

“We Are Still Adventurers”: The Records of the Hudson’s Bay Company’s Development Department and Fish and Fish Products Department, 1925-1940

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The combined extent of the records of the Hudson’s Bay Company’s Development Department and Fish and Fish Products Department is not much more than seven metres. These departments did not last for long. The Development Department operated from 1925 to 1931 and the Fish and Fish Products Department from 1934 to 1940. Furthermore, a reading of the finding aid for their records, which contains files on such topics as bears and berries, coal and cod livers, herrings and horsehair, laboratory equipment and lobsters, sea shells and seal flesh, might lead one to wonder whether these documents have anything more to offer than the occasional chuckle. Yet the records generated by the departments are important both for what they have to say about the world outside the Hudson’s Bay Company and about the company itself. For the departments owed their existence to the spirit of modernization which began to transform the company in the early part of this century and neither they nor their records can be dismissed as peripheral. They come from the heart of the company’s twentieth-century history.

A man who played a role of special importance in the company’s modernization was Charles Sale, a partner in his family’s shipping firm of Sale & Co., which had extensive interests in the Orient. Sale became Deputy Governor of the company in 1915 in order to run its wartime venture as buying and shipping agent for the French and other allied governments. He became Governor in 1925 and, at the same time, was appointed Managing Director. He held both positions until 1931. Even as Deputy Governor, Sale showed keen interest in all aspects of the company, and in his dual position as Governor and Managing Director he was able to exert a great deal of influence over its affairs. Sale was a man possessed of a lively imagination. Speaking to the shareholders in 1928, he assured them “we are still adventurers” and went on to stress that without a spirit of discovery “every business is bound to decay and come to an end.” He was speaking about the Development Department, but his emphasis on innovation was characteristic of all that he did. Nowhere, perhaps, was innovation more needed than in the oldest branch of the company’s business, the fur trade.

Sale’s innovations in the fur trade fell into two categories: widening of the trade’s geographical base and extension of its activities. (While many of the innovations mentioned here took place after the creation of the Development Department, they will be described here as a group because they explain the intellectual context within which the department was launched.) In order to widen the fur trade’s geographical base, other fur trade companies, notably Revillon Frères, were bought up or bought into, the Labrador trading stations of the Moravian Brethren were leased, and an attempt, known as the Kamchatka Venture, was made to carry on the trade in Siberia. At one point, Sale even entertained the idea of asking the Government of Australia for a charter to operate in the Australian Antarctic, but this came to nothing. The extension of fur trade activities

involved establishment of fox farms and buying a portion of the Prince Edward Island firm of McLure & MacKinnon Silver Fox Farms Ltd., selling furs on consignment (coupled with buying into the consignment business of C.M. Lampson & Co. Ltd.), an expansion of fisheries activity with the purchase of Newfoundland Atlantic Fisheries Ltd., and buying a share of the complex of businesses operated by Job Brothers of St. John's and London.

In April 1925, two months before Sale became Governor, and while undoubtedly preoccupied with all that he must do, he received a letter from Charles Townsend, who described himself as the head of the Development Department at Lever Brothers and asked for an interview. It is not known why Townsend was looking for a new job, although the fact that Lord Leverhulme was near death (he died in May 1925) may have had something to do with it. As the term "Development Department" was still fairly new, Townsend in his initial letter explained what it meant. A Development Department was, he said, "designed on business building lines in the direction of the evolution of new ideas of products and processes, elimination of wastes, utilisation of bye-products in the production of specialties, and of new marketing and selling plans both for Home and Abroad." On the strength of this letter Sale granted Townsend an interview and by the next month offered him the position of Manager of the company's yet to be created Development Department. Townsend's letter must have seemed remarkably serendipitous to a man contemplating changes in the fur trade. Sale was being offered the services of a man whose business it was to devise new ways of doing things.

For the first year or two of its existence, the Development Department was largely occupied with investigative journeys by Townsend and others to determine what possibilities for development there might have been in Canada and Newfoundland. The department got down to work on research and development by 1927. Its staff never numbered more than fourteen, many of whom were in support roles, and its bill for salaries and wages was never more than £6000, £1500 of which went to Townsend. The department was quite loosely structured; its other members assisted Townsend in their various capacities, and he reported for the department to Sale. The department was housed in Beaver House in the City, not far from Hudson's Bay House, and rented laboratory space in Bromley, Kent, just outside London.

