
CHAPTER III

THE SCOTTISH FUR TRADERS OF MONTREAL

NOTHING is more notable in the history of the beginning of trade in Canada, after the turmoil of the conquest of 1759 had somewhat settled down, than the energy and skill with which a band of men—chiefly Scottish—engaged in the opening up of the fur trade by way of the Ottawa River and the Upper Lakes to the great prairies and mountains of the Canadian West.

This was work of the most adventurous kind, and the pluck, enterprise, and managing ability of the Scotsman in Montreal fully showed itself in this fur trade movement in the North-West.

Moreover, there was a special fitness in this work in the North-West being undertaken by Scotsmen. It is a country with a decided winter, abounding in fur-bearing animals which amid the snows reach their best development and produce the most precious furs. The Scotsman belonged to a northern clime ; his Highland hills—though not to be compared with the Rocky Mountains which he was to face—were yet rugged and

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wintry and snow-producing enough to enable him to feel at home in the Canadian West.

In 1770 Thomas Curry, a Scotsman of Montreal, was the first to adventure himself on the deserted French route to the Fur Country, west of Lake Superior. Passing Lake Winnipeg he reached by way of the Saskatchewan the old Lac Bourbon of Verendrye, which we now know as Cedar Lake, north of Lake Winnipegosis. Curry was so successful with this first venture in furs that he did not need to go to the West again. He stands as the Scottish pioneer of the fur trade of the West, and, as we shall see, it was he who stirred up the Company trading at Hudson Bay to make a dash into the interior.

The second pioneer of the fur trade was another Scotsman named James Finlay. He was also from Montreal. He is found wintering at Neepawe, on the Saskatchewan River, in the winter of 1771-1772, thus having advanced up the river beyond Curry's wintering place. With Scottish shrewdness he made money on his venture and retired some five years afterward in Montreal as one of the notables of the place. It was his son, James Finlay, jun., who afterwards ascended to the very sources of the Saskatchewan and discovered a tributary to the Peace River, which is still called Finlay River.

At this point it is usual in the description of the development of the fur trade to introduce the name of Alexander Henry, sen., a Montreal trader, and one of the most noted of the pioneers. His

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well-written book, edited by that genial Toronto Scotsman, James Bain, whose demise we regret, is a model of description and may be termed a Western classic. Unfortunately for our purpose, Bain, who was the distinguished Librarian of Toronto Public Library, in editing Henry's "Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories," calls his author an Englishman, though Dr. Robert Campbell, long the minister of St. Gabriel's Church of Montreal, classes Henry as a Scotsman, and as one who headed the list with £20 for the erection of the Scotch Church in Montreal. Bain in making Henry English states that he was believed to be a relative of the great commentator Matthew Henry, whose monumental work is revered by all Scotsmen.

The fur trade drew into it a large number of men of the brightest mind and greatest trading capacity of Montreal. For courage, insight, and executive ability no one surpassed a prominent Highlander, Simon McTavish, who with the brothers, Joseph, Thomas, and Benjamin Frobisher, who were Englishmen, pushed out his men and struck at the very source of the fur supply of the Hudson's Bay Company. Intermarried as McTavish was with one of the most popular and well-known of the French families of Quebec, that of an old fur trader, C. J. B. Chaboillez—a sister of his wife being married to Joseph Bouchette, the great surveyor, and another to Roderick McKenzie, the cousin of Sir Alexander—he had

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much influence among the French people. It was the dominating mind of McTavish that drew the merchants of Montreal into the union of 1783-1784 for the better establishment of the fur trade in the North-West, and McTavish and the Fro-bishers were the leaders of the new Company, acting as agents for the other shareholders. McTavish was born in 1750, and, as we have seen, was a man of great decision of character. When this combination was made there were, however, certain dissatisfied traders. Among them were two Americans, named Pond and Pangman. They applied to a young Englishman, Gregory by name, who with Alexander Norman McLeod—an ardent Highlander—formed an opposition company. McTavish, like the lion rampant on the standard of his country, defied them, and he became known as "Le Premier" and "Le Marquis," names given in derision. On the rise of the second secession from the North-West Company, which took place in 1802, the "Old Emperor" at Montreal extended his agencies to the South Saskatchewan and Missouri River districts, rented the "posts of the King" down the St. Lawrence, and sent two ships to establish forts on Hudson Bay. His ambition was unbounded. McTavish became a wealthy man, owning the whole Seigniorship of Terrebonne besides other lands. At the time of his death he was engaged in building a princely mansion at the foot of the mountain in Montreal. This building, uncompleted, was called the "Haunted House." On the rugged

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face of the mountain may be seen to-day the tomb of the great Scottish lion of the fur trade. This was erected by his nephews, William and Duncan McGillivray, who were also very prominent in the fur trade.

