
CHAPTER XIII

A FIERY SCOTTISH METIS

BY the strange irony of fate the leaders of the opposing Scottish factions on the Red River were both removed by force and left the field of action open. Miles Macdonell, as a prisoner at large, was sent east to Canada ; while, in return when the colony was restored, Duncan Cameron was sent as an exile to York Factory on Hudson Bay.

Colin Robertson seems to have been the only survivor of the first actors in the drama.

He brought back the scattered remnant from Jack River, and they were followed by the colonists of 1815—one hundred in number. The settlement now began under new auspices, but every one knows that, since it was a Scottish quarrel, the end was not to be yet. It is not without appropriateness that the Scottish motto, "Nemo me impune lacessit" ("No one hurts me with impunity"), has become descriptive of Scottish life and Scottish temper. The new party of immigrants were of the same stock as their predecessors. In the list of their families occur the names Sutherland, Polson, Matheson, Murray,

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McKay, Bruce, Gunn, Bannerman, McBeth, and McDonald. They were a sturdy party and were the ancestors of the people of the Kildonan of to-day in Manitoba.

But more pains had been taken to provide leaders for the Selkirk colonists. Robert Semple, the new Governor, being a military officer, brought with him a small staff, including Captain Rogers, Lieut. Holte, and others. The Nor'-Westers were led by Alexander Macdonell, A. N. McLeod, a Highland fur trader, and a young native of the mixed race of the country who came into prominence at this juncture. Again it was to be a Scottish duel between Governor Semple and this fiery young Scottish Metis, Cuthbert Grant. We do not see it stated anywhere that Robert Semple, the new Governor, was Scottish ; but it is almost certain that he was. The name Semple, or more correctly Sempill, is a Renfrewshire name of old standing. Sir Robert Sempill was made by James IV. Lord Sempill in 1489, and was killed at Flodden, twenty-four years afterward. His son and grandson were respectively Lord Robert Sempill. Robert Sempill (1530-95) was an offshoot of the Sempills with the bar sinister, and was a celebrated ballad-writer of the Reformation era, and his ballads enjoyed great popularity. Governor Robert Semple was, however, born of British, almost certainly of Scottish, parents in Boston in 1766. The parents were Loyalists and were imprisoned, during the War of Independence, by the rebels. Young Semple was

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connected with mercantile affairs between England and the American colonies. He visited Cape Colony in 1802, London, Spain, and Italy in 1803, and the West Indies and South America in 1810. It is a matter of much interest that in 1813 he was on the Continent and in the rear of the British Army, and was mistakenly arrested as a supposed American spy by Lord Cathcart, the British commander. The race of Sempills had several times shown the literary faculty, and Robert Semple wrote four interesting volumes, representing the four foreign journeys mentioned here. These are to be found in the British Museum along with a novel entitled "Charles Ellis ; or, The Friend." As we shall see, this interesting man was probably too much of a gentleman and a scholar for the rough work to which he had been sent. He was, however, universally held to be a just and honourable man, though ex-Governor Masson of Quebec, in his "History of the North-West," calls him "a man not very conciliatory, it is true, but intelligent, honourable, and a man of integrity." It will be observed that no one has charged him with want of bravery or decision of character.

For the winter of 1815-16 Governor Semple was compelled to take his colonists to the old wintering-place of Pembina. Returning from there after the New Year, 1816, and after consulting with Colin Robertson, he decided, as we have seen, to arrest Duncan Cameron, the officer at Fort Gibraltar, and send him as a prisoner by way of York Factory on Hudson's Bay to England.

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The departure of Colin Robertson in charge of Duncan Cameron was a distinct loss to Semple. Though before his departure Robertson had counselled the Governor not to interfere with Fort Gibraltar or the Nor'-Westers, yet the Governor most unwisely decided to raze the fort to the ground and with the material, floated down Red River to the site of Fort Douglas, enlarge the Colony Fort. While on the ground of abstract legal right Semple was justified in doing this, yet, with the Nor'-Westers much stronger in men and those of a warlike type, it was simply an act of madness. However, the stockade and buildings were attacked by thirty men, and Gibraltar was soon absorbed into Fort Douglas.

And now like wildfire the news went west, and traders, Metis, and Indians were startled beyond measure. True, Lord Selkirk owned the soil ; but was there not customary right, and did not possession mean something?

The Indians withdrew themselves into an absolute neutrality, and the cunning fur traders—chiefly French—saw the storm brewing, and with their wives and half-breed children, ponies, carts, and all their belongings hied them away to the plains where the buffalo dwelt, till the tempest should be past.

The successful result of the plot of the year before, laid and carried out by Duncan Cameron and Alexander Macdonell, had led the North-West traders at their meeting to give instructions for reprisals if any attempt should be made to restore

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the colony whose destruction they had planned. It was, however, left to Alexander Macdonell and Archibald Norman McLeod, both old and experienced traders, to take the steps necessary.

Now rushed upon the scene, with the suddenness and spirit of a gladiator, a prairie youth of mixed Scottish and Indian blood, ready, like youthful David, to face any Philistine giant.

