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'Corruption' at Moose

By Frits Pannekoek

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ON THE COLD, DESOLATE, wind-swept shore of Hudson Bay, winters were long and there was nothing but brandy and talk to relieve the boredom of the endless ice and the interminable meals of salt geese and dried pease. Tempers grew shorter as the winter lengthened and the new recruits succumbed to the bottle and inevitable melancholia. Rebellions brewed and violence was too often the order of the day. Only a few found life even tolerable. These few lived a careful compromise between the heavily regulated life of the Company fort and the freedom offered by the camps of the 'Home Guard' Indians — those Indians who lived near the fort year-round and provided local food supplies to the Company.

While the communities that emerged in the 1730s at the Bayside might be dismissed as of interest only to the antiquarian intent on examining the minutiae of the fur trade, their study has broader implications. They fit in the tradition of the single-resource communities that make up the mid-Canada corridor, ranging from eighteenth-century Moose Factory to the nineteenth-century gold camps of the Klondike. All had economies based on the extraction or collection of a single staple, and all were dominated by a few large companies whose organization dictated the social structure of the communities they created. Because of their isolation, physical unpleasantness, the finite nature of their resource base, and the consequent reluctance of many labourers to do anything but acquire enough to retire 'back home', the societies that they contained were to a large degree unstable, transitory and dominated by the single working male.

Doubtless some men from each isolated staple community managed to create new lives centred on the hinterland. At Moose the more adaptable among the servants married Indian women, had children, trapped furs, and abandoned close connections with the Old World. To them the Company became only a supplier of the goods that remained essential to their survival.

By 1740 a significant portion of the trade was generated by 'the corruptors', as those who had 'gone Indian' were called. It is difficult to determine exactly how the new staple society of the Bayside functioned. Those at Moose, for example, were careful not to reveal too much, wary that London might censure. Only when new, inexperienced chief factors bent on reform were appointed, do the daily journals become revealing. James Duffield was one such garrulous reformer and he nearly forced the destruction of the half-European, half-Indian way of life which had emerged at Moose by the 1740s. His journals, filled with paranoia and rebellion, tell much about the staple society of Moose in the 1740s.

The problems faced by staple communities centred on removing men from one social setting, like pre-industrial England, and placing them in a radically different environment, at once isolated, unnatural and intensely regimented as it was at Moose Factory. Unable to come to grips with the cold and the tyranny, most found escape in drink. Alcoholism was the principal social problem of those resident at the Bayside. Indeed, for some, alcohol was the object of all activity. The surgeon at Moose for one was a 'Compleate Swob' constantly thirsting for liquor. Many of the work accidents at Moose were alcohol-related. One man consumed so much 'bumbo' — that fur-trade mixture of rum, water, sugar and nutmeg — that he fell off the sloop and promptly drowned. With some regret and much haste his mates lost no time in auctioning off the contents of his chest. The chief factors were always afraid that the men on watch, who were too often drunk, would, spitefully or accidentally, set fire to the buildings. The courage to commit suicide could also be found in the bottle. 'Brandy-death' was common, and known in Rupert's Land as a Northwesters' Death.

The Company was understandably concerned at the loss of life and work caused by this constant guzzling. Almost annually the chief factors were instructed to

reduce the quantity of alcohol consumed by the servants, but they were only occasionally successful. When James Knight in 1715 refused to issue the normal ration of bumbo to his men they called him — among other things — a 'lyeing Old Rogue'. No doubt Richard Staunton suffered the same abuse when he tried in 1738 to limit alcohol to 'one bottle at a time betwixt four men and that only at Seasonable times'. He was also unsuccessful.