As research and development are usually associated with manufacturing companies, it is necessary to explain what role they could play in a company which dealt with natural resources. In the case of the Hudson's Bay Company, these resources included not only fur but fish, the hides and oil of marine mammals, and a wide variety of other items such as castorum. Such resources all require some degree of handling before they are marketed, and they can be handled in ways that will make them sell either more or less profitably. The Development Department sought to find new and better ways of handling these resources (improved rendering plants for whale oil, for example) and also intensified the degree of handling to which some resources were subjected. The company traditionally dealt in raw fur; for example, it did not dye or dress fur. The Development Department under the name BAEFUR, patented a method of dyeing and dressing whitecoat (harbour seal pup) pelts which made them useable by furriers and not just tanners, as had previously been the case. It was hoped that this would increase their commercial value. Another patented invention was PERIFIX, a castorum extract intended to fix the scent in perfume and soap.

It is often not enough, however, to develop new products or treat old products in new ways. A new market may have to be developed as well. The company, for instance, got into the business of selling brine-frozen salmon under the trade-names HUBAY and LABDOR; however, fixed ideas about salmon on the part of the British public had to be overcome. The British felt that salmon should be fresh, come from Scotland, and be eaten cold and poached as a seasonal treat. If salmon was neither fresh nor Scottish, it was tinned, probably came from the Pacific, and made the *pièce de résistance* at proletarian teas. So various marketing strategies had to be devised to persuade the British housewife to look with favour on frozen Atlantic salmon and consider it as a year-round food.

In addition to engaging in these and many other research and development activities the department acted as a clearing house for information. Other companies and individuals were solicited for their expert opinions and often sent sample products. Walrus hides, for example, were sent to tanners so that they could comment on the department's methods of treatment. In turn, a company might send samples of its products in the hopes that the department might promote their use in the company. Spratt's Patent Ltd., for example, sent samples of fox biscuits for use in the company's fox farms.

The department's loose structure enabled it to engage in activities which could not be classified as research and development. It was more than a research and development department; it was a generator of new ideas, a think tank, for the fur trade. If the department is viewed in this way, the work of George Binney, the Governor's personal assistant, and ecologist Charles Elton can be understood. Binney was attached to the department as the man in charge of the selection and training of apprentice clerks, in order to provide the Fur Trade Department with new men and new ideas. He was also responsible for "native welfare." This was in a sense linked with the apprentice programme, as the Indian and Inuit hunters were also workers in the fur trade, and it was in the company's best interests to keep them happy, healthy, and economically self-sufficient so that they could continue their traditional way of life. To this end, the department prepared nutrition and hygiene programmes and fostered home industries such as the making of rugs, cushions, and toys. Charles Elton acted as the department's ecological consultant. His research on population cycles in fur-bearing animals was helped in part by the fur trade post managers who filled out annual questionnaires on animal populations near their posts. Elton was not actually an employee of the company, for he had his own job at Oxford. The company provided him with data, access to its records, and some financial assistance, and he provided the Company with analyses of the data. This mutually beneficial cooperation is a good example of the way in which the Development Department acted as a creative focus for the fur trade.

There are four series of Development Department records (Series A.94 to A.97) at the Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Provincial Archives of Manitoba (hereafter HBCA, PAM). Series A.94 contains 158 correspondence files, 1927-1931; Series A.95 contains 125 dossiers or subject files, ca. 1925-1931; Series A.96, Townsend's set of 5 dossiers, 1926-1927; and Series A.97, miscellaneous reports and papers, 1925-1930. While the description of the Development Department as a hive of creativity may make one fear the worst for its records-keeping practices, they were in fact meticulous. That this was so appears to be the result of Sale's influence.

Sale numbered among his virtues an interest in records keeping (and archives, for that matter) and many changes in the records-keeping practices of the London Office occurred during the years when he was associated with the company. One of these changes was a

method of filing correspondence first used by Sale to file correspondence with the French government (HBCA, PAM, Series AFG 5) and then used to file the general London Office correspondence (HBCA, PAM Series A.92), and the correspondence of the Development Department (HBCA, PAM, Series A.94). The correspondence in all these series was filed by correspondent, but alphabetical order was not used. Alphabetical order is difficult to maintain should a company change its name or a new correspondent be entered into the system. The pitfalls of alphabetical order can be avoided by the brilliantly simple idea of assigning each correspondent a number. If a letter from Thomson & Co. was the first to be dealt with when the system was initiated, then Thomson & Co. would be assigned the number one, and all its subsequent correspondence would be placed in the section of the file cabinet numbered one. Each numbered section was divided in half, with inward correspondence filed in chronological order in one half and outward correspondence in chronological order in the other. When the section was full its contents were placed in a transfer case with the result that blocks of inward and outward correspondence alternate. A number was not assigned to correspondents who sent and received only a few letters; these were placed in an alphabetically ordered miscellaneous section. There are, however, some letters from individuals or companies filed in the miscellaneous section of Series A.94, whose subsequent correspondence is filed under its own number. This indicates the flexibility of the system, which allowed correspondence that became voluminous enough to be elevated to the dignity of its own number, but it is something that researchers will have to bear in mind. (The carelessness of the clerks in leaving some letters behind in the miscellaneous section is explained by the fact that there was a miscellaneous section for each year, so that in retrieving the letters of Bloggs & Co. for 1927, it might be easy to overlook their letters for 1926.)

A vital part of this system was a card index kept in alphabetical order. Each card bore the correspondent's name and address and either the number or the miscellaneous section (such as Misc. 1926) under which letters had been filed. The index would have been an indispensable tool to those filing and retrieving letters, and the card index for Series A.92, which is, alas, the only one to have survived, has already proved its worth to researchers. The loss of the card index to Series A.94 is regrettable, but as this series contains only 116 files of correspondence with seventy-two companies and individuals and only forty-two files of miscellaneous correspondence (which the archives staff re-ordered so that all the letters to and from a given correspondent are placed together and not divided in yearly sections) correspondence with a given individual or company can be traced without too much effort.

Of course, a system of filing by correspondent, however ingenious, does not answer the need to have correspondence and other material on a certain subject gathered together. Dossiers are of obvious use to a business involved in a variety of activities, and their value to researchers is perhaps even greater, particularly when research is being done on British business records. British companies are often named after individuals, so that their names rarely afford a clue as to the nature of their business. Fortunately for researchers, a parallel series of dossiers was created for Series A.92 and Series A.94. These dossiers often contain copies of correspondence to be found in the correspondence series and as they are arranged alphabetically by title they will often prove to be a researcher's most convenient starting point. The Development Department's dossiers (Series A.95) contain 125 files. They include financial records, office diaries, some of Townsend's reports on his visits to Canada and Newfoundland, and George Binney's correspondence on native welfare.

(This was not part of Series A.94 because the correspondence was to and from Binney, not Townsend or the department in general.) Approximately fifty subjects are covered in Series A.95 and simply reading the file list provides an excellent short cut to understanding the department's range. (It is from the file list that the strange assortment of topics in the opening paragraph of this article was taken.)

Series A.96, the five dossiers maintained by Townsend, and Series A.97, the miscellaneous reports and papers, are, from an archival point of view, not as interesting as the other two series, yet they are particularly valuable to researchers because they were for the most part created as a result of the investigative journeys made to Canada and Newfoundland in 1926 and 1927. Apart from Townsend's own reports, a report from Geoffrey Milling on his visit to Pangnirtung in the winter of 1926-27 and a report from Binney on his visit to Canada and Newfoundland in 1927 are worthy of mention. These records deal more directly with life in Canada and Newfoundland than do many of the records in the other two series, and they often help explain what prompted the Development Department to come up with the ideas it did. Binney, for example, thought the company should provide the Inuit with ear trumpets. This created a certain amount of amusement at the time, but Binney had noted in 1927 that many of the Inuit were hard of hearing and that this was an especially cruel affliction for a sociable people.

These four series are the complete records of the Development Department. (Photographs and blueprints have been placed in the appropriate collections.) Yet they are only the records which the department created and used in the conduct of its daily affairs, and they are not in themselves a complete record of the Development Department. There are several reasons for this. One is that as the purpose of the Development Department was to furnish the fur trade with new ideas, the records of the Fur Trade Department (HBCA, PAM, RG 3) and the records of the Canadian Committee Office (HBCA, PAM, RG 2), which deal with the fur trade, must be consulted to see how these ideas were received and carried out. Another is that the department was a part of the London Office and many records concerning its activities were kept by the company's Secretary and Accountant. The third reason, which is related to the other two, is the department's loose structure, which means that records one might expect to find between Series A.94 and Series A.97 ended up elsewhere. Binney's correspondence on apprentices, for example, was addressed to Sale and is thus in Series A.92. Correspondence from Charles Elton is found in both Series A.92 and Series A.94.