Of these two brothers the more noted was William McGillivray. After the death of Simon McTavish, William McGillivray became the head of the North-West Company. The decision of the Boundary Commissioners that the Grand Portage, the old headquarters of the Companies, at the mouth of the Pigeon River, Lake Superior, was to be included in the United States, compelled the traders to move their fort and property to the British side of the boundary-line. This was done and a new fort was established near the mouth of the Kaministiquia River, where it empties into Thunder Bay. This change took place in 1804 or 1805, and the new fort was called Fort William, after the Hon. William McGillivray. McGillivray received a grant of 11,550 acres from the Crown in the township of Inverness in Lower Canada. He was the Lieut.-Col. of a body of voyageurs in the war of 1812, and McGillivray River in Rupert's Land also commemorates him. That he was a generous and worthy Scotsman is seen in the record that he was "a liberal supporter of St. Gabriel's Scottish Church in Montreal." But it was Scotsmen also that took the lead in the rival Company of the North-West of which we have spoken. The rallying-point of the oppositionists was the firm of Forsyth and

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Richardson. In this Company were two Forsyths, Thomas and John; these brothers were from Aberdeen, and they fully illustrated the fact that where the Aberdonians with their financial ability are, there is little room for the Jews.

At the end of the eighteenth century of which we are speaking, "they stood," it is recorded, "foremost among the commercial houses of the City of Montreal." Thomas Forsyth removed to Kingston in Upper Canada, and there did a large business until his death. Hon. John Forsyth was a public man, and was appointed to the Legislative Council of Lower Canada in 1826, and was a director of the two prominent institutions—the Bank of Montreal and the Montreal Fire Insurance Company. He was successful in business, and returned to his native Scotia to spend the closing years of his life.

The junior member of this doughty firm of traders was John Richardson, a native of Banffshire, Scotland. He was born in 1755, and rose to be the greatest personality among the partners. He was so public-spirited a man that it was said that "Montreal of the period owed more to him than to any other of its citizens." A recital of all his public services is not here possible. He was the promoter of the Lachine Canal, and saw its completion. He was chairman of the committee which prepared the articles for the establishment of the Bank of Montreal, and was a director of the first Montreal Savings Bank. He was a founder and the first President of the

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Montreal General Hospital, and his services to this charity were so great that his friends erected to his memory the "Richardson Wing of the General Hospital." It was his distinguished honour to be one of the gentlemen appointed by Governor Drummond to collect a subscription, in 1815, for the friends of the slain at the Battle of Waterloo. Surely both Scotland and Canada are honoured in having set to their credit the character and work of so worthy a Scotsman as the Hon. John Richardson.

Virtually a partner of Gregory, who we have seen led off the opposition against McTavish, Frobisher and Co., was Archibald Norman McLeod, who in temperament and energy was an unsurpassed example of the Celtic Scotsman. In the Indian Country he was a man of impressiveness, not only to the Indians and to the officers and men of his own Company, but to his opponents as well. He figured, as we shall see, in the Nor'-Wester attacks and persecutions of the Selkirk settlers. Under Col. McGillivray, McLeod was Major of the expedition against Detroit in 1812, which brought glory to British arms. He was the man to drive off, it was said, either by fair or doubtful means, the troublesome free traders who victimised the Indians, and, sad to say, it was stated by Col. Coltman that he was, more than any other man, responsible for the attack by which Governor Semple lost his life at Seven Oaks in the Selkirk Colony in 1816. As to this charge the writer is bound to say that this im-

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putation seems hardly proven. McLeod seldom visited Montreal, but his boast was that he was an operator in the field of action and not a mere defensive soldier. That the ardency of the Celt led him to rashness we admit, but his alertness, decision, and fearlessness cannot but challenge our admiration as Scotsmen.

"The Grants."—The name of Grant is one of the most celebrated in the annals of Scottish achievement and likewise of North-West history. It is not necessary to prove this by any such method as a member of the Grant clan took to prove his antiquity. The ambitious Grant referred to had a Bible with small print, and in one of the earlier chapters of Genesis discerned an indistinctness in one of the letters of which he took advantage and read it, "There were giants [Grants] in the earth in those days." The clan, which covers a President of the United States, a Principal of Edinburgh University, a Principal of Queen's College, Kingston, and forty-seven men of note in Sidney Lee's "Dictionary of National Biography," does not need to support itself by any such humorous justification. Peter Grant, the historiographer and one of the best writers of the fur-trading fraternity, is of interest to the people of the Red River Settlement and the Winnipeg district on account of his being the first to establish a fort on the banks of the Red River. He was born in 1764 in Scotland and entered the Nor'-Wester service in Montreal in 1784, to become a partner within seven years. He was stationed at one of

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the Nor'-Wester posts in Minnesota in the Red Lake district, and built a fort at Shell River in 1794. He thus gained the reputation of being a fort-builder. Three years after this date he was met by the great surveyor and astronomer David Thompson, but just then he had built the first fort on the east side of Red River, near the International Boundary-line where St. Vincent now stands. Two years afterward Peter Grant was in charge of a fort on Rainy River—of which the records call him the proprietor. After this time he was in charge of the Red River department and spent a most active life. Peter Grant signed the agreement uniting the Nor'-Westers and X Y Companies, by attorney. Grant retired from the active service to live in "Ste Anne," where the voyageur could still be heard singing his "evening hymn." The old trader died near Lachine in the year 1848.

