

CHAPTER XVIII

SCOTTISH BORDER TRADERS

THE strong individuality of the Scotsman shows itself in his willingness to colonise and to face the dangers and novelties of a new country. His success is based on two qualities that go to make up this trait of character—namely, courage and adaptability. The Scotsman is not afraid of new conditions, and he has the patience and power of observation required to fit into new circumstances. In the Fur Country of a century ago it needed remarkable courage to face the environment of the wild beasts and wilder men of the fur trade. There was no law to protect the newcomer, and the Indians, in their ignorant state and constant feuds, were bound to involve the white man in their disputes, and to meet these the fur trader required the wisdom of a Solon, and the resources of a Machiavelli. Accordingly, when several Companies were trading in the same district and young Scotsmen came out and put in their apprenticeship with them, there was a tendency among the bolder spirits to fly off from the main body and carry on a trade for themselves as soon as they could select a good district and compass

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resources enough to put up a trading-house or post and get credit enough to carry over business for a year or two. Besides, after the Declaration of Independence, an uncertainty prevailed even up to 1818 as to boundary-lines and rival claims. This gave a great opportunity for the facile trader. Also the large Fur Companies were governed by rules, whereas the private trader was frequently a law unto himself. If the stately Hudson's Bay Company called the Nor'-Westers "Pedlars," they regarded the "free trader" as a knave and vagabond. Very often this conception of "*les traiteurs libres*" was not too strong. These men often gained their ends and made their profits by cunning and falsehood, but most frequently by "whisky." Among those who lived their free life were a number of Scotsmen who gradually became absorbed in Astor's Pacific Fur Company, and afterwards in the American Fur Company. Half a dozen of the most distinguished and most reputable of these we have sought to picture, the more so that their relations were naturally with the Canadian Border Land.

One of the most notable of these border rangers, or free traders in the border country, was Murdock Cameron. He was a Scotsman who had thrown himself into the far west when the Nor'-Westers occupied the territory now in the State of Minnesota. He was a man of great force of character and had great influence among the Indians. In the wild Indian country he could hold his own. Living on the border-land between the Ojibway

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Indians of Red Lake and the Sioux or Dakotas west of the Mississippi, in cases of his men or goods being injured by either, he combined with the other to protect his interests. Every one states that while living the reckless life in which whisky occupied a place unknown in Hudson's Bay Company annals Cameron was kind and thoughtful to his men. Mr. G. W. Featherstonhaugh, a racy author who wrote "A Canoe Voyage up the Minnesota River," gives an account by a French Sioux half-breed who had formerly been employed by Cameron, in which it is shown that Cameron exhausted every service to save the life of his men who had been lost in the winter storms. Long, the interesting writer who wrote the "Expedition to the St. Peter's," states that Cameron was a sagacious Scotsman who had amassed a good deal of property by trafficking with the Indians. His post was at an enlargement of St. Peter's River called "Lac qui parle." The St. Peter's is a western branch of the Mississippi. From his residence Cameron was called the "trader of St. Peter's River." Being on the border between two Indian nations, his traders were always liable to attack, especially by the Sioux, who lay in ambush along the river. No attack of this kind was ever left unavenged, for Cameron's Highland blood had the temper of centuries of border raid and dashing foray. But his time came at last, as had fate to a family of his countrymen in the old days of border raids, who boasted that none of his ancestors had died in chambers (*i.e.*, at home)

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for ten generations. When Sioux jealousy and hatred could not obtain revenge on the doughty trader, the contemptible spite of the poisoner ended him. Long says that Cameron was poisoned by a Sioux Indian, who administered to him some of the plant used for the purpose of poisoning arrows. Taking ill from the poison in his canoe, the sturdy trader was landed, and died in the woods in 1811. He was taken home by his French half-breed steward, called by Featherstonhaugh "Milor," and was buried on a commanding bluff near "Lac qui parle," where his trading post stood. So great had his influence been on white and Indian alike, that his power seemed to be regarded after that as of a weird and uncanny spirit. Long after his death the passing voyageur stopped his canoe and went to see "Cameron's grave," and the Indians at their camp-fires—both Sioux and Ojibway—told tales of his prowess.

