

CHAPTER XVI

SIMPSON—THE SCOTTISH EMPEROR OF THE FUR TRADERS

WHEN Colonel Coltman made his able report on the troubles between the North-West Company, the Hudson's Bay Company, and Lord Selkirk's colonists, it seemed a hopeless thing to expect any reconciliation or pacification of the irritated feelings of the contestants. But in 1820, within twenty-seven days of each other, Sir Alexander Mackenzie, who had been the silent but effective source of the opposition on the part of the Nor'-Westers to the colony, and Lord Selkirk, who, as we have seen, sought peace and rest in the South of France, both died and left the rival Companies leaderless.

Besides this, more than a decade of storm and anxiety and failing trade had taught the combatants that the beginnings of strife are like the letting out of water. Among the Nor'-Westers was a scion of one of the Scottish fur-trading families of the North-West Company named Edward Ellice. His father, his brother, and himself were known within the fur-trading circle as "the bear and cubs." If the names were

Scottish Emperor of the Fur Traders

deserved, they were hardly the source from which to expect the rise of peacemakers. Besides, the killing of a British officer, his staff, and attendants to the number of twenty at Seven Oaks had produced a sensation of horror among all classes in Britain. The Scottish sense of propriety of the fur traders in Montreal made even the strongest partisans ashamed of such an act of violence.

Accordingly when Edward Ellice made an appeal to the self-interest of his Nor'-Wester confrères, pointing out all the extravagance in the conduct of the fur trade which was leading to a great loss both of money and prestige, even the most violent partisans began to consider whether any reasonable compromise could be reached.

Lord Bathurst, a prominent member of the British Government, hearing of Edward Ellice's plan, and knowing the British sentiment on the subject, sent for "the Peacemaker," and offered to give legal approval in a statute to any financial agreement which the opposing Companies might reach. It is not necessary to mention the equitable arrangements which were made, more than to say that twenty-five Chief Factors and twenty-eight Chief Traders were to be selected alternately from the two Fur Companies, and that due provision would be made for securing the financial rights and claims of every member of the Company to the most humble officer and even the far-away trader within the Arctic Circle. Legislation was obtained giving the United Company, which was to bear the name of the older organisation, the

The Scotsman in Canada

Hudson's Bay Company, right to trade in the Indian territories outside of Rupert's Land. This licence then granted was to come before the Imperial Parliament every twenty-one years, dating from 1821, if it was to be renewed. The legislation was accepted.

But the real work of unification could only be brought about by the personality of a man rather than by Acts of Parliament or financial agreements. The man wanted was required to be young and unprejudiced, of British rather than Canadian antecedents, and with a view to the strong national peculiarities of the majority of the officers and men of both Companies, it was necessary that he should be a Scotsman. The man was found. A year before the coalition a young man named George Simpson had been sent out by Andrew Colville, Lord Selkirk's brother-in-law, to the favourite haunt of the fur trader in the distant Athabasca. He was the illegitimate son of an uncle of Thomas Simpson, the Arctic explorer, and with this blot on his birth he may be included among such men of action as William the Conqueror and the celebrated Duke of Monmouth. George Simpson had gone to the Athabasca region in 1820, and during his one year of service had visited the Peace River. He now, in one leap, reached the position of Governor of the new Hudson's Bay Company, with all its great influence in Canada and in the Northern country. It was really wonderful that this young Scotsman should have got so soon his seat firmly in the

Scottish Emperor of the Fur Traders

saddle. As soon as possible a great meeting of the Chief Factors was held at Norway House at the foot of Lake Winnipeg. The choice of this point showed how the centre of gravity had moved west from York Factory of the old Hudson's Bay Company, and from Grand Portage on the Lake Superior of the North-West Company.

The young Governor was surrounded by those old traders of the west, who had been able to baffle Indian cunning and deceit, and to carry on competitive trade with each other ; and yet they found themselves compelled to admit the courage, skill, and self-confidence of this raw young Scotsman, who came without family prestige and with only one year's experience in the country to be their leader in a most complicated and disjointed state of business affairs. However, as we know, many of this young Scotsman's fellow-countrymen have done the same thing in other fields of action and under foreign skies. Having received reports from the assembled fur traders present at Norway House, Simpson introduced a bold and radical policy of cutting down establishments, withdrawing from unremunerative points, distributing the money-interest to better advantage, and conciliating the hostile as well as toning up the discouraged. The power of the new Governor was at once felt from Montreal and the Ottawa to the Lake Superior region ; and through the trade stretches of Rupert's Land, east to York Factory, and west to the Rocky Mountains ; while even the valleys and shores of the Pacific Coast gave to

The Scotsman in Canada

it an immediate response. True, three years afterward a trader writes, "The North-West is now beginning to be ruled with a rod of iron"; but it was inevitable that this should be said of one who was a man of iron, possessed of a shrewd diplomatic faculty which was to pilot him through the mazes of business of the whole Empire of the North for the well-nigh forty years during which he was to be the Emperor of the Fur Traders.