Logically, the Company could have regulated brandy consumption simply by refusing to supply it in any significant quantities; however, communications with the Bay were controlled by the captains of the Company's annual ships and it was relatively easy for them to take on a few hundred extra gallons. The factor's refusal to land the brandy would have sparked a rebellion headed by the captain and supported by the servants and the ship's crew. Most chief factors alleged that the 'private brandy' at the Bottom of the Bay was traded to the servants by the captains and their crews in exchange for illicitly obtained furs, but often it was simply sold. Of course since the captains were usually the agents for the private affairs of the servants, it was a simple matter to arrange payment. It was also rumoured that the captains sometimes ransomed the annual supplies to the chief factor. If the factor did not allow a trade in brandy the annual cargoes would not be landed. Should the chief factors report the incidents, the letters of complaint could be intercepted or simply denied. While it seems likely that blatant blackmail was rare, it would not be too much to suppose that in order to keep peace amongst his men, each chief factor had to reach his own informal understanding with the captains.

While alcohol was the principal social problem at the Bottom of the Bay, the moral indignation of the chief factors was aroused by others which they viewed with even greater alarm. Many of the servants were less than enamoured with the prospect of the five years of chastity, obedience and poverty that the Company's service seemed to demand. In response, some 'went native'. They learned Indian languages, became conversant with Indian customs, became adept at the trapline, and quite often married into Indian families, fathering and otherwise acquiring numerous dependents. The greatest of the 'corruptors' (as those who had 'gone country' were inevitably called) was Augustin Frost of York, and later Moose Factory. Frost was a very quiet man, knowledgeable in all the Indian ways and connected to a number of Indian women who ran his traplines. Frost was indispensable to the fort's trade and country supplies, married as he was to the daughter of the captain of one of the groups of Home Guard Indians, old Muccatoon (Nimitikige). The captain and his two sons Pasqueijo and Messhacopway brought food and provisions to the post in return for the security and prestige afforded by

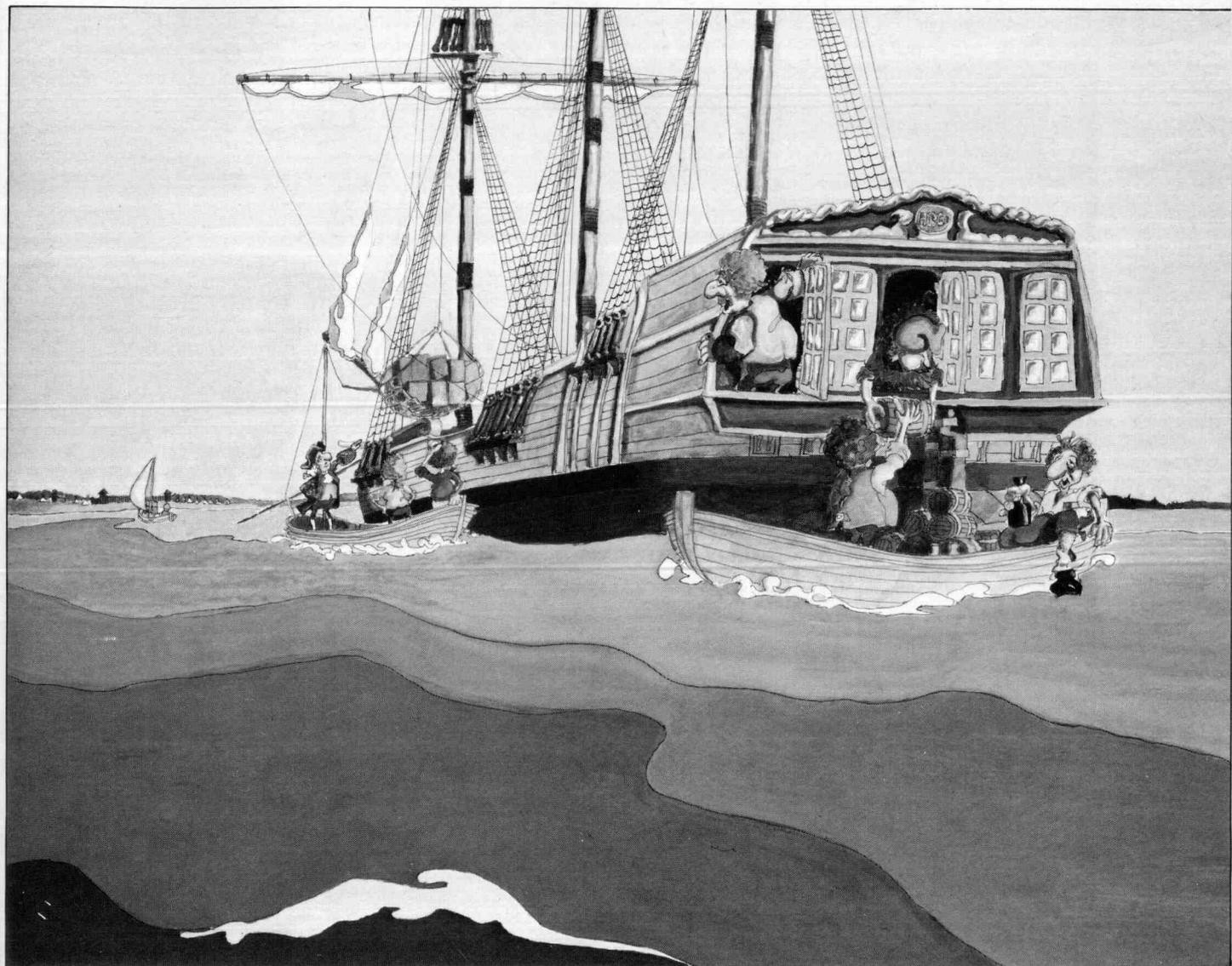
post connections. So influential was Frost's example that he was credited with the 'corruption' of a whole generation of servants.