A contemporary of Murdoch Cameron was Colonel Robert Dickson. He lived at Vermilion, on the Missouri River, and conducted trade with a vigour and distinction which was characteristic of the early borderers. He had not the shortcomings of Murdoch Cameron, and, perhaps, had not the brilliancy of that trader. He, too, was, as described by Neill, the historian of Minnesota, a "red-haired Scotsman of strong intellect and good family." He began to trade with the Sioux Indians as early as 1790 and had a great name all over the Missouri country. This became all the more serious to the American Government,

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for about the time of the American War of 1812 he remained true to the land of his birth and nation, and was actively engaged in stirring up the Western prairie tribes against the Americans. Some American writers have called him an "Englishman." That he was not, though according to the story told of the well-known Montreal manufacturer, Mr. W. W. Ogilvie, that would be a thing of little account. The story goes that Mr. Ogilvie when going on business to Constantinople carried a passport which stated that he was a Scotsman. The Ottoman officer on examining his credentials remarked, "A Scotsman! What is a Scotsman?" "Oh, it is all right; you see, a Scotsman is just a superior kind of Englishman," replied Ogilvie. Colonel Dickson showed himself to be a high type of man throughout his whole career. He was very humane, and when the Western territories largely favoured the British, he, along with the majority of the Indian tribes, sympathised with them. During the hostilities he again and again saved captured Americans from the fire ordeal of the Indians, and prevented massacres which the latter would willingly have committed. American writers state that as late as 1817 Dickson was in league with Lord Selkirk in stirring up the Sioux in favour of the British, and it will be remembered that Lord Selkirk did make a treaty with some of the Sioux during his visit to Red River. Dickson passed through various dangers in the unsettled section of the Western States and was finally arrested, and on

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his release came to settle in Western Canada near Queenston, on the Niagara frontier, where he passed the remainder of his life. Like most of the Western traders, he had taken an Indian wife from among the Sioux, and had a family of four children.

Though, as we have seen, Astor was a man of remarkable ability and foresight, yet it goes without saying that he could not have carried on his plans successfully without able subordinates. The fact that he had difficulty in obtaining these in sufficient numbers explains the disasters which overtook his Astorian settlement. The most able colleague which he possessed was Ramsay Crooks, who was born in Greenock, Scotland, about 1790, and was at the age of sixteen found among the Nor'-Westers. He, however, became independent of the Montrealers, pushed on to St. Louis, and went trading up the Missouri. We have seen that he entered Astor's Pacific Fur Company for a time and figured in the famous journey of the Astorias, which Irving has poetically described. Crooks was a notorious traveller, having something of the verve and activity of his countryman, Sir George Simpson. After Astor's connection with the Pacific Fur Company, Crooks bought out a part of it and continued an energetic career till his death in New York in 1859. His wife was French, being the daughter of one of the famous partners of the Astor Company, Pierre Chouteau, jun., of St. Louis, who was son of one of the noted founders of that city. Though Crooks lived

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out his threescore years and ten, yet he suffered from ill-health all his life. He was the letter-writer of his Company, and he had a clear and incisive style. A "bonny fechter," as so many of his race are, he was open and straightforward in all his dealings. This is a class of character which all true Scotsmen admire.

When Crooks began his business as a fur trader on the Missouri in 1807, four years before he joined Astor's Company, there was associated with him a man of Scottish blood, though born in America, named Robert McLellan. McLellan had qualities that challenged the attention of chivalrous souls. It was said of him "that he was a man of many perilous exploits and hair-breadth escapes, a sure shot, a daring hunter, and altogether a superb example of frontier manhood." He had in his younger days, been in the wars against the Indians in Ohio, and was not young when he first went to the Missouri to trade. He then met a British trader, who had undersold him in trading with the Indians but who willingly joined Crooks in a partnership. Backed by the wealthy Chouteau, who had half shares, Crooks and McLellan, with eighty men, set out on a trading expedition, but they found the Sioux hostile and returned. Their defeat was caused by a rival Spanish fur trader; however, being unlicensed traders they could expect nothing else. McLellan, with Crooks, as we have seen, joined the Astorians in their famous overland trip, and was joint-commander of one of the parties. He probably met his death in St.

