
CHAPTER XI

THE SCOTTISH COLONY ON THE RED RIVER

LORD SELKIRK was a man of visions. Nothing else can explain his tenacity in holding for years without question the plan of placing a party of his countrymen on the banks of the Red River, in a region which he knew to be fertile, though hard to reach. His Prince Edward Island and Baldoon experiences were but an apprenticeship in the art of raising up New World communities.

Taken up with his scheme of defence and charity, as we have seen, he did not lose an opportunity in the low price of the stock of the Hudson's Bay Company, which held the lands on which his eye was set, to obtain the area for the establishment of a colony which would bear his name and be a monument of patriotism and disinterestedness. The wars of Napoleon were still continuing, and the labouring classes of England, Scotland, and Ireland were really in a state of pauperism. Commencing in 1808, Lord Selkirk and his relatives had acquired a quantity,

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of Hudson's Bay Company stock. Alexander Mackenzie, of whose Imperial and successful voyages we have heard, representing the North-West Company of Montreal, had come to Scotland, married a fair daughter of the House of Seaforth, and become a Scottish proprietor. He kept a watchful eye upon the "eccentric lord," as he and his friends were wont to call Lord Selkirk, for he knew how disastrous a settlement of white men and their families would be to the fur trade. He knew that when the white man and his family come the deer flee to their coverts, the wolf and the fox are exterminated; and even the muskrat has a troubled existence when the dog and the cat and the other domestic animals make their appearance. It was a startling thing for the Nor'-Westers to see their very existence threatened by the plans of the "visionary Scottish nobleman." But Lord Selkirk and his friends purchased stock until in May, 1811, they held, it is said, more than £35,000 worth of stock out of the whole £105,000 of the Company. A meeting was called on May 30th to deal with Lord Selkirk's proposals. Two days before the meeting Alexander Mackenzie, John Inglis, and Edward Ellice—Nor'-Westers—purchased £2,500 worth of stock; but this was of no avail, and Lord Selkirk bought of the Company 116,000 square miles of land—one half of which is now the Province of Manitoba, the other half being at present included in the States of Minnesota and North Dakota, on the south side of the boundary-line between the United States

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and Canada. The Nor'-Westers were frantic, but they were for the time being helpless.

Lord Selkirk's scheme was most dazzling and attractive. He was possessor in his own right of a territory in North America four times the size of Scotland. The highest legal opinion had been taken, and it was all in his lordship's favour. A fertile land was lying ready to be tilled by his needy countrymen. His would be a colony of his own countrymen, under the British flag, in a country capable of supporting millions of human beings. But trouble was in store for him. His previous experience had brought him into touch with men of ability in Canada and the United States; and he secured Captain Miles Macdonell, a Loyalist from the United States who had come to Canada, and who was to be the Governor of the colony. While Macdonell was making his way from Canada, Lord Selkirk was not idle. Glasgow was a centre of Scottish industry, and to this point was sent Captain Roderick McDonald, who found many difficulties in the way; but some fifty colonists, led by him, made their way to Stornoway, the rendezvous of the party.

A most effective officer, who had seen service in the fur country and had quarrelled with the Nor'-Westers, willingly entered Lord Selkirk's service. This was Colin Robertson. He was sent to his countrymen in the Island of Lewis and secured a number of recruits for the party at Stornoway. In the year 1811 Miles Macdonell arrived in Scotland from America, and on account

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of his being a Roman Catholic he was sent to Ireland to advance the emigration scheme, sell stock in the Company, and engage a number of workmen as colonists. It seemed much more difficult for Lord Selkirk to get colonists now than it had been with his Prince Edward Island colony of eight hundred in 1803. Now he had an active opposition, which was unknown before. Sir Alexander Mackenzie was doing his best to thwart the scheme. In Inverness the *Journal*, a newspaper of that Scottish town, came out with an article, signed "Highlander," which pictured the dangers of the journey, the hardships of the country, the unreliability of the agents, and the mercenary purpose of Lord Selkirk. Two ships were going out to Hudson Bay with men and merchandise for the trade of the Company, and a third vessel, the *Edward and Ann*, was to carry the colonists. The emigrant ship was a sorry craft, with old sails and ropes, and a very small crew. On account of the threatened attack of the French fleet, a small man-of-war was sent as convoy to the little fleet of three Hudson's Bay Company ships. Many difficulties met the captains in the east and north of Scotland as the vessels made their way from London around the North Coast of Britain to Stornoway. Here the fiercest opposition began; the collector of Customs was a relative of Sir Alexander Mackenzie, and the whole official force seemed against the colonists. Some of them were "given the shilling" on the deck of the ship and were then arrested as

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deserters. Miles Macdonell, on the day of the sailing of the ship, having lost a number both of workmen and colonists, wrote to Lord Selkirk : " My Lord, this is a most unfortunate business. . . . I condole with your Lordship on all these cross accidents." The day of sailing was July 26, 1811.