In fact, by the 1730s Moose had become an 'Indian Factory' and most of the men allowed their families to reside in the compound. Indian relatives were rarely, if ever, shut out at night and supplies and credit were not generally denied. While the men were content the system worked well; the Company received its furs and the men managed a tolerable existence. Attempts on the part of the Company to alter the easy relationship between Indian and servant were always resisted. Depending on the regional strength of the French opposition, the men and their families could conspire against the Company's trade. The French were very close in the 1730s and it took little to divert trade to them. What neither the London Committee nor some of the chief factors seemed to appreciate was the crucial influence of the servants and their Indian families in the management of the trade.

The provisioning of the Company's post further reflects the close relationship between Indian and servant. Geese, the staple of the factory's diet, were shot by the men while out at the goose camps with their half-breed and Indian families. The quantities of geese required to provision the fort were enormous. The eighteen men at Moose in the 1730s usually received per four-man mess, two or three salt geese per day, one and one-half pounds of flour, slightly less than one quart of pease, plus beer brewed at the factory. Although this was supplemented in the summer with fresh garden produce, for over eighty per cent of the year the diet of salt geese was invariable and monotonous. Only in September and May were fresh geese available. At the same time the chief factor of the fort had a diet that was considerably more English, with fine cheeses and the best of wines. Combined with the insecurity and monotony of the diet — for there were days near the spring and fall hunts when the geese barrels were empty — this preferential treatment provoked many to near-riot. A full stomach meant a passive servant, but stomachs were rarely full.

Accentuated by the vagaries of diet and climate, disease was the other great problem at Moose in the 1730s. Pain and discomfort were normal, especially after age thirty as the body succumbed to the ravages of age and cold. George Howy, a member of the Moose Council, was attacked by a severe case of gallstones. Arthritis was expected as a matter of course, and it crippled many of the older servants. Venereal disease was well known and the fear was always present that the men would infect the natives. There were, however, surprisingly few on-the-job accidents and even fewer cases of frost-bite.

