

Moses Norton (ca. late 1720s-1773)

It cannot have been easy for the Hudson's Bay Company to find good commanders for that handful of little forts beside the Bay where, until the last quarter of the eighteenth century, all its trading was done. The task was demanding and the field of choice limited. A man could only learn the job by serving in the country. The Company's employees there were few, and of those few many were illiterate labourers. Seniority also had to be considered. These facts help explain why such a character as Moses Norton rose to be commander of Prince of Wales' Fort, at Churchill, from 1762 until his death in 1773.

Norton certainly knew the country. He was born at Churchill, the son of Governor Richard Norton and a Cree woman. Like Henry Kelsey and William Stewart, Richard Norton was one of the Company's pioneer travellers among the Indians, and in the winter of 1717-18 had brought the first Chipewyans to trade at Churchill.

He sent his son to England to be educated. There Moses stayed nine years, and would seem (from his occasional spelling troubles with the letter "H") to have acquired a Cockney accent. In May 1744, he was apprenticed to Captain George Spurrell, a seaman who made many voyages to Hudson Bay. After this apprenticeship, the Company engaged him, in 1753, as mate of their sloop *Churchill* at the Bay. Moses' father had now long been dead, but this was a good job, with prospects of promotion.

The *Churchill* was employed on trading with Eskimos along the west coast of the Bay, and during her voyages Norton doubtless played a part in the efforts the Company was making to establish peace between these Eskimos and their hereditary enemies, the Chipewyans. As his father had, Norton did some exploring when his boss, Ferdinand Jacobs, sent him to Chesterfield Inlet in 1762. He returned to report reaching its very end and finding that no hoped-for Northwest Passage existed there.

That autumn, Jacobs went to command York Fort, and Norton succeeded him at Churchill. He now had opportunities to display what the late Professor Rich generously called his "uncommon energy and perception". One may allow the "energy", for Norton was full of ideas, but they were too often impractical for his "perception" to be very impressive.

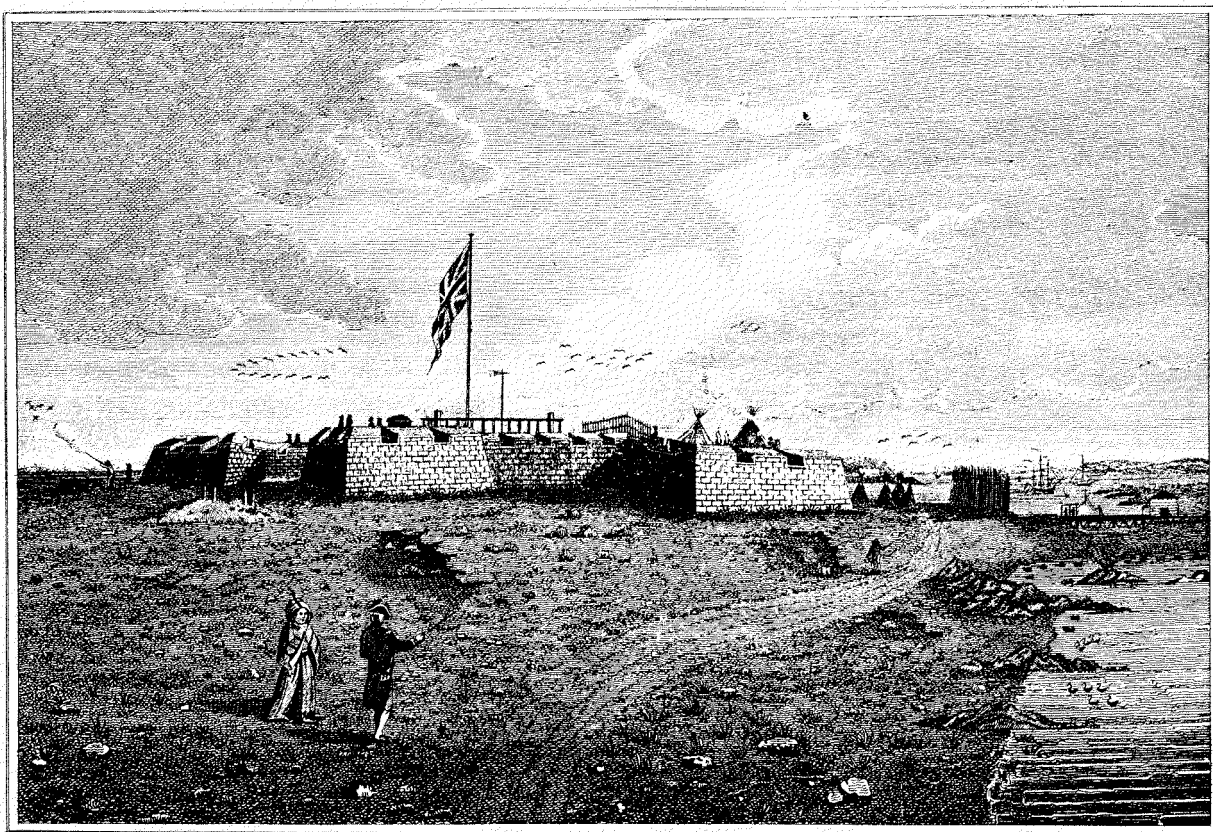
One was a notion that live moose could usefully be sent to England, and in 1767 he dispatched a young pair to London. The male died on the voyage, however, and the Company would have been happier if the female had done so too, for, they complained, it cost them £9-10s-11d to feed her from October 1767 to February 1768, when they at last managed to dispose of her as a gift to King George III. She was then shipped upriver to Richmond Park, and by their next boat the Company ordered Norton to send no more livestock home.