Another Grant—David—is called an experienced old trader who at the split of the old Nor'-West Company was among the X Y traders. James Grant, another of the clan, was clerk and interpreter of the Nor'-West Company in Minnesota in 1804. Robert Grant, another trader, founded Fort Esperance, probably about 1785, on the Qu'Appelle River.

Two other Grants remain, and they are worthy of greater notice still. These are Cuthbert Grant—father and son. Cuthbert Grant, the elder, was a Scotsman of much force and ability. This trader was sent along with Leroux, who figured in Sir

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Alexander Mackenzie's parties, to found a fort on Great Slave Lake. He was also at Fort Chipewyan when Mackenzie returned from the discovery of the river which bears his name. The astronomer David Thompson mentions him as being present at a meeting of the partners at Grand Portage in 1797. Grant was evidently a leading man of affairs, being agent for the region back of Red River. Thompson and Grant travelled together along the banks of the Assiniboine.

John Macdonald of Garth, a very clever man, but one whose dates are not always reliable, states that he served under Cuthbert Grant at Fort Augustus, but though Grant was middle aged and a good man "he was weak in health." When the spring came Macdonald took his bourgeois Grant, who was quite ill, and, placing an awning over him, had him transported to Cumberland House. From this point the sick man was carried on to the Kaministiquia River, but died at Grand Portage in the summer of 1799.

Cuthbert Grant the Younger.—The writer has not been able to find particulars of the birth and relations of Cuthbert Grant, the younger, other than that he was a half-breed son of Cuthbert Grant, sen., and that probably his mother had a touch of French blood. Young Grant seems to have belonged to the Qu'Appelle district, where a community of Metis, or French-Canadian half-breeds, had grown up around the forts of that rich district. Accustomed to the use of the prairie horses, the gun, and the snow-shoe, they formed

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a sort of guild of their own and actually called themselves Bois-brulés, or "The New Nation." We shall see how the Nor'-Westers made use of these young spirits to attack Lord Selkirk's colony. Of this Bois-brulés (dark-faced) band Cuthbert Grant was leader. Of his exploits we shall speak more fully in another chapter.

Duncan Cameron.—Among the captains of the Nor'-Westers there were few more adroit, more shrewd, or more aggressive than this scion of a Highland family. His family had lived in New York State, and came over with the United Empire Loyalists to Canada and settled in Glengarry in 1785. He entered the North-West Company, and was always one of their most enterprising agents. Cameron was stationed in the Lake Superior country, and wrote an account of the Nipegon District. Of his great career we shall afterward speak.

Charles McKenzie.—This trader was another Highland youth who entered the Nor'-West Companies in 1803. He was one of a party to cross the plains to the Mandans on the Missouri River in the year following. The Canadian traders met on the Missouri the celebrated party of American explorers—Lewis and Clark—who crossed from the Atlantic seaboard and reached the Pacific Ocean. McKenzie made several visits to the Mandans, who are well known as a very intelligent tribe of Indians, cultivating the soil, and living in underground houses. This trader was fond of study, and especially delighted in the history of his native

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land—Auld Scotia. As a man of mind he sought to educate his half-breed children, and inveighed bitterly against the Hudson's Bay Company for refusing to admit natives to the higher offices of the Company, however excellent their education or great their capacity might be. He received leave from the Company to settle in Red River. His son Hector McKenzie, formerly well known to the writer in Manitoba, was a man of excellent character and high intelligence. He accompanied one of the exploring expeditions to the North in the capacity of guide.

The most remarkable of the Scottish fur traders of Montreal were two cousins—Sir Alexander and Roderick McKenzie. Of the former, whose position was so extraordinary and worthy of study, we shall write more at length in a subsequent chapter. We may, however, properly close this sketch of the personnel of the Scottish Fur Company by referring to Roderick McKenzie, the historiographer of the Company and of the fur trade. Roderick McKenzie came out as a Highland laddie to Canada in 1784. He obtained a position as clerk, immediately on arrival, in the North-West Company, and at once made his first journey to the farthest extremity of the Fur Country. On his way the youth stopped at Grand Portage and saw the wonderful meeting of the partners with all its excitement and novelty. He went on directly to Lake Athabasca, where, under his cousin's direction, he built Fort Chipewyan.

Roderick McKenzie was a great letter-writer,

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kept up a correspondence with his cousin Alexander, and also planned to write a history of the Indians and of the fur trade of the North-West. To carry out his plans he obtained many journals from the literary lights among the fur traders and laid the foundation of the interesting recitals which we have in Masson's two invaluable volumes on "The Bourgeois of the North-West Company." After eight years' service Roderick McKenzie retired to Eastern Canada in 1797. His "Reminiscences" extend to 1829, at which time he was living at Terrebonne in Lower Canada. He became a member of the Legislative Council of Lower Canada, and left behind him a number of distinguished descendants.

Ex-Governor Masson has done good service to Scotland and his Scottish relatives and friends by preserving the memory of this bourgeois.