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## CHAPTER IX

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### SCOTSMEN IN THE "ASTOR COMPANY

**J**OHAN JACOB ASTOR, a German trader, of New York—the ancestor of the wealthy and celebrated family of the New York Astors of to-day—had a good eye for furs. Beginning trade in Montreal, he, after certain changes had been made in trading regulations, went to New York, but he had a liking for Canada and the fur trade which never left him. With varied success he dealt in furs in the American Fur Company at Mackinaw, and established the South-West Company and the Pacific Fur Company. But Astor with keen insight saw that the only men who could help him through with his larger enterprises were the Scottish traders of Montreal, and he had set his heart on beginning trade on the Pacific Coast at the mouth of the Columbia River.

In 1810 he proposed to the North-West Company of Montreal that they should take a one-third interest in the "Pacific Fur Company." The Nor'-Westers were, however, quietly working out in the same direction through the passes of the Rocky Mountains. They therefore declined his proposals, and immediately gave special orders to

## *Scotsmen in the Astor Company*

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David Thompson, their explorer, to push on to the Pacific by way of the Columbia River.

Astor at once saw the necessity for prompt action. The Scottish traders of Montreal were his only resource, and cost what it might he determined not to be beaten. He made offers of the most flattering kind to a number of the most active and capable men of the North-West Company. The French-Canadian boatmen he knew he could get if their Scottish leaders were available.

Astