
CHAPTER XVII

SCOTTISH GOVERNORS OF ASSINIBOIA

THE arrest of Miles Macdonell, the Governor, at the instance of Duncan Cameron in 1815, led to the temporary filling of his place by Alexander Macdonell, a Scotsman who left an unenviable name on the banks of the Red River. This work cannot be a true history of Scotsmen if only the good and the wise are described and the unworthy or the unfortunate are ignored or passed by.

Alexander Macdonell seems to have had a facility for business, unaccompanied by morality. On the arrival of Governor Semple he of course ceased to be Acting Governor, but on the death of this Governor, in 1816, he again came to the front, and for five or six years, amid the conflict and ruinous condition of things upon the banks of the Red River, lived a life of extravagance and unrestraint. No doubt he had ability, but he was utterly unreliable, and Lord Selkirk and his heirs were for years victimised by this worthless parasite.

The plague of grasshoppers visited Red River in the year 1818. Some years before the coming of the colonists a similar destructive visitation had occurred. Now every green thing was devoured,

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and the colonists fled to Pembina for winter sustenance. Alexander Ross tells us that so destructive and tyrannical was the Governor that the French people gave him the title of "Gouverneur Sauterelle," or Grasshopper Governor, "for," adds the historian of the period, "he proved as great a destroyer within doors as the grasshoppers in the fields." Macdonell also took advantage of Lord Selkirk's generosity and confidence. The founder, as proprietor of the colony, felt himself responsible for the success of his colonists. He supplied them with food, clothing, implements, arms, and ammunition. He erected buildings, including a storehouse, and of his own motion completed Fort Douglas for their shelter. He authorised the establishment of a colony shop, where the colonists might purchase what they chose. This gave Macdonell great opportunities for speculation and deceit. Sir George Simpson, after being with Macdonell at Red River, says in one of his letters: "Macdonell is, I am concerned to say, extremely unpopular, despised, and held in contempt by every person connected with the place; he is accused of partiality, dishonesty, untruth, and drunkenness—in short, by a disrespect of every moral and elevated feeling." Alexander Ross says of him: "The officials he kept about him resembled the court of an Eastern Nabob, with its warriors, serfs, and varlets, and the names they bore were hardly less pompous, for here were secretaries, assistant-secretaries, accountants, orderlies, grooms, cooks, and butlers."

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Macdonell far outdid anything Duncan Cameron had attempted.

"From the time the puncheons of rum reached the colony in the fall, till they were all drunk dry, nothing was to be seen or heard about Fort Douglas but balling, dancing, rioting, and drunkenness in the barbarous sport of those disorderly times."

Macdonell's method of keeping account of the consumption of liquors in the Company's shop was unique. It was as follows: "In place of having recourse to the tedious process of pen and ink, the heel of a bottle was filled with wheat and set on a cask. This contrivance was called the 'hour-glass,' and for every flagon drawn off a grain of wheat was taken out of the hour-glass and put aside till the bouse was over."

This carousal and extravagance led to grave frauds in the accounts of the colonists, and one of Lord Selkirk's executors having crossed over the seas to investigate the grievances, we are told that "false entries, erroneous statements, and overcharges were found which threw the colonists in debt to the Selkirk Estate."

The enforced removal of Macdonell led to the estate sending out two English gentlemen as Governors, the one was a Captain Bulger, who was impractical, short-tempered, and otherwise unsuitable, though a man of upright character and good intentions. He was followed in a year or two by Governor Pelly, who was a relative of the great Company Governor Pelly. But as a

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man he lacked nerve and decision of character, and after a year or two proved utterly inefficient.

Thus far the Governors of Assiniboia had been appointed by Lord Selkirk or his executors, and the plan had been a dismal failure. Now Sir George Simpson suggested that the Governors should be appointed by the Hudson's Bay Company. This was done, and in 1825 the appointment was made of Donald McKenzie, a veteran of the Company, who had seen service from ocean to ocean, under the three Companies—the Nor'-Westers, Astor's Company, and the Hudson's Bay Company. He was a brother of Roderick McKenzie, the fur trader, and among the most notable and expert fur-trade officers of all of the Companies he was unexcelled as a leader, and ended his career as Governor of Red River Settlement for eight years. After ten years' service he had risen to distinction in the North-West Company, and had been one of four Scotsmen in the Pacific Fur Company upon whom Astor had depended for their skill and experience. No book has had greater fame in the history of Rocky Mountain exploration than Washington Irving's "Astoria." As a record of exact exploration it is very defective, but Donald McKenzie was leader of one of the two parties carried by Irving by some mysterious method across the great Rockies. As one of Astor's partners he was "accustomed to camp life, proficient in Indian strategy, a good shot, and a good fellow." While with Astor he controlled the fierce Indians of the coast, and

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built a fort among the Nez Percés tribe. He seemed to lead a charmed life. On one occasion, with a small bodyguard, he undertook to search a whole Indian camp, and accomplished it successfully. The Nez Percés attempted at one time to starve out the traders ; but when McKenzie needed to slaughter a young horse belonging to the Indians for food he did so, leaving the price in a bundle tied to a stake near the head of the dead horse. He thus forced the Indians to deal with him at fair prices. His deeds and escapades among the Shoshones, Walla-Wallas, and Snake Indians have become established traditions among the Rocky Mountain Indians.

In the year 1822 McKenzie left the Pacific slope and made his way across the mountains and prairies to York Factory on Hudson Bay. After taking part in the general affairs of the Company, he was chosen by Sir George Simpson to rule the colony after it had been taken over from Lord Selkirk's executors by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1825. The greatest trial which Red River Settlement underwent occurred during Governor McKenzie's rule. This was the great flood of 1826. He was living in old Fort Garry and the water rose above the first story of the fort, so that the inmates were driven to the upper story. The flight of the De Meurons and Swiss, as well as that of a certain number of the Scottish settlers, occurred after this deluge. The departure of this foreign element seems to have been regarded favourably by the Selkirk colonists, and no doubt

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by the Scottish Governor, as they were much disliked. In 1833 the Governor's term of office ceased, and he and his family retired to Mayville, New York State. The memory of his humour, courage, and diplomatic management lingered long in the minds of the Selkirk settlers.

A third Scottish Governor, Alexander Christie, was named by the Company to succeed Donald McKenzie in 1833. He was one of the Chief Factors who came in at the time of the union of the Companies in 1821. His name has always been well spoken of by the Selkirk colonists. He not only served one term as Governor from 1833 to 1839, but began a second term, after another fur trader had served five years. Governor Christie was interrupted in his second term, after two years' service, by a military Governor, whose appointment was deemed wise on account of Britain's relations with the United States. It was in Governor Christie's régime that two most important events happened in Red River Settlement; the one was the establishment of the Council of Assiniboia—a concession, though not thorough enough, to the desire for representation of the people on the governing body; the second was the erection in 1835 of the famous Fort Garry, with its stone wall and stately bastions. Christie is given the credit of having erected it, "a neat and compact establishment." He was a Scottish Presbyterian and was called an "urbane man," but failed to satisfy his fellow-countrymen in their earnest desire to obtain a clergyman of their own

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faith. It is perhaps too much to say, as an historian might, that he "allowed policy to rule his conduct." It is to be remembered that the times were troublous, and perhaps it was necessary to "ca' canny."

The succession of Scottish Governors of the colony was continued still unbroken when Duncan Finlayson, who had become a Chief Factor of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1839, followed Governor Christie. Governor Simpson, of the Company, made a most strenuous effort at this time to establish a successful experimental farm, to teach the Selkirk colonists an improved agriculture. Failure followed failure, however, until he cried in a rage, "Red River is like a Lybian tiger, which the more we try to tame it, the more savage it becomes. So it is with Red River: for every step I try to bring it forward, disappointments drag it two backward."

Amid the turmoil, sturdy old Chief Factor Finlayson successfully pushed his way and gained a reputation for sterling worth. A contemporary eulogises him as "one who during many years' administration of the affairs of Red River Colony evinced unwearied toil in the development of its resources, and in the amelioration of the general condition of its inhabitants: who by the energy of his rule, and by the wisdom of his policy, established order and maintained peace: and who by officially promoting in the wilderness the benevolent causes, as well of missionary enterprise as of general education, besides fostering

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with the hand of power the forms of agricultural industry laid a solid basis, not only for the prosperity of the white man, but also for the Christian civilisation of the aboriginal inhabitants."

These are high encomiums for any man!