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Louis ; others say it was in an Omaha village on the Missouri, while others contend that he died at St. Gravier in that country.

Among the free traders of the Missouri was a Scoto-Irishman named McMillan, born in Vermont, who drifted to the West. He was one of the men mentioned as in command of the great Astorian expedition. Having arrived in Astoria, he was sent back with dispatches to Astor, but he and his party were killed by hostile Indians on the return journey. Another Irish trader was Thomas McCracken, a former soldier in the artillery, who became prominent and joined with Lewis and Clark.

Kenneth McKenzie, who was born at Inverness, Scotland, in 1801, was a relation of Sir Alexander Mackenzie. Young McKenzie came to Canada and entered the North-West Company. How he fared in that Company history does not record, but after the union of the two Canadian Companies we find him chosen President of the American Fur Company in 1827, and we are told that he was "the ablest trader that that Company ever possessed." McKenzie's regard for the "wine of his country," however, seems to have got the better of him when he built a distillery at Fort Union in the Indian Country and carried on a surreptitious trade at that centre. He left the West for a time, but coming back established a wholesale liquor business, which did not succeed. He, however, was a man born to command, and had great executive ability. He was called the "King of

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the Missouri," and a trader, describing a visit to him, says, "From the style in which he was dressed I really thought he was a king." He seemed to have a magnetic influence upon the Indians, for they both feared and respected him. He could praise and censure in one breath. His force of character was proved on one occasion when he heard of one of his parties having been attacked by the Indians. On hearing of the disaster he asked whether the horses had been saved? On being told that only the men had escaped, with an oath he shouted, "The men! If the horses had been saved, it would have amounted to something!" It is no new thing to see clever Scotsmen make comparative failures. McKenzie's career shows clearly why this happened.

William Laidlaw, also of Scottish descent, was "right-hand man" to McKenzie. He had served in the Canadian North-West Company, was well versed in the fur trade, was a good letter-writer, and was passionately fond of the buffalo hunt. He was a successful manager, although severe, having an ungovernable temper. He gained a competence, but on retiring was lavish in disposition and died a poor man. So it is not always only the close-fisted Scot that we encounter.

Alexander Cuthbertson, a companion of McKenzie and Laidlaw, was of Scoto-Irish descent, and was born in Pennsylvania. He was a picture of manliness, had a handsome face and keen eye. By his Blackfoot wife he had a handsome and well-to-do family, who made good

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use of what he had accumulated for them. He had the sweet oil of temperament to soften the severities produced by his partners.

Daniel Lamont, one of the great Fur Company partners, came of the Argyllshire family of that name. He had connections in Canada, and his descendants have reached prominent positions in the United States.

While compelled to recognise at times the intrusion of the affairs and history of the United States Fur Companies into the sphere of our Canadian Scotsmen, we may mention a noted Scoto-Irishman of the border, who was not in any of the Fur Companies, but was mixed up with the trade and public affairs of the British. This was John Johnstone, who was known on Lake Superior, near Sault Ste. Marie, as an independent trader. An Irish gentleman of birth and education, he had come to Canada, had become a friend of Sir Guy Carleton, his countryman, and had established himself at La Pointe, on the south side of Lake Superior. He chose as his home a rocky isle which he called "Contemplation Island." He did not fix his eyes, however, only on the rocks of his surroundings, but became smitten with the beauty of the daughter of Wabogish—the "White Fisher"—an Indian chief of the district. Wabogish was doubtful, however, about the white man's offer for his daughter, and advised Johnstone to return for a time to his native land, and if his passion still continued to decide. The suitor visited Ireland, disposed of his property there, and came

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back to claim his bride. He was married, had extensive lands and plantations on which he grew "corn and vegetables. He also had a beautiful garden, a comfortable house, a good library, and carried on an important trade." In the war of 1814 he assisted in the British expedition which took Mackinaw; but as a reprisal his group of buildings at La Pointe were burnt by the Americans. With his wife and daughter he visited Britain and was received in the highest circles of society there. His daughter afterwards married Henry Schoolcraft, the distinguished author of the great work on the Indian tribes of America. It was in this great Thesaurus of Indian lore that Longfellow found the material for his poem, "Hiawatha."