As might be expected mental health posed a problem on the Bay. Many men suffered from winter melancholia. The confinement indoors, the



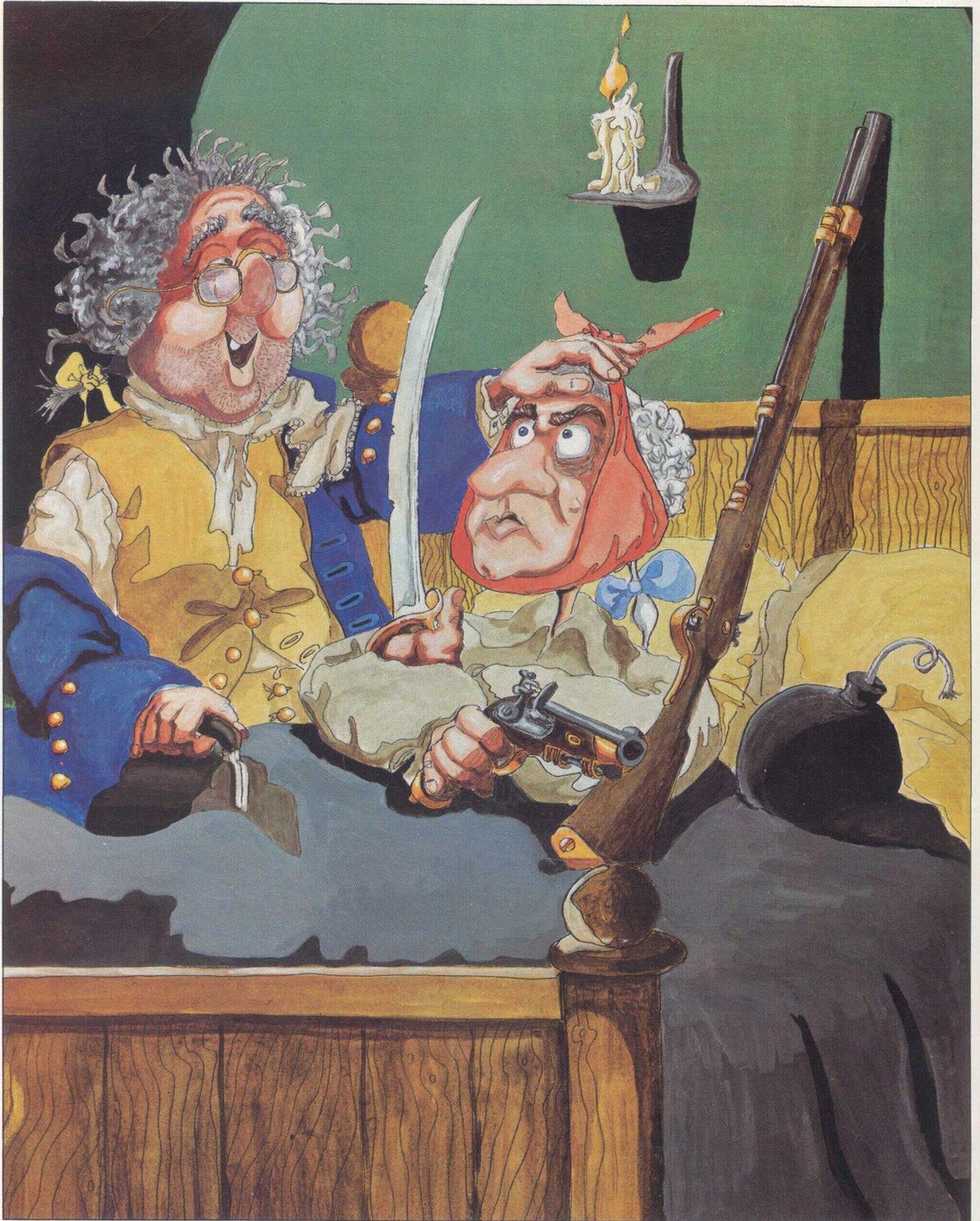
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monotonous diet, the long dark hours, the isolation and the constant fear of fire made life seem an endless and fear-filled drudgery. Suicide was contemplated with awesome frequency, and many macabre incidents can be found in the factory's journals. Paranoia reached considerable dimensions. Both James Duffield and the chief at Albany, Joseph Isbister, felt that their surgeons were trying to kill them, a plot for which there is no evidence. Rather than submit to their surgeons they chose to find comfort in each other's tales of woe and treachery. Admittedly, the surgeons were not of the best variety. The one at Moose, a resident of some forty years, was an alcoholic whose careless approach to hygiene took on extraordinary proportions; but like the other post doctors he conceived himself to be irreplaceable and acted with appropriate arrogance.