Early in 1934, about two years after the Development Department had been dismantled, the company established a successor to continue at least one part of the department's work — the fish business. This new department bore the prosaic name of the Fish and Fish Products Department. The reason for its creation lies in the company's involvement with Job Brothers, one of the companies that had been bought into during the exuberant years of Sale's regime. The origins of the Job family business go back to the late eighteenth century; although Job Brothers & Co. Ltd. was incorporated in 1909. There were four Job Brothers in all, but the Honourable Robert B. Job of St. John's and William C. Job of London had the most to do with the Hudson's Bay Company. Several other companies were associated with Job Brothers & Co. Ltd., such as the Royal Stores Ltd. and Job Brothers Sealfisheries Ltd.. The Jobs were part of the Newfoundland merchantocracy and they concentrated on fish and the seal hunt, as did similar Newfoundland families such as the Harveys and the Bowrings. Job Brothers and the company were first closely associated in 1911 with the founding of the jointly owned Nascopie

Steam Ship Co. Ltd.. (Although the *Nascopie* is best remembered for her supply voyages into Hudson Bay, for many years she sailed to the ice-fields for the spring seal hunt.) The two companies became even more closely involved in the twenties and by 1929 the company held a 70 per cent interest in Job Brothers. It is reasonable to assume that it was because of Job Brothers that the Development Department took an interest in salmon and sealing.

Once the Development Department had ended, Job Brothers naturally continued to go about its business, and the company was still involved, particularly in the sale of salmon which was brine-frozen on the Job's factory ship, the *Blue Peter*, and sold under trade-names, HUBAY and LABDOR, which stressed the connection of the two companies. In 1933 the company dispatched Jack Maurice, who had been used before as a problem-solver, to survey the Job Brothers' operations and report to London. As a result of Maurice's study, the Job Brothers' companies were substantially reorganized and by early 1934 the new Job Brothers Co. Ltd. was entirely owned by the company. The Fish and Fish Products Department was set up at the same time in London under the management of Jack Maurice. Maurice was responsible for coordinating the marketing of Job Brothers' fish and other products, such as blueberries, as well as the marketing of the company's own fish and fish products. He was also to supervise the activities of Job Brothers in Newfoundland and elsewhere. The Fish and Fish Products Department lasted until 1940 when the company decided that it was too difficult to carry on international trade in fish during the war. It wound up the department and handed over responsibility for Job Brothers to its Canadian Committee in Winnipeg. Job Brothers bought back the company's shares in 1943; negotiations over the use of the trade-names HUBAY and LABDOR continued for a number of years, however, with Jobs claiming that the Newfoundland pronunciation of HUBAY made it impossible to associate the name with the Hudson's Bay Company.

The structure of the Fish and Fish Products Department is easily described. Jack Maurice *was* the department. When he was out of London on business, as he often was, V.W. Elphick, Manager of the Cold Storage Department in Beaver House, replaced him. Maurice was also the Manager of the Wine and Spirits Department, another one-man operation, and in this capacity he promoted sales of the company's own brands of wine and spirits in Britain. Although Maurice presumably did not type his own letters, he did not have any staff to manage, and the title "Manager" was accorded him to indicate that he was responsible for a certain sphere of activity within the London Office and to make sure that he held a rank commensurate with his duties.

It is not surprising that the records of this one-man administration were kept in a slightly idiosyncratic fashion. The records of the Fish and Fish Products Department (HBCA, PAM, Series A.98) are not much more than a metre in extent and consisted of only thirty-four stout files before they were placed in new file folders. (There are now eighty-seven files in all.) No very sophisticated system would be needed to keep thirty-four files in order and Maurice's memory must have been the real key. Most of the letters were filed by correspondent, but there are some subject files. One of the subject file titles is "Publicity," not publicity for the salmon, which was handled by the firm of George Tabor Ltd., the wholesale fish merchants of Billingsgate, but editorial publicity for the company as a whole. Maurice acted as the company's contact with businesses which looked after this sort of publicity. If he had been any more involved, he might well have been called the Manager of the Publicity Department.

