
CHAPTER XII

THE DASHING HIGHLAND RED-COAT CAPTAIN

WHY do Scotsmen make good soldiers, and why are the Scottish regiments most famous? is a question often asked.

A Scottish lady on being asked, replied, "Because they can fight!" This is the truth.

A Scottish Governor, Miles Macdonell, backed with legal opinions, and inspired with the national hardihood, had issued his proclamation of "Embargo," and he proposed to stand by it. Free Traders, Indians, and half-breeds, who all regarded themselves as outside of law, and who were as free in their notions as their prairie winds, made outspoken dissent.

What would come of it?

The answer came from another tribunal four or five hundred miles away from Red River.

The McGillivrays, McLeods, and Camerons of the Montreal Fur Company and many others were Scotsmen too; and the blood of the Highland clansman was warm even to boiling over. So in August, 1814, in their annual meeting at Grand Portage on Lake Superior, they denounced in

The Scotsman in Canada

burning tones the high-handed order of Miles Macdonell, and vowed the destruction of Lord Selkirk's infant colony.

True, the great hall at Fort William resounded during the nights of their meetings with noisy revelry, and rum and music urged them on to extravagance ; but when it came to planning reprisals and driving out the interloper, the same spirit as that of Roderick Dhu against the invasion of the Sassenach stranger animated them, and they chose two of their most warlike and doughty leaders to meet the enemy. The first man chosen was well fitted for his work. He needed finesse to keep within the letter of the law, however much he might transgress the spirit, he must have the Highland pluck to claim the rights of Canadian law as having force in the Indian territories, for an Act of the Imperial Parliament seemed to give authority. He needed also the adroitness and the "illness," as Shakespeare called it, to coax or force according as circumstances might require it. Not too scrupulous, but not rash, not too timid to incite his followers to violence, but not afraid to discourage any evil intention, not too anxious to begin a quarrel unless he saw fair chance to gain his end. The man thus fitted by nature and experience to undertake such a task was Duncan Cameron. He was one of the Loyalist Scots who had come over from the United States to Canada and had grown up from boyhood in the Canadian wilds of the St. Lawrence and the Ottawa, where the intrepid hunter, daring boatman,

Dashing Highland Red-Coat Captain

or leader of the lumber shanty was the hero of men. As a young man he had taken part in the war of 1812. He had, moreover, been for years a trader among the Indians on the north shore of Lake Superior as bourgeois of the Scottish Fur Company. He was brave and ambitious, though somewhat vain and decidedly selfish. With him was appointed Alexander Macdonell, who had much influence among the Indians and half-breeds in the western district of the Qu'Appelle River, but Duncan Cameron's was the master-mind. While he claimed to have military standing, it was never clearly made out that he had more than volunteer rank, but when he proceeded on his mission from Lake Superior to Red River he appeared dressed up in the red coat and accoutrements of a captain of the Army. To the Scottish immigrants who had just come from the Old Land he had the prestige of a son of Mars. When he came to Fort Gibraltar, careless of good taste, he had his so-called captain's commission nailed on the gate of the fort, that all who came might read. As bourgeois of the fort he took complete command. Moreover, was he not a Highlander, and could he not speak the language of Eden which the colonists spoke? His first step was to ingratiate himself with his countrymen. He brought the leaders of the colony to his table, treated them freely with "the mountain dew" of their native land, and showed the greatest interest in their concerns. That he was a serpent in the grass they could not believe. When admitted thoroughly

The Scotsman in Canada

to their friendship he began to lament their sad condition and to stir them up against the tyranny of Lord Selkirk's Governor, Miles Macdonell.

Very soon also he became more aggressive against the Hudson's Bay Company and its representatives. His full plan, not revealed at first, was to lead away the colony from the Fur Country, and to take the deserters to Upper Canada. But Miles Macdonell had three-quarters of a dozen of small cannon, and with these he might prevent the colonists—a number of whom were under indenture to Lord Selkirk—from leaving the colony. In the absence of Governor Macdonell, when the rations were being issued to the colonists from Lord Selkirk's stores, Cameron induced some of the settlers to make a demand from Archibald Macdonald, acting head of the colonists, for the nine field-pieces. Macdonald refused, but the settlers broke open the store-houses and took the cannon to Fort Gibraltar. Macdonald next arrested the leading settler who had taken part in the raid. Cameron then incited the settlers to rescue their leader, and they did so. When Governor Miles Macdonell returned, Cameron, by virtue of his commission as a Justice of the Peace under the Canadian Government, ordered the Governor's arrest.

Upon Miles Macdonell refusing to acknowledge Cameron's authority, the wily captain stated that unless he was given up the settlers would be dispossessed of their farms and be driven from the settlement. A number of loyal settlers were now

Dashing Highland Red-Coat Captain

fired at by unseen marksmen, and they became utterly alarmed.

In most of these happenings the hand of Cameron was not seen. The captain now became more daring, as he was confidently expecting the arrival of Alexander Macdonell, his fellow-plotter, with a band of Indians from Qu'Appelle, and also another party of Chippewa Indians from Red Lake in Minnesota. These failing, an open attack was made in force on the colonists' houses. This violence was continued so persistently that, to save the colonists, Governor Miles Macdonell gave himself up as a prisoner, in response to the warrant of Cameron. This capture gave the captain with the red coat great prestige among the colonists, even among those most devoted to Lord Selkirk. Having produced among the settlers great discontent, and even fear, Captain Cameron now disclosed the second feature of the plot. This was nothing less than a most tempting offer to the whole colony to take them down to Upper Canada, a more settled country, and to give land and many advantages to those who were in distress in the Red River Settlement.

