

---

## CHAPTER II

---

### THE MEN OF ORKNEY IN RUPERT'S LAND

WE have shown how the Norsemen of the Orkney Isles became Scottish, though the Orkney people in local sentiment have always regarded themselves as a separate people. The writer remembers at a St. Andrew's Society meeting in Winnipeg hearing the members classed as so many of Scottish blood and so many Orkney men. The President, however, who was of Orkney birth, protested against the classification, declaring that he was as good a Scotsman as the best of them. It was early geographic circumstances that led to the great influx of Orkneymen into the Company posts of Hudson Bay. It arose thus. The great Hudson's Bay Company in London was incorporated as a purely English organisation by the "merrie monarch," Charles II., in 1670. His was a royal gift, for he gave away about one-third of a continent, consisting of all the English territory on the streams running into Hudson Bay. This was named after his cousin, Prince Rupert, who became the first Governor of Rupert's Land. The trade was carried on by the yearly trading

## *The Men of Orkney in Rupert's Land*

---

vessel—at times by additional vessels—from London down the Thames, up the East Coast of England and Scotland and through the Pentland Firth, and stopping at Stromness in the Orkney Islands—the last place of call. Here very naturally they took on trappers, fishermen, and labourers from the Orkneymen available. From the Orkneys the course was direct to York, Churchill, and Severn Forts or factories on Hudson Bay.

For about one hundred years after the founding of the Hudson's Bay Company the captains, men, and employees did not leave the shore of Hudson Bay, but carried on business with the Indians who came to them, and often through a window in a safely protected fort. In 1710 Orkneymen went out.

When about the middle of the eighteenth century the Nor'-Wester traders of Montreal were going up the rivers and meeting the Indians, and had built under Frobisher a fort on Sturgeon Lake to cut off the whole Indian trade going to Hudson Bay, Samuel Hearne—called the Mungo Park of Canada—made a dash on behalf of the Hudson's Bay Company five hundred miles inland and built the fort of Cumberland House, a few hundred yards from Frobisher's fort. Then the gage of battle for supremacy was thrown down—and the statement is made by the chroniclers that Hearne returned to the Bay in 1774, leaving his new fort garrisoned "by a number of Orkney men" under an English officer, who held the fort and country for the great Company. The Orkneyman was a sturdy, faithful, inoffensive man, not

## *The Scotsman in Canada*

---

so lively or so expert with a paddle as the French-Canadian voyageur, slower and less emotional than the Highlander, but cautious, deep, and persistent in his course. It was his misfortune that he was not permitted to take with him to the remote post to which he went as an indentured servant of the Company a spouse from his native island. The Fur Company, for its special work, was better served by sending out, for a term of years, only unmarried men.

But around all the posts came the Indians to trade. They were chiefly Crees. Near Hudson Bay they were the Muskegons, or "Swampy Crees"; in the forest they were "Wood Crees," and on the open prairies "Plain Crees." The Crees were a steady, reliable race, uncultivated and savage it is true, but having the elements of a firm and trustworthy character. With the women of these tribes the Orkneymen largely inter-married in all parts of Rupert's Land. Whatever the officers of the Company might do, when on better pay they might leave the country and also perhaps leave behind wife and dusky children, the working man could not do this, and so the Orkney labourer of the country remained in the country. His family as it grew up around him received the best education he was able to find at the Mission School beside the fort where he was stationed, or at some remote centre where he had friends. He himself could read and write, and his family generally learned these accomplishments, while his wife, pure Cree or half-breed,

## *The Men of Orkney in Rupert's Land*

---

learned the ways of the white woman at the fort and did her best to remember that her husband was a white man. Thus around the shores of Hudson Bay, and afterward in the far interior, grew up bands of "Scotch half-breeds," or on account of their language sometimes called "English" half-breeds. After the formation of the Selkirk colony, of which we shall speak more fully, many of the Orkney men with their savings retired to the banks of the Red River, and there found a community where they felt at home. They received strips of land along the river, where they built log houses after the Red River pattern, tilled the land, caught fish, kept a few cattle, went out with the gun to shoot a duck or a prairie chicken, and "far from public haunts" lived a comfortable life and often saw their children rise to a higher station.

The writer has lived for wellnigh forty years on the banks of the Red River in Winnipeg; his duties have led him to mingle with these people in their homes, to be present at their public, religious, and other gatherings; and he can testify that he has come to have respect and regard for them as kindly, confiding, and good citizens.