But George Simpson, though a superb man of business and of great executive ability, had an entirely different side to his nature. He was fond of the social life of his native land, and was one of the foremost in developing this among his fellow-countrymen in Montreal, which now became the acknowledged Hudson's Bay Company centre in the New World. The two great national feasting days and holidays of Old Scotia are New Year's and St. Andrew's days. On New Year's Day it has always been a triumph to place "the first fit" in the house of your friend, to celebrate the day with merriment, unfortunately with greater enthusiasm than the state of mind and body makes enjoyable on the following day. St. Andrew's Day has long been a day famous for dining and delight in Scottish song and story wherever Scotsmen have been able to assemble. The fame of the enthusiasm and hilarity of the Beaver Hall Club of Montreal exceeds that of even the Highland exuberance of a "Hundred Pipers and a' and a'."

Governor Simpson stood for all the old Scottish

Scottish Emperor of the Fur Traders

customs. The love of the picturesque and the appreciation of the pibroch of his native hills of Ross-shire never left him. A fellow-countryman of his, Archibald Macdonald, who had the pen of a ready writer, has left us an account of the Imperial progress made by Governor Simpson in the year 1828. Following Macdonald's narrative, we may reproduce his picture.

The departure on the transcontinental journey of the year mentioned was a great event at York Factory. Two light canoes were very thoroughly fitted up for the journey—tents for camping, utensils for the camp-fire, arms to meet any danger, provisions in plenty, wine for the gentlemen and spirits for the voyageurs. Each canoe carried nine picked men, and from Governor Simpson's reputation as a swift traveller it was quite understood that their lot would not be an easy one.

On July 28, 1828, fourteen chief officers, factors, and traders, and an equal number of clerks, were gathered together at the Factory to inaugurate the great voyage. The event had brought the whole Indian community about the posts, and probably no greater spectacle had taken place at York Factory since Miles Macdonald and his Scottish settlers, nearly twenty years before, had started for their new home on the Red River. Hayes River resounded with the cheers of the assembled traders and their dependents, while a salute of seven guns made the fir-trees of the Northern station re-echo with the din. The voyageurs then sang in unison one of the famous

boat-songs for which they were noted, and with pomp and circumstance began their journey.

The approach to Norway House—the fur traders' trysting-place—was also notable.

The fort, though simply a depôt of importance, had a number of Indian settlements within reach of it, and all the denizens of the region were on tip-toe to see the pageant which they knew would be afforded. Indian warriors and trappers were there in large numbers; the lordly Redman was accompanied on all his journeys by his whole family, for whatever might overtake him his camping-place was his home. Thus groups of old women peered upon the scene from the background, while beavies of Indian children with their accustomed shyness stood awestruck at the spectacle. The "Kitche Okema"—the greatest mortal they had ever seen—was coming.

Before reaching Norway House the party landed from their canoes and attired themselves *en règle*. Resuming their journey, they sped with flashing paddle through the rocky gorge by which Norway House is reached, quickly turned the point, came in sight of the fort built on a slope rising from the lake, and saw floating from the tall flag-staff of Norway pine, on the top of Signal Hill, the Union Jack with the letters H.B.C.—the flag which had a magical effect on every trader and Indian as he beheld it flying aloft.

The Governor's gaudily painted canoe was easily distinguished by its high prow, on which sat the French-Canadian guide, who for the time being,

Scottish Emperor of the Fur Traders

as pilot, had chief authority. The Governor looked on with interest, while from his immediate neighbourhood in his canoe pealed forth the music of the land of the Gael—the bagpipes—as well suited for effect on the rocky ledges surrounding Norway House as on the craggy shore of Ballachulish or the rugged ramparts of Craigellachie. From the second canoe rang out the cheery bugle of the senior Chief Factor, who was really in command of the expedition.

As the canoes came near the shore the effect was heightened by the soft and lively notes of the French-Canadian voyageurs, who were always great favourites with the Governor. The song they sang was one of Old France, of the days when Scottish and French friendship was proverbial. It was "A La Claire Fontaine," with the chorus—

Il y a longtemps que je t'aime
Jamais je ne t'oublerai.

The progress of the Emperor was continued all across the continent. Fort Chipewyan on Lake Athabasca, which was the Governor's first station in the country, was *en fête*, and the same waving of flags, firing of guns, shouting of Indians and employees, and the sound of singing and bagpipes, which had attended the arrival and departure of the distinguished traveller, followed him across the continent.