This was Cuthbert Grant, the younger son of a Scottish trader, to whom reference was made in an earlier chapter, and who was connected with the native people of the country. The fertile district of the Qu'Appelle River, closely associated with the Swan River, noted for furs, and the region of the Riding and Duck Mountains was the favourite hunting-ground of Indian and Company trader alike. Here something of a community grew up, resulting from the intercourse of the traders and trappers, both French and Scottish, with the Indian women. The half-breeds born of the union were a daring, athletic, and restless race. On the paternal side there was some of the best blood of the Highlands and islands of Scotland and of the French traders from Montreal. They were chiefly on the maternal side of the Cree nation, one of the most sturdy, brave, and persevering of the Indian peoples. Dwelling on the prairies, they were possessors, even in the earliest times of the fur trade, of the prairie ponies, which had been traded from tribe to tribe from Mexico to the Saskatchewan. The young men were exceedingly good riders, knew the use of

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firearms from their infancy, and were accustomed to the hunting of the buffalo and deer. Their close association with the Nor'-Westers gave them plenty upon which to live, and developed a comradeship and party feeling that was very useful to the traders in carrying on their trade and gathering their furs.

Under such enterprising and reckless leaders as Duncan Cameron, A. N. McLeod, and Alexander Macdonell they became an organised and powerful force. Stirred up as they had been in 1815 to drive off the Selkirk settlers, whom the French traders called "Jardinieres," or clod-hoppers, they began to speak of themselves as the "New Nation." The shrewd bourgeois of the Montreal Company cultivated this feeling for his own ends and praised them as "Bois-brulés" (charcoal faces), or Metis (half-breeds).

Alexander Macdonell planned a campaign in dead earnest. In the spring of 1816 a conference was held with the Cree Indians, when it was suggested that they should join with their half-breed kinsmen in an attack on the settlement. The cautious Indian, however, could not be moved. The Bois-brulés and Nor'-Westers were then stirred to action. This was achieved more effectually by the rumours of a similar attack coming from Fort William. The news echoed back from east to west. The step which committed the Bois-brulés was the seizing of a quantity of pemmican and furs belonging to the Hudson's Bay Company which was being carried by boat from

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Qu'Appelle down to Fort Douglas. Cuthbert Grant now began freely to announce their intention to seize the fort and destroy the Selkirk Settlement. The boast was made that the Bois-brulés would bow to no authority in the land. They assembled daily and nightly, had their jovial gatherings, and sang the French war and canoe songs which their fathers had taught them, until there was a growing spirit of nationality noticeable in them.

The following of young Cuthbert Grant consisted of some sixty men, most of them youths of his own age. They were all mounted on prairie ponies, and when wearing their blue capotes and red sashes the company had quite a picturesque appearance. Their arms were varied. Some had muskets, others pistols, and still others were content to use the traditional bow and arrow of their Indian ancestors.

The journey to the "Forks," where they would encounter the settlers, was upwards of two hundred miles, and it was chiefly along the banks of the Assiniboine River. On June 19, 1816, they had reached within four miles of Fort Douglas, the colony headquarters. Alexander Macdonell, cautious and cunning, remained at Portage la Prairie, sixty miles from the scene of action, but greatly encouraged the party as he saw them depart disguised as Indians or in most irregular garb. It is true that they expected to join with A. N. McLeod's party from Fort William, therefore they turned northward across the prairie to

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meet the eastern company. In this way they seemed to be avoiding Fort Douglas.

Governor Semple appears to have been misled by this movement. He knew quite well from letters intercepted by him that the intention was to destroy the fort ; but possibly he was thrown off his guard by their cross movement. At any rate, he went out to meet them in great haste. It is not our purpose to describe the battle. We are simply describing the characteristics and experiences of the two leaders—the trained captain of Scottish men, and the young Scottish Metis—when thrust into danger. The Governor ordered a gun to be dragged after his party, which had some arms, but he did not concede that his intentions were hostile.

Probably it was an accident that the first shot was fired, but it was enough, though Cuthbert Grant did not seem to have given any hostile command.

The most melancholy results followed to the Governor's party. He and his staff were all killed, while the half-breeds were scarcely touched. Semple was only wounded at first, and might have recovered, but was shot by an Indian of bad character and bloodthirsty spirit. Cuthbert Grant acted on the whole with consideration and humanity. On the persuasion of John Pritchard, one of the Governor's clerks, he protected the women and children from injury, although he had at first declared that if Fort Douglas with all the public property was not immediately given

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up the men, women, and children would all be put to death.

The fort was surrendered to the victorious young commander, and he gave full receipts for all the property, signing them "Cuthbert Grant," acting for the North-West Company; while a messenger was at once dispatched to the tactful Alexander Macdonell at Portage la Prairie.

The fort was taken possession of by the Bois-brulés, and was for the night a scene of revelry. The body of Governor Semple was carried to the fort, but the other dead were left lying on the field at Seven Oaks to be devoured by wild birds and beasts.