The politics of this melancholy society reflected

life's despondency and paranoia. There was inevitably a faction comprised of the new servants and the sailors, who preached discontent and insurrection. While from time to time these malcontents were in the majority they were rarely in control. Rather in the 1740s it was the 'country' or 'corrupted' faction who exercised power with confidence and little opposition. There was, of course, a small, albeit consistent, pro-Company group who, by disposition, tended to support authority no matter what its form.

Politics were to a large degree dictated by the chief factor and the advisory council structure imposed by the Company. In theory, the factor, with advice from his council (who were appointed by the London Committee on the recommendation of the factor), was responsible for regulating all aspects of life. Usually the council included the factory's surgeon, two or three of the senior experienced servants, and the



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accountant. At Moose one of the senior servants on the council was Augustin Frost who, through the power of his own personality, managed to have things largely his own way. He could turn those with a rebellious disposition in whatever direction he thought appropriate.

At Moose the leaders of the rebellious trouble-makers were the surgeon and a tradesman named Joseph Robinson. In the 1740s Robinson acted as the 'Attorney General' for the factory's discontented, because of his capacity to ferret out the legal niceties which supported the men's demands. At one point Robinson argued that since the men's contracts were not stamped, as required by the Stamp Act, they were not binding. The servants could therefore do as they pleased.

This bag of legal tricks was added to every year with the arrival of the annual ship. The sailors, a notably rebellious lot, were always free with advice for their brothers on the shores of the Bay. Many of the servants were, in fact, recruited through the captain. Coates, who served Moose during much of the 1700s, had connections in Stockton, and many sailors and servants came from there. They knew each other and their fraternity seems to have been a strong one.

The factors for their part were not always happy with the selection of new recruits: the tailor at Moose was labelled as 'crazy', while the carpenters were 'indifferent and corrupted' or 'lazy and rebellious'. The 'corrupted' and 'rebellious' factions often formed different groups among the servants. Nevertheless, they tended to reinforce each other, since all those who stayed for long periods acquired relatively common Indian connections. New recruits were always ready for trouble at the slightest hint of real restraint of their activities. The Indian parties, like that headed by Frost, tended on the other hand to tolerate the Company's power so long as their lifestyle was not affected. If the Company preached a reformation of corruption, they quietly subverted and opposed, for in the end they knew full well that no alternative to the Company existed. The new society that had emerged at Moose was dependent upon the Company's technology, without which survival would be impossible.

Tempered by Company dictate and Indian custom, the society at Moose, by the 1730s, had evolved its own unhappy structure. It was a society in which one's position in the Company's hierarchy was only useful if accepted by the old Indian hands whose families controlled the post's trade. It was during the height of Frost's influence over the Home Guard Indians that the Company moved, through its newly appointed chief factor, James Duffield, to reform the 'corrupted' social order of Moose. But it was to be a Pyrrhic victory which only succeeded in destroying the Indian community that had become Moose Factory and in

pushing the factory servants to the edge of anarchy. Duffield nearly destroyed the Company's trade in the process.

Little is known of Duffield's early connections with the Hudson's Bay Company; yet as a close friend of and executor for a discontented Company servant, a certain Mr Waggoner, he must have been familiar with its operations. When Mr Waggoner died, a dispute with Captain Coates over the will permanently secured Duffield against the sea captains who annually supplied the posts at the Bayside. Probably influenced by the Waggoner fiasco, Duffield made it his mission to reform the Bayside and the captains. The Company, for its part, must have hoped that Duffield, with his promised rule of iron, would rectify the corruption that they believed was draining their revenues.