It also seemed as if all the forces of the ocean were combined against this devoted party. The journey was very long ; they did not reach their destination at York Factory till September 24th. The voyage had taken sixty-one days, and was the longest and latest passage ever known to Hudson Bay.

The passengers were landed, tents were pitched for their temporary convenience, and in eleven days they saw the ships depart for the home they had left behind.

York Factory was not deemed suitable for the shelter of the colony during the winter. The Hudson's Bay Company officer and Miles Macdonell proceeded to build what they called the " Nelson Encampment," some distance from the fort. Comfortable log dwellings were soon erected, under Miles Macdonell's direction. As he was a colonial, this was done with expedition. The winter dragged along, scurvy attacked some of the settlers, but the famous remedy of the juice of the spruce-tree cured this. After New Year many deer were killed, and these made good rations. A serious rebellion broke out among the men. This arose from a quarrel between the Irish workmen and those from Orkney.

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Boats were built during the winter, and after waiting for the ice to go out of the Hayes River the party, having been met by several Company officers from the interior, started from York Factory on July 6, 1812, to make their long and dangerous journey to the Red River.

Lack of space forbids the details of the eventful journey up rapids, portages, decharges, and semi-decharges, as they were called when the rapids, more or less difficult, had to be ascended.

The route was of a very rugged and trying character. When they arrived at Norway House, at the foot of Lake Winnipeg, they had traversed thirty-seven portages and endured great hardships. A short delay to obtain rest was made here, then they hastened on, coasting Lake Winnipeg and entering the delta of the Red River. They had nearly fifty miles yet to go before they should reach the Promised Land, but this they soon accomplished and camped on the east side of Red River, opposite the site of the city of Winnipeg of to-day.

Their long voyage from York Factory to their landing-place on Red River was 728 miles, and this had taken them fifty-five weary days.

They landed on August 30, 1812.

This is the red-letter day of the beginning of Lord Selkirk's colony.

At the time of arrival there was Fort Gibraltar, the trading house of the Nor'-Westers. This was on the site of the present city of Winnipeg, and there was a small trading house of the Hudson's

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Bay Company. Miles Macdonell, however, had his duty to perform. The Nor'-Westers might be counted on as hostile, a few French people lived where he had encamped on the east side of the river, and the Indians looked on with curiosity at the new-comers.

Governor Miles Macdonell now prepared for the official act, the "claiming of the territory for Lord Selkirk."

He summoned three of the Nor'-West officers from Fort Gibraltar, the French Canadians, and the Indians, and he also collected a number of Hudson's Bay Company officers and men as well as his colonists. The patent to Lord Selkirk of his vast estate was then read, and a part of it translated into French for the Canadians. There was an official guard, colours were flying, and the firing of six swivel guns followed the reading of the patent. At the close of the pageant the officers were invited to the Governor's tent and a keg of spirits was turned out for the people.

The next step was to choose a point on which to settle the colonists. After taking a number of the leading men and going up and down the river, a spot was chosen where the trees had been burnt from what is now known as Point Douglas (so called from Lord Selkirk's family name), and here on the site of the north end of the Winnipeg of to-day the Selkirk colony made its beginning. The Indians, under Chief Peguis, gave a hearty welcome to the strangers, while the Nor'-Westers looked on with a critical air,

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though they were compelled to admit that Lord Selkirk's claim seemed to be valid.

The first difficulty to be met by Governor Macdonell was how to provide food and shelter for the colonists during the coming winter.

In a few days, after consulting with the Indians, he came to the conclusion that it would be necessary for him to move the whole body sixty miles up the Red River to the vicinity of the great "buffalo plains," where they could obtain plenty of food. The place is to the present day known as Pembina. The Governor succeeded in getting the friendly Indians to accompany them to their anticipated haven of rest. The poor colonists—men, women, and children—had to walk the whole distance, while the Indians, riding unconcernedly on their ponies, guided them. On September 11th the settlers reached Pembina, and Macdonell and three companions, who had succeeded in obtaining prairie horses, arrived the next day.

A site was chosen on the south side of the angle where the Pembina empties into the Red River. The settlers encamped here, where a storehouse had just been built, and great quantities of buffalo meat were brought to them by the French Canadians and Indians. About two weeks after their arrival the second party, consisting chiefly of a few Irishmen, arrived at their camping-place. Orders were now given for the erection of several buildings, so that near the end of November all were habitable, and in a little more than a month later the quarters for the Governor and officers

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were ready for occupation. A flagstaff having been erected and a certain amount of protection being provided for guarding the place, it was duly named "Fort Daer," after Lord Selkirk's second title. Their winter was on the whole comfortable, although towards the spring buffalo meat became scarcer.