Two days after the fight McLeod's party from Fort William reached a landing-place on Red River at Nettley Creek. They were proceeding up to the appointed place of meeting, expecting to see Cuthbert Grant and his mounted levy there, when quite unexpectedly some seven or eight boat-loads of men, women, and children, descending the river, met them. These were the colonists whom Cuthbert Grant had driven away with the intention of completely destroying the settlement. They were now on their way to Jack River, where the previous party had gone. McLeod stopped them and compelled them to open all their boxes and packages, including Governor Semple's trunks, which his men carefully examined for papers and letters which might afford them information.

On the arrival of his party at Fort Douglas, McLeod took command, Cuthbert Grant's work

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having now been accomplished. The Bois-brulés enjoyed their life in the fort, and even on the night of the carnage they spent their time in high revel and debauch. The body of Governor Semple at least was given decent burial, and McLeod made a journey with his mounted men to the site of Fort Gibraltar, which Semple had dismantled. Here he found Peguis, the old Indian friend of the settlers, and denounced him for his lack of sympathy with the Nor'-Westers, the old friends of the Indian. McLeod and his fellow-officers also gave the highest approbation to the Bois-brulés, even upholding their brutalities.

For the time being Fort Douglas was in the hands of the Nor'-Westers, and another chapter will relate what happened within it.

Cuthbert Grant was now the hero of the hour. He settled down at St. François Xavier, some twenty-five miles west of the "Forks." Here he lived for many years among the Metis, and was the most influential person among them as "Warden of the Plains." He was the one French representative upon the Council of Assiniboia which was organised some years afterward.

The French community of Red River had its bard, Pierre Falcon, the half-breed son of a French trader. He sang the praises of the Bois-brulés and of Cuthbert Grant, their leader, especially. The French Canadians have always expressed admiration for the Scottish people, whose blood was in the veins of this their young hero.

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EULOGY OF CUTHBERT GRANT

On the banks of the Assiniboine River in the French parish of St. François Xavier in Manitoba, where was the home of Cuthbert Grant, lived near by, till the end of the nineteenth century, the fiery little Pierre Falcon, of mixed French and Indian blood. He was the poet of his countrymen. His admiration of the hero of Seven Oaks was great. One of his poems, referring to the efforts of the traders to turn aside Cuthbert Grant in his high career in 1815-16, is given in the Red River patois, though it almost baffles translation, with a rubric accompanying it.

I

[A military officer comes to parley with the Red River Bois-Brulés.]

C'est à la Rivière Rouge,
Nouvelles sont arrivées,
Un général d'armée
Qui vient pour engager.

[The Captain is not able to pay the price.]

Il vient pour engager
Beaucoup de Bois-Brulés,
Il vient pour engager
Et n'a point d'quoi payer.

[He says he wishes much to have the Bois-Brulés, who are renowned as warriors.]

Il dit qu'il veut emm'ner
Beaucoup de Bois-Brulés,
Ils sont en renomée
Pour de graves guerriers.

[He offers Cuthbert Grant, leader of the Bois-Brulés, his silver epaulettes as a gift.]

Vous, Monsieur Cuthbert
Grant,
Maitre de régiment,
Mes épaulettes d'argent
Je vous en fais présent.

[The Captain declares that he gained his renown among the Spaniards.]

Moi, Général Dickson,
Je cherche ma couronne,
Je cherche ma couronne
Chez Messieurs les Espagnols

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[The City of Mexico, says the Captain, has many warriors as well as cannoneers, who wish to crown Cuthbert Grant.]

Ville de Mexico,
Beaucoup des guerriers
Aussi des canonniers
Qui vont vous couronner.

II

[Being refused, "Farewell!" says the Captain. "You have all left me, or will write on the page: 'Dickson, poor warrior!'"]

Adieu, mes officiers,
Vous m'avez tous laissé,
Ou marqu'ra sur papier :
" Dickson, pauvre guerrier !"

[The disappointed Captain continues to the trader of the Fur Company, "I ought to be thankful for being sent back to the fort on the Mackenzie River."]

Bourgeois de compagnie
Je dois remercier
De me faire ramener
Au fort de Mackenzie.

["Bourgeois!" says the Captain, "I ought to thank you, since with your pennies I am able to find my way back under the guidance of two Bois-Brulés."]

Je dois vous remercier
Puisque avec vos deniers
J'ai pu me faire guider
Par deux des Bois-Brulés.

III

[The poet asks, "Who has made this song?" and promises at the end to tell his name]

Qui en a fait la chanson?
Un poète du canton:
Au bout de la chanson,
Nous vous le nommerons.

[To-day at the table we sit to drink and sing: To sing again and again this new song.]

Un jour étant à table
A boire et à chanter,
A chanter tout au long
La nouvelle chanson.

[Friends! drink, drink! Celebrate the song of little Pierre Falcon, the maker of songs.]

Amis, buvons, trinquons,
Saluons le chanson
De Pierriche Falcon,
Ce faiseur de chansons.