Immediately upon his arrival at Moose in the fall of 1741, James Duffield set about to effect a vigorous reformation, but the factory council opposed him with silence and deceit. Duffield grumbled that he felt he had been

dropp'd down amongst a nest of *free & accepted* Masons, without being initiated by ye bretheren, but as an Intruder on their laws, by virtue of ye Compys authority: & therefore at all events I was to be hoodwink'd & kept from discovering their Secret measures . . . such a Scandalous Society.

The council maintained its despondent silence as Duffield assumed vigorous and absolute control of all aspects of life. He banished the Indians, including the men's families, from the factory's compound and refused credit to all. Alcohol was attacked with equal vigour. He confiscated first the surgeon's then the servants' brandy.

During the following months Duffield piled oppressive regulation upon regulation. Every evening at sundown he locked the factory's gates himself, saw every servant to bed at the eight o'clock bell, and checked every change of the watch. He never went to bed himself until all the men were asleep, about ten o'clock, and he was always the first at work in the morning, rousing any who slept too long. The men's lockers were periodically searched for furs, and any fur bedding was summarily confiscated. Any infractions were severely and corporally punished.

As tension mounted in the post Duffield took to carrying a brace of pistols and a stout cane to defend himself. The men were increasingly unhappy at their perceived loss of liberty which they likened to slavery. William Drever, the new 'Attorney-General' became the focal point of much of the resistance, as he plotted insurrection with the factory's cook, surgeon and carpenter. Determined to break the back of the opposition, Duffield seized the carpenter, handcuffed him and turned him outside the factory where he stayed in a small Indian tent for three days and nights. Such force continued to be applied with vigour. On 4 December 1741, a man was lashed to the stove, and



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on 23 December a seaman, John Ridley, was caned for being 'idle and shifting in his work'. Even on Christmas Day, Duffield went about after eight in the evening seizing brandy and generally putting a damper on merriment.

Duffield was particularly afraid that the men would deliberately burn the fort down. Frost, for one, attempted to fire one of the flankers. To prevent this, Duffield usually chained trouble-makers to the stove to make sure they would burn before the factory. Late night drunken brawls and burning candles could also cause accidental fires, so to make certain the men did nothing but sleep after eight, the doors to the cabins were removed. This, of course, also made it difficult to hide Indian wives and to plot conspiracies.

Through terror, humiliation and constant vigilance Duffield managed to keep the lid on rebellion. The energy and techniques that kept him alive are much in evidence in an incident that occurred in 1743. While Duffield was writing up the sailing orders for the master of the Moose sloop, the crew was in the factory

spiriting up a rebellion against him with their 'countrymen', the factory servants. Mr Longland, the master and a favourite of Duffield's, was the first to be attacked. Duffield was to be next. Hearing a disturbance, and Mr Longland's cries, Duffield grabbed his pistols, raced into the factory's court and chased the conspirators back to the sloop. Later that evening after careful inquiry he seized the ringleader, one Porto Bello, whom he had whipped the year before. When Porto Bello threatened to burn the fort, himself included, Duffield locked him up in a small shed with seven biscuits and one gallon of water. Then in another fit of bravado Porto Bello swore to hang himself. Duffield obliged by providing the rope, but Porto Bello complained that the rope was not long enough, whereupon Duffield called all the servants together for the final humiliation of their hero whom he provided with a very long piece of rope indeed. Porto Bello again refused and threatened starvation, as a dramatic but less immediate form of suicide; but by now his credibility had evaporated. Duffield remained in control and the men were left to look for a new leader.

While congratulating himself on keeping riot at a minimum, Duffield was well aware, even before 1743, that his life was not safe. As early as September 1741, as the fort restrictions grew more trying, hints of Indian-engendered assassinations were made by some of the servants. Given the close connection with the Home Guard Indians this was a very distinct possibility, but why these threats were never carried out is difficult to determine. Nevertheless, Duffield chose to keep his distance from the Indians.

Duffield also systematically set about to break Frost's control. From the very first, Frost and the council had continually interceded on the men's behalf, begging Duffield to moderate his regime. Initially Duffield privately reprimanded the council and forbade their continuing connection with the Indians. In March of 1742, however, he decided upon another solution. He was determined to prohibit Frost any connection with the Indians and to send him home in September when the annual ships arrived. That winter and spring Duffield kept a careful eye on Frost from the factory windows, and whenever he saw an Indian approaching he would dash out to prevent the meeting.

Nevertheless the men schemed with the Indians that winter and plots were hatched in rapid succession. Most of these Duffield held in utter contempt. According to him the men were

but very *Shallow* pated politicians & [I] can easily dive into ye bottom of all their plots, before they are ripe for execution.

He felt that a rebellion of the Home Guard was unlikely; but while there was no uprising, the Home Guard, at Frost's instigation, refused to provide geese

or fish for the Company's table. Frost felt that lack of food due to mismanagement on Duffield's part would be sufficient excuse for a rebellion, which might then persuade the Company to recall the chief factor.

More importantly, Frost connived with the Home Guard to trade with the French. Some contacts were made but their success was negligible. Supplies from the French, especially powder, could not be guaranteed. In fact Duffield's careful and rigorous trade had pushed the overplus from 922 13/60 Made Beaver in Richard Staunton's last year to 1936 21/40 in his own last year. Duffield finally broke the back of the Home Guard resistance by sending Frost to Albany in July. Without their leader and with generous gifts to the Indian leader, the reluctant trade with Moose continued.

The factory's servants were not Duffield's only object of attack. He also believed that the captains were at the root of much of the discontent. Captain Coates was accused of interfering with the internal operations of the factory, landing brandy illicitly, engaging in clandestine trade, and ransoming the annual cargo. The captains he argued were also responsible for much of the bad behaviour of the men. The Company must not

Suffer their Sea Commanders any longer to Uphold laziness, sottishness and disobedience, by which they have so long found it their interest.

Duffield, however, never managed to break the powers of the captains, who had the ear of the London Committee.

The London Committee was, for its part, not impressed with Duffield despite his apparent successes. On 5 May 1743, they publicly chastised him in their annual letter to the factory's council:

[We] do believe that the Proceedings of your Chief by Governing with a Rod of Iron, causes disturbances in the Factory, and thereby is detrimental to our Affairs.

At the same time he was urged to maintain friendly relations with the sea captains. There was to be no more premeditated conflict. Whether Duffield would have moderated his regime will never be known, for during the winter of 1743-44 his health deteriorated rapidly and in August 1744, he returned home.

After Duffield's departure, the factory slowly returned to its old ways. George Howy was appointed by Duffield to act in his stead. Having maintained a quiet opposition during the previous four years, Howy spent the next months trying to put things right. He had deplored Duffield's rough usage of the Indians, and his displays of favouritism. Howy's immediate problem was to get the Indians hunting geese again since during the previous starvation winter, Duffield had shut the Indians out of the factory. In order to survive they had plundered the Eskimos instead. That winter of 1744-45 Howy let the indigent Indians into



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the factory, and re-established a close relationship with the Home Guard. The servants were allowed more freedom and the rebellions of the past years vanished. Once again 'corruption' reigned; Duffield's reformation had been undone.

Actually there were few Duffields at the Bayside to disrupt the development of the staple society. Most of the chief factors rose through the ranks and were aware of the exigencies of life at the factories. Most acquiesced in silence, and little leaked to London in the journals. The fur trade had produced a society of its own that was half Indian, half European, at once independent of the Company in terms of its internal structure, yet dependent upon the Company for its technology. By virtue of their situation and their function the communities of the early eighteenth century on the shores of Hudson Bay had to create their own social patterns over which the Company had little influence. Indeed, attempts to impose an external and essentially foreign order upon the Bayside societies always served to retard rather than advance Company business on Hudson Bay. ♦