In later years these native people have received a good education, have learned farming, and many of them are in good circumstances, while some have risen to distinction in different departments of the provincial life. Sometimes it is the Orkney-man himself, who has come out to the West, who has done well; sometimes it is his children. It

## *The Scotsman in Canada*

---

is but just that we should describe more minutely some of these Orkney-born people, or their descendants living to the number of six or eight thousand among the people of the Manitoba of to-day. Among the old Scottish families of Red River probably none have been more active or more successful than that of the Sinclairs. It is well known that this was the family name of the old Earl of Orkney, and that it was of the Sinclairs or St. Clairs that Sir Walter Scott wrote his beautiful ballad of "Rosabelle." One of the Sinclairs was a century ago Governor of York Factory and a prominent officer of the Hudson's Bay Company. In 1844 James Sinclair was chosen as leader of the native people of Red River, both French and English, in the fight against the Hudson's Bay Company's monopoly and tyranny. Sinclair was one of twenty trading half-breeds who engaged in the industry of tallow exportation, from their herds of cattle. He was refused the right by the Company of exporting tallow at a reasonable rate, and on account of his persistence in opposition was prevented by the Company from exporting at all. He and his companions contended that on account of their Indian blood they had native-born rights which no Government or Company could take away. It has been said that James Sinclair became the "Village Hampden," who stood for his own rights and those of his compeers.

At this juncture a man of Orkney blood, who rose to great distinction, came into notice. This was Alexander K. Isbister. Isbister was the son

---

## *The Men of Orkney in Rupert's Land*

---

of an Orkneyman, named Magnus Isbister, who came out from Scotland in 1811 along with the first of Lord Selkirk's settlers to York Factory. The older Isbister was for years in the Hudson's Bay Company's service, between Hudson Bay and Norway House. He married one of the Kennedy family, which had a slight trace of Indian blood. It was Isbister's sad fate to be killed at Norway House by an angry bull. His son Alexander was taken to the Red River Settlement and studied London at the time of James Sinclair's contest with Fort Garry. From Red River Settlement he went to England, graduated in London University, became a barrister, and was the head of the College of Preceptors in London. Being in London at the time of John Sinclair's contest with the Hudson's Bay Company he was appealed to, and in 1847, with five other half-breeds of Red River, forwarded an important memorial to Lord Grey, Secretary for the Colonies. The Company opposed the memorial, but the storm could not be quieted. The French half-breeds of Red River Settlement also forwarded a memorial to the Queen; this was signed by 947 persons and was written in French. The next five years saw a great amelioration in the Hudson's Bay Company's treatment of the people. This was largely the result of Isbister's persistent advocacy. The patriot rose to great prominence as an educationalist, and dying some thirty years afterward left a capital sum, now amounting to \$100,000, as a Scholarship Fund for the University of Manitoba.

---

## *The Scotsman in Canada*

---

Surely Sinclair and Isbister reflect the highest credit on the name of Scotsman in the region of Rupert's Land.

Two families, Inkster and Tait, were well known in the old Red River Settlement ; their ancestors were from the Orkneys. The Inksters intermarried with the Sinclairs. Both the Inksters and Tait, though not Highlanders, lived among Lord Selkirk's colonists in Kildonan, and are widely married among the leading people of Manitoba. Colin Inkster was one of the Legislative Council or Upper House of the Manitoba Legislature. He is now Sheriff of Manitoba and is universally well regarded. A sister of his is married to Archibald Macdonald, one of the veteran Chief Factors of the Hudson's Bay Company.

Of the Tait family three brothers, William James, and Robert, took an important part in the stirring times of the Riel Rebellion in the Red River, and were strongly loyal and patriotic as became their Scottish blood.

The name Flett is an old Orkney one well represented in Manitoba. A family of Fletts, with numerous branches, grew up in Kildonan and scattered westward. They have been industrious and respectable representatives of the home of their fathers in Orkney. A well-known and intelligent Orkney Chief Trader of the Hudson's Bay Company of this name was for years in charge of Lower Fort Garry, and his family still remain in Manitoba. A large family of the olden time named Setter, of Orkney descent, lived in the

---

## *The Men of Orkney in Rupert's Land*

---

neighbourhood of Portage la Prairie, and took an active part on the loyal side in the Riel Rebellion. John George Setter became Sheriff of his district, and there are branches of the family still living in Manitoba.

The leading merchant of Red River Settlement was Andrew McDermott, one of the settlers of the first year in Lord Selkirk's colony. He was an Irishman, but would seem to fall under the head of the Scoto-Irish, who came from the Green Isle. Though not now in the line of our treatment, he may be here mentioned as having married a woman of Orkney and Indian blood. McDermott was a great favourite of the Selkirk colonists. He was their merchant, contractor, treaty-maker, business manager, counsellor, adviser, and confidential friend. To the new immigrant he was always kind, obliging, and trustful. He was in the first Council of Assiniboia in 1835, and was a director of the Canadian Pacific Railway.