As the original order of these files was not apparent, they have been placed in alphabetical order by file title. Even alphabetical order, however, does not render everything clear. In the register of incoming correspondence which has been placed first, incoming correspondence from the Wine and Spirits Department is also registered. The explanation for this may be that Maurice used the register to help him plan his work and found it more convenient to have all the letters he had to answer listed in one place. Less easily explained is the file title "Private-St. John's," which was given to what are now fourteen files covering the years 1934-39. These contain correspondence with Geoffrey Milling, who had been made Managing Director of Job Brothers shortly after his winter in Pangnirtung (mentioned above in connection with Series A.97). Maurice insisted that Milling's letters about Job Brothers should be sent to his home address. Perhaps this was also a planning device; Maurice may have found it easier to think about the business of the Hudson's Bay Company in his office and the business of Job Brothers at home, so that one did not overlap with the other. Perhaps he felt that letters about the business of one company should not be addressed to the office of another, even when one company was entirely owned by the other. Perhaps he just liked to spend time at home. At any rate, the "Private-St. John's" letters definitely belong to Series A.98 and the copies of Maurice's replies to Milling appear to have been made in the office, as it does not seem likely that Maurice kept a Roneo machine in his flat. Series A.98 includes ten files of correspondence with Job Brothers as well as reports, minute extracts, and other records concerning them between 1927 and 1936. The material which antedates the Fish and Fish Products Department appears to come from the offices of the Secretary and the London Manager. Maurice may have assembled it to assist him when he made his study of Job Brothers in 1933.

The primary value of the records created by the Development Department and the Fish and Fish Products Department lies in the fact that they document a significant part of the Hudson's Bay Company's modern history. For researchers interested not so much in the company itself, however, as in those aspects of life connected with its business, these five series are also a source of information on many topics. The records concerning native welfare and the Pangnirtung whaling have already attracted researchers. The records dealing with Job Brothers and operations in Newfoundland provide insights into the merchantocracy. Science, technology, publicity, and marketing in Britain are among other topics covered by the records.

These records also have something to contribute to imperial history. This could, of course, be said of a good many of the Hudson's Bay Company's records but the very purpose of the Development Department — to generate ideas which were then applied in Canada and Newfoundland or, as in the case of native welfare, tried out on the people of Canada and Newfoundland — makes its records an especially valuable source for the tensions which existed within the Empire. The Newfoundland fish business, documented in the records of both departments, was nothing if not an imperial venture, was conducted on one of the first and last frontiers of the Empire. The company encouraged its shareholders to ask their fishmongers for HUBAY and LABDOR salmon not only to stimulate its own business but also to foster imperial trade. Many shareholders, such as the Misses Malet of Porchester Square, did their loyal best to respond. They seem to have been an elderly pair, to judge by the shaky hand of whichever Miss Malet wielded the pen. They informed the company Secretary in a letter of 20 September 1930 that they "would ask their fishmonger to try and order some but he is Scotch and might not like to do so nor think it quite fair to our own land though Newfoundland and Labrador belong to our dear Empire." (HBCA, PAM, Series A.94/ 142). One picture is an irate son of Caledonia

bristling at the implied insult to his native land. In an attempt to support the broader patriotism of the Empire, the Misses Malet kindly sent the Secretary a list of their friends who might be interested in frozen Atlantic salmon yet presumably did not patronize Scottish fishmongers. Of such small dilemmas are life, and history, made.

NOTE: The following are published sources for the two departments and the people connected with them. Those who are intrigued by the references to the company's business with the French government should consult Sir William Schooling, *The Hudson's Bay Company, 1670-1920* (Hudson's Bay Company, 1920) or Alex Ross and Anne Morton, "The Hudson's Bay Company And Its Archives" forthcoming in *Business Archives*. Biographical information includes: on Sir George Binney, DSO (1900-1972), *The Polar Record* 16, No. 104 (1973), pp. 754-56; on Charles Elton, FRS (b. 1900), *Who's Who*, 1985; and on Charles Sale (1868-1943), *The Beaver* (September 1943), p. 28 and *The Times*, July 1943. Relevant articles in *The Beaver* include: A. Dudley Copland, "Harvesting the Northern Seas," (Winter 1974), pp. 40-46; R.M. Howell, "Summer at Blanc Sablon," (September 1944), pp. 20-23; Anne Morton, "Charles Elton and the Hudson's Bay Company," (Spring 1985), pp. 22-29; Frank Ryan, "New Life in an Old Land," (March 1942), pp. 26-30; G.C. Whitley, "Fresh Fish," (March 1935), pp. 42-43, 58; Mary E. Williams, "Fish and Ships," (June 1949), pp. 6-8. Books connected with their authors' work for the Development Department comprise: George Binney, *The Eskimo Book of Knowledge* (Hudson's Bay Company, 1931) and Charles Elton, *Voles, Mice and Lemmings: Problems in Population Dynamics* (Oxford, 1942).