The winter over, the Scottish exiles trudged their way back to their settlement and made futile attempts to till the soil. They had no implements other than the hoe with which to break up the tough sod of the prairie. They were not farmers, but crofters. Even the fish in the river, which they might have caught to secure themselves food for this year, seemed scarce. The wild fruits, which usually grow in the belts of trees along the river-bank, were not abundant this year; and the chief food of the colonists was the so-called "prairie turnip," belonging to the pea family." This was abundant, and a succulent weed was also freely used by the colonists.

Thus far the Nor'-Westers had shown no unfriendliness to the new settlers. They had even brought into the country from the south a few cattle, pigs, and poultry, for which Governor Macdonell tendered hearty thanks.

But when, in the winter of 1813, as in that of 1812, they were again compelled to make the long journey to Pembina to seek food for the winter, the French hunters of Pembina began to show some opposition to them, perhaps on account of the building of Fort Daer upon their lands.

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This winter proved to be very stormy, and deep snow covered the prairie. This made it difficult to reach the buffalo, and the hunters were in great danger of losing their lives, while within their abodes there was scarcity. Early in January, 1814, a most suicidal and unwise action was taken by the Governor. He issued a proclamation that no food—pemmican, grain, or vegetable—should be taken from the country, but at the same time he offered to pay for all the food that was necessary for the support of the colonists. An amount of dry buffalo meat was also seized at the Nor'-West Fort, near Brandon House. The Nor'-Westers, the half-breed French, and even the traders of the Hudson's Bay Company, who were none too friendly to the colonists, all regarded the action of the Governor as tyrannical, if not impertinent. It is to be remembered that there had hitherto been no assertion of governmental control in the whole country. Governor Macdonell justified himself somewhat by stating that he was expecting a considerable party of new settlers from Scotland during the approaching summer.

Meanwhile Lord Selkirk, still in Scotland, was keeping a watchful eye on his colony, although separated by a great distance and with most tedious means of communication. But the opposition of Sir Alexander Mackenzie, and the fact that both the Selkirk parties had thus far arrived safely at the Red River, seems to have inspired their patron to greater activity than ever. Accordingly in 1813 he sent out his third party—

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an excellent band of settlers, about one hundred strong. They crossed in the ship *Prince of Wales*, bound for York Factory. A very serious attack of ship's fever seized them, and several well-known and influential colonists died. The captain of the ship seems to have lost his judgment, and ran the vessel into Fort Churchill, the nearest port, where, after landing, others of their number died.

On the approach of spring in 1814 the more determined members of this party ventured forth in April—twenty-one males and twenty females—and undertook to walk more than a hundred miles across the icy hills and snow-piled valleys to York Factory. The party went at first in single file, but afterward six abreast. Some gave out and had to be carried, and the cold became intense, but fortunately a sufficient supply of wild partridges was provided for them. The party reached their destination—York Factory—after twenty-one days of the greatest hardship. Fortunately this company of colonists were under the leadership of a Mr. Archibald Macdonald, a competent and determined man. The party reached Red River on May 27th, and were in time to plant potatoes for themselves and others in the settlement, and when the weather became milder the comrades of the party who had been left behind came on to Red River.

The arrival of this third band of Selkirk colonists but served to irritate the Nor'-Westers, who knew that if the colony succeeded their prestige and business in the North-West would certainly be undermined.

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During the summer of 1814 the partners held their annual meeting at Fort William on Lake Superior, and, after discussing the whole matter of the colony, agreed on a plan of opposition of the most determined kind. The whole body of Nor'-Wester traders were incensed at Lord Selkirk, and they had received the following message from London: "Lord Selkirk must be driven to abandon his project, for his success would strike at the very existence of our trade." And the hearts of the wintering partners responded fully to this inciting command.

The settlers upon their return from Pembina began to occupy their lands and to make provision from the soil for their support. But there were constant threats of attack, expulsion, and opposition, which rendered the future very uncertain indeed. It was especially distressing for Lord Selkirk, because he could not get any information of the events happening only after several months' interval. But with true Scottish pluck on his part, and perfect courage and devotion on that of Governor Macdonell, and the knowing advice of Colin Robertson, whatever the Nor'-Westers and their allies were threatening to do to them, the leaders felt—perhaps foolishly, but still confidently—that they were standing on their rights. Plainly their attitude said, "Wha daur meddle wi' me?"