Governor Simpson was, however, a patriot and a strong supporter of British authority, even almost

The Scotsman in Canada

to despotism. Two strains of opinion have ever seemed to run through the whole of Scottish history and the Scottish people. The one represented by Sir Walter Scott was an exaggerated admiration of authority on the part of the Crown, the other an equally strong opinion as to the rights of the common people, sung by Scotland's peasant-poet Burns. It is this compensatory duality that has given Scottish character its adaptability. Sir George Simpson was necessarily the defender of privilege. The Crown, the Company, the capitalist, and the officer were to him the important portion of the State on which its stability depended. He was consequently a Tory. This being the case, when rebellion rose among the French Canadians in 1837-38, as it did also in Upper Canada, Governor Simpson was an ardent Loyalist and used all his influence to overcome the rebellion, and as a true and loyal British subject received, in 1839, knighthood from the hands of the young sovereign, Queen Victoria.

Simpson was an ideal Governor. His plan was not to sit in the office in Montreal, give orders, and allow others to carry them out, but he journeyed through the wide Empire of the fur traders and made himself personally acquainted with local conditions. He was Governor for forty years, and it is said made forty canoe-visits over the long fur-traders' route up the rivers and lakes to the interior. At times he went to England and crossed the ocean on the Hudson's Bay Company ship which sailed between London and York

Scottish Emperor of the Fur Traders

Factory on Hudson Bay. His visit to Red River Settlement was always notable. He could be most affable and sympathetic in his bearing to the colonists. When he was at Fort Garry the humblest of the people had access to his presence. Every complaint, grievance, request, or local difficulty was carried to him and dealt with most successfully. It is true that after the Canadian rebellion greater restlessness was shown by the settlers. They had an appointed body called the "Council of Assiniboia"; but they had no elected rulers, and, indeed, it was this want of representative government that in the end broke down Hudson's Bay Company rule on the banks of the Red River.

Sir George, however, married a native of the country of attractive manner, and thus no doubt drew closer to himself the thousands of people who formed the colony of Assiniboia. The presence of Lady Simpson at times in Red River Settlement, though their home was in Lachine, no doubt assisted Sir George in his hard task of government.

Sir George was a patron of literature, using his influence in establishing libraries at the Company's posts throughout Rupert's Land. He kept well abreast of the magazine literature of the time, and often and often in his letters referred to some current topic or notable article of the day. He even himself became an author. Two portly volumes, entitled "Journey Round the World" (1847), stand to the credit of the enterprising Governor.

The Scotsman in Canada

It is true he was assisted in the literary part of this work by an old protégé of his own, Recorder Adam Thom, who had retired from Red River to London, and of whom we shall speak elsewhere.

Taken altogether, the career of Sir George Simpson was one of very great distinction. He was ever a patriotic Scotsman. Whether he was on his native heather or carrying on the business of the Company among his Scottish associates in Montreal, or dashing along the inland waters of the fur traders' country, he never forgot the customs, history, chivalry, or literature of his native land. He belonged to the "Blackwood" type of Scotsman, living in the period of the remarkable influence of Sir Walter Scott, who by his genius made modern Scotland the land of poetry and romance and a wonderful influence to which all her sons in all parts of the wide world, wherever they made their home, could look back with appreciation from the North American colonies, icy snows, or torrid regions of foreign lands where they had gone to trade.

Sir George's achievements, by which he added to the name and fame of Scotsmen, were a remarkable re-organisation and restoration of the fur trade of British North America, which he found in a state of chaos and decline. He was also, on the whole, a kind and skilful administrator of the affairs of the infant colonies of Red River and the Pacific Coast, which have since grown to be the thoroughly loyal British provinces of Western Canada, Manitoba, Saskatchewan,

Scottish Emperor of the Fur Traders

Alberta, and British Columbia. To him was largely due the enormous proportion of Scottish officers and men of the Hudson's Bay Company during the fifty years dating from 1821, when Sir George assumed the office of Governor. Out of 263 commissioned officers of the Company, no less than 171—*i.e.*, some 63 per cent.—were Scotsmen. These appointments were all in the hands of the Governor, and it was commonly said that to rise in the service of the country it was a special qualification to have a name prefixed by "Mac."

True, it has always been reported of him that he could not escape from "the witchery of a pretty face"; but in his public activities, and as head of the governing body of Assiniboia, his sympathy with education, religion, and the comfort and improvement of the people, were well-marked features of his policy. Whatever may be said, Red River Settlement under the government of the Hudson's Bay Company was the abode of the best features of that morality which in general characterises Scottish communities.