To the suffering Highlanders, ill at ease in their surroundings, Cameron was the ideal of sincerity and kindness, when he proposed to transport them free of cost to the unpossessed lands of Canada, and to give each family two hundred acres of free land near a market town.

Moreover, there is evidence that disaffected settlers who had any prominence among the people

The Scotsman in Canada

were promised sums of money from £100 to £20 each. The adroitness with which Cameron appealed to the fact that they were not going to a foreign country—the United States—but to land where the British flag was flying also had its influence. The die was at last cast by some 140 out of the whole colony of 200 deciding to accept the offer. This was a dreadful blow to the generous and patient coloniser in his British home, and the galling thing was that it had been a victory for deceit and cunning.

On June 15th the party departed in the canoes provided for them, drifted down the Red River, which had been their goal since they had left Ross-shire, Sutherland, or the Island of Lewis. And who were the departing settlers? There were Campbells, Sutherlands, McKays, Gunns, McKinnons, Livingstons, Mathesons, McBeaths, Grays, Bannermans, Coopers, and other families, many of the most enterprising and worthy of the settlers. By the end of July they had reached Lake Superior, but their journey, though it had been one of well-nigh five hundred miles, was not half over. In their canoe brigades they went along the base of the rugged cliffs of Lake Superior, through the Sault Ste. Marie River, and then along the shore of Georgian Bay to the old fort of Penetanguishene. They had now reached the region which was to be their future home, and they were taken to lands in different directions. The most compact and noted settlement of them was in the township of West Gwillimbury, some

Dashing Highland Red-Coat Captain

forty miles north of Toronto. Some of them were dispersed through the townships about Toronto, and a number went west to London to the Talbot Settlement. They made good homes for themselves and obtained comfort and wealth for themselves and their children. Two of the younger members of the party who came to Ontario were known to the writer. These were Heman Sutherland and John McBeth, who had both risen to the distinction well marked in Scottish settlements of being "elders in the kirk." McBeth was a large man, weighing 250 lbs., and it was humorously said that he had been carried all the way from Red River to Toronto. The explanation of this was that he had been carried as a baby from Red River to Toronto.

Cameron came away, personally conducting the refugees, but left a legacy of sorrow to the party of fifty or sixty remaining; for Alexander Macdonell, who had come from Qu'Appelle to Red River with a party of half-breed horsemen, was to drive the remnant away from their homes and leave not a trace of settlement to mark their memory. Two days after the deserters had gone the little party of some thirteen families sailed sadly down the Red River in boats to find a refuge at Jack River, near Norway House, at the foot of Lake Winnipeg. The Governor's house, the buildings begun by the settlers, and the mill were all burnt to the ground. One daring Highland captain had gone, but another determined Celt remained. This was John McLeod, who, with three

The Scotsman in Canada

or four other employees of the Hudson's Bay Company, were left in charge of the Company's store and blacksmith's shop. This daring McLeod had received no orders to do anything ; but, seeing the damage being wrought by Alexander Macdonell and his destructive band, determined to show his Scottish grit, and at once began to fortify the blacksmith's shop. With a cart he brought the three-pounder cannon to the shop, cut up lengths of chain to make shot and shell, and carefully hoarded his supply of powder. The Bois-brulés assailants came threatening the brave McLeod's improvised fortress, but dared not face his three-pounder gun. The siege continued for several days, and a Hudson's Bay Company gentleman was killed ; but McLeod saved £1,000 worth of goods for the old Company. The party of half-breeds, finding it useless and somewhat dangerous to remain, retired to their prairie homes and left McLeod unmolested. Though having no authority to do so, he now planned a fort and a Governor's residence, for he knew that other settlers were coming from Scotland that year, and that Lord Selkirk would not desert his colony. He states in his diary that this was the beginning of the Colony Fort, which was called by him Fort Douglas in honour of Lord Selkirk's family name.

But Duncan Cameron, having conducted the departing colonists to Upper Canada, must needs return to see the fate of the settlement and to advance the interest of the Nor'-Westers. Colin

Dashing Highland Red-Coat Captain

Robertson, the old leader of the settlers, also came west from Canada to Red River, sought out the refugees at Jack River, and restored them to their holdings on Red River again. These were afterward joined by the finest of all the bands of settlers—numbering about one hundred—sent out by Lord Selkirk. They were led by a retired Army officer named Robert Semple. Whether Semple was of Scottish blood is a matter of question, although the form of the name Sempill is undoubtedly Scottish. The new Governor had been a great traveller as well as soldier and was a superior man. He was born in the American colonies, and had entered the British Army. On his return to Red River Settlement, Cameron was arrested by Semple and imprisoned; but on his agreeing to keep the peace, he was allowed to take charge of Fort Gibraltar again. Evidently Cameron could not be trusted, and again his fort was taken and he himself made a prisoner. Governor Semple, being a military man, took strenuous measures, and declared it to be necessary to deport Duncan Cameron. The prisoner was sent to York Factory, was held a year at that fort after missing the annual ship, and after a short stay in Britain returned to Canada. This action of Semple's proved expensive to Lord Selkirk, for Cameron afterward recovered £3,000 for illegal detention, though this ended his connection with the West. He settled down in Glengarry in Upper Canada, and from 1823 to 1828 was a member of the Legislature for that county.

The Scotsman in Canada

His son was Sir Richard Cameron, a New York merchant engaged in the Australian trade. Duncan Cameron had the perfervid temperament of a true Scotsman.