One of the most popular and most highly regarded merchants and public men ever known in the later days of the Red River Settlement and of earlier Manitoba life was Andrew Graeme Ballenden Bannatyne. He was born in Orkney of a good family and came out as a clerk in the Hudson's Bay Company's service about the middle of last century. Learning his duties very quickly, he was too prominent and independent a man to remain in the leading-strings of the Fur Company. He married a daughter of Andrew McDermott, a handsome woman of education and

---

## *The Scotsman in Canada*

---

ability, and became one of the leading merchants of Winnipeg. Though Scottish born, he learned French and spoke it as well as a native. Knowing the French half-breed people intimately, it was not wonderful that he should be elected by them as their representative in the Dominion Parliament at Ottawa. He was one of the most charitable men in Winnipeg, was President of the St. Andrew's Society, was Chairman of Manitoba College Board, and always a leading supporter of the Church of his fathers. Several members of his family still remain in Manitoba. Among other families to be mentioned from the Orkneys is that of William Drever, the head of the boatbuilding department of the Hudson's Bay Company. He received a valuable piece of land just north of the Company's land in Winnipeg. One of his daughters married Bishop Pinkham of Calgary, and another Col. McLeod, of the North-West Mounted Police.

The family of Linklater was well known in the Red River Settlement, and Magnus Linklater, a typical Orkneyman, was for years Master of Fort Garry. One of his daughters was married to Major Swinford, a well-known military man of Winnipeg, and another to John McKenny, a trader, and a nephew to the well-known Dr. Schultz, who also, although not a Scotsman himself, married the daughter of a Scotsman named Farquhar. Lady Schultz is still a leading resident of Winnipeg. A man of kindly disposition and much respected in Winnipeg is Mr. William Clark, a Chief Factor

## *The Men of Orkney in Rupert's Land*

---

of the Hudson's Bay Company. A native of Orkney, he has been fifty years in the Red River country. For years he was one of the most reliable officers of the Company, and he is to-day living in well-earned retirement. His wife is a daughter of one of the early Kildonan settlers—Donald Murray.

William Kennedy, who was born in Cumberland House, on the banks of the Saskatchewan River, was the son of Alexander Kennedy, an uncle of Alexander K. Isbister ; Kennedy was one of Lady Franklin's captains, and will be mentioned among great Scottish navigators in Canadian waters.

The son of an Orkneyman, and also nephew of William Kennedy, was one of the greatest men that Red River or Manitoba ever produced. This was John Norquay, who was for years the Premier of Manitoba. Norquay received his higher education in St. John's College, and early in 1870 became a member of the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba. He was young and poor, but showed at once an aptitude for public affairs. Being an Orkney half-breed, he was able to fill a most important place in the affairs of Manitoba. He was a man of commanding presence and polished speech, which was almost as if it had been obtained from reading the best authors. He was a good public speaker, a man of fine disposition, and able to take his place with any class or rank of men. His peculiar service to Manitoba was in reconciling the Red River people, whose susceptibilities had been roused by the Riel Rebellion and with whose

## *The Scotsman in Canada*

---

grievances a large number of English-speaking people had sympathised. With these he harmonised the incoming Canadians, many of whom were somewhat blunt and aggressive. He served for a number of years as Premier of the Province of Manitoba and died in early manhood, regretted and missed by all who knew him. The Orkneys and Scotland might well be proud of this their Canadian son. His family occupy various good positions in the country. Among other old timers in the City of Winnipeg were James Spence, an Orkneyman who was an early occupant of the land, and another man from Orkney, well known years ago as a landowner, named Magnus Brown. In later days in Manitoba was W. B. Scarth, who took a leading part in land company business, and was representative for years of the City of Winnipeg in the Dominion Parliament. Another family of representative Orkney people is that of the Smellies. Dr. Smellie is a leading physician of Port Arthur and Fort William and now a representative in the Ontario Legislature, while several brothers have made their mark in business in Western Canada. The Moncrieff family of Shetlanders has lived for many years in Manitoba, and one has been well known in journalism.

Such names as Cooper, Gibbon, Harper, Bruce, Johnson, Clouston, Stalker, Stanger, Armit, Sabiston, Fobister, and many others come to mind. Alexander Begg, of Winnipeg, and another Alexander Begg, of Victoria, British Columbia, both Orkneymen, have written books on the West ;

---

---

## *The Men of Orkney in Rupert's Land*

---

but they will be spoken of under the head of Literature. For a century and a half the Orcades have been sending out to Western Canada trusty representatives, and there is no part of Great Britain where the affairs of Rupert's Land and Red River are so well known as in these islands of the tempestuous North Sea.