On his northward voyages Norton had doubtless seen bowhead whales (*Balaena mysticetus*) and in 1765 he persuaded his employers to start a whaling business at Churchill. The result was disastrous. A century later bowheads were profitably hunted around Southampton Island, but Norton ordered his whalers to stay south of Marble Island. There only four whales were caught in seven years, and in 1772 the Company cancelled this enterprise after losing over £20,000.

Another of Norton's brainwaves concerned the copper which had long been known to exist in the North. James Isham had shown there was no way of exploiting this copper profitably, but in 1765 Norton hired two Chipewyans, Idotliazee and Matonabee, to find its source. Three years later, when Norton was about to go to England on leave, these Indians reappeared at Churchill, with actual copper samples and a "map" purporting to show where they had been. This "map" has not the slightest resemblance to the real northern Canada, but nobody then knew any better, so at least it looked impressive. Norton bore it triumphantly off to London and there persuaded his employers to send Samuel Hearne on his three famous journeys to the Coppermine in 1769-72.

On the journeys we can say here only that Norton's crazy planning ensured the failure of the first two (e.g. on each he sent Hearne off with a worthless guide, first a crook, then an ignoramus). By a happy chance, however, Hearne met Matonabee when returning to Churchill from his second failure, and together these two men planned the third journey, which was successful, and on which Hearne produced one of the great books about Canada's North. Geographers found their discoveries most interesting, but they brought the Company no new trade to compensate for what had been spent on them, so another Norton scheme was a business failure.

This third journey also caused a bitter quarrel between Norton and Hearne, for Norton tried to force Hearne to take along some of his Cree relatives. Hearne, who had had enough of Norton's kin on his earlier journeys, refused; and thereafter, he writes, Norton "used every means in his power to treat me ill." It is therefore unfortunate that nobody but Hearne has left any description of Norton's personality; Hearne's picture of him living "in open defiance of every law, human and divine", is so lurid that one would welcome corroboration. That Norton "kept for his own use five or six of the finest Indian girls which he could select" is entirely believable — among his Cree relations polygamy was common. One can but hope that Hearne's report of his using poison to dispose of Indians who offended him is based on misinformation. Anyway, wherever the truth on that last point lies, Norton's death on 29 December 1773 would hardly seem a great loss to his employers.



A NORTH WEST VIEW OF PRINCE OF WALES'S FORT IN HUDSON'S BAY NORTH AMERICA by S. HEARNE 1777

FURTHER READINGS

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