After three Governors and a Recorder-Governor, who certainly were not Scottish, the last Governor of Red River Settlement came and for eleven years presided over the affairs of the now somewhat turbulent colony. This was William McTavish, a thorough Highlander and a man who bore himself with honour to his native land. He had become a Chief Factor of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1851, and seven years after was made Governor. He married a daughter of Andrew McDermott, the old pioneer merchant of the country, and thus became intimately associated with the native people of the land. The period of eleven years during which Governor McTavish held sway were the last years of the rule of the Hudson's Bay Company in America. They constitute a period of political excitement which led to the rebellion of the Metis, or French half-breed people of the country, and to the sending of a military force under Lord (then Colonel Garnet) Wolseley from Canada to the banks of Red River. Unfortunately, Governor McTavish was, at the time of the trouble, 1869-70, in a state of health which incapacitated him for meeting the insurrection. His helplessness led to the greater portion of the difficulties of that time, but his high character, straightforwardness, and general popularity more

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than balanced his shortcomings. His death occurred soon after his leaving the country in 1870. The want of energy and listlessness of the Governors simply reflected the state of feeling which dominated the Hudson's Bay Company as a body. During the last years of Governor McTavish's rule the death of the great Governor of the Company, Sir George Simpson, took place in 1861, and he was followed by a Scottish gentleman, who, in the short space of three years, succeeded in making a considerable stir in the otherwise quiet retreats of Red River Settlement. The new Governor was an out-and-out Scotsman—his name being Alexander Grant Dallas. He had been a merchant in China, had come to Fort Victoria on Vancouver Island, and as a Chief Factor of the Hudson's Bay Company had been in charge there, and had married a daughter of the famous Company magnate, Governor James Douglas, of whom we are to speak again. His marriage brought him into touch with the native people of the country, as Sir George Simpson's marriage had done for him. Dallas had distinguished himself in Victoria in 1859, by acting with great promptitude and courage during the stormy period of the gold-mining excitement on the Pacific Coast. For the whole winter of 1861-2 he had been looked for at Red River Settlement, and his arrival was heralded with great approbation by the Nor'-Wester newspaper, which was usually opposed to the Hudson's Bay Company. With characteristic energy, the new Governor travelled on horseback

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between two or three hundred miles over the plains, leaving his family and servants to follow him down the river on the steamboat. The activity of certain persons against the Hudson's Bay Company became so pronounced that Governor McTavish, of Assiniboia, resigned his post and left the responsibility to Governor Dallas, who when in the Settlement was, of course, the superior officer. Dallas saw quite distinctly that it was the autocratic system of government which lay at the base of the whole trouble in Red River Settlement. He wrote that he found himself "with all the responsibility and semblance of authority over a vast territory, but unsupported, if not ignored, by the Crown." In this the Governor was perfectly right. There was no local law, no adequate force, and no belief among the people that there was any legal authority for carrying out law. Governor Dallas kept up Scottish customs somewhat after the same style as Sir George Simpson had done. He had a Highland piper, and such a man is often quite as much an influence in Scottish society as the master. The beadle in the kirk and the confidential henchman of the chief are frequently masters of the situation. Governor Dallas's piper was John McLellan, who was also the Governor's valet. In the cool of the evening Piper John was in the habit of playing his pipes, marching to and fro upon the parapet-gallery which was along the north wall of Fort Garry in front of the Governor's house. Dressed up in Highland garb he marched with great "aplomb," with his kilt

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and philabeg, wearing a feathered Glengarry cap, and copious ribbons floating from his pipes. He drew crowds of the Indians camping upon the reserve to see him and hear his dulcet strains. Going down to Kildonan Scottish church on Sundays the piper was the observed of all observers. He was likewise a pugilist, and had no objection to a contest of fisticuffs, and was even willing to fight a tame moose, but was prevented from what would have been certain defeat. In St. Paul he actually engaged in a fight and attempted to injure a citizen, for which he was arrested.

Governor Dallas remained three years as Governor of the Company in Red River Settlement, though afterward as a financier he took an active part in England in reorganising the Hudson's Bay Company. By this action the old Company sold out to a newly organised Hudson's Bay Company for a million and a half pounds, though there was much discontent in the minds of the wintering partners as to their claims upon the Company. Governor Dallas showed the financial ability which is universally conceded to the Scotsman abroad.

It will thus be seen that during the well-nigh forty years, extending from the union of the Fur Companies in 1821 until the passing away of the governing power of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1870, the Scottish Governors-in-Chief Simpson and Dallas occupied the whole period, and of the Governors of Assiniboia that Alex. Macdonell,

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Miles Macdonell, Semple, Christie, Finlayson, and McTavish—all Scotsmen—occupied forty-two years of the whole fifty-eight years from 1812 to 1870. They all showed marked ability and distinction in their work, they all had the power of dealing with trying and complicated questions, and with the one exception of the "Grasshopper Governor," Alexander Macdonell, they have left a monument of character, of which the Scottish people, either at home or abroad, need have no hesitancy in expressing their fullest approval.