

CHAPTER IV

FIRST CONSEQUENCES OF 1783

I

THE year 1783 was probably the most important year in the entire history of the northern commercial state. Canada then was a sparsely populated and undeveloped country; but the mere simplicity of the society in which the crucial changes of that year occurred should not be allowed to diminish their fundamental importance. Canada was changed both outwardly and in essence. For the year 1783 meant three things: peace, the advent of the Loyalists and the establishment of an international boundary where none had existed before—a boundary devoid of geographical and historical meaning which cut through the commercial empire of the St. Lawrence. Each of these changes, though the establishment of peace was unimportant in comparison with the other two, was heavy with meaning for Canada. The northern economy, though despoiled and partitioned, had at least kept its independence in North America. It had emerged at length from the long period of wars, of rumours and aftermaths of wars, which had lasted from the conquest; and peace lifted the dread of the last decades and weakened the instinctive reliance upon military forms. The bureaucracy at Quebec lost its most unanswerable justification. The civilian middle class recovered its assurance and resumed its old political activity.

The year 1783, however, meant much more than this. It began an economic and social revolution in the region of the Great Lakes which lasted for nearly four decades after the peace. The new international boundary partitioned the northern commercial state; the coming of the Loyalists initiated a radical change in its character. Both these changes were of great importance. But the full consequences of the migration were less immediately apparent than the results of the new boundary; and though in the next forty years the merchants had to revise their commercial machine as much in response to the settlement of the lower lakes as in answer to the new political division of the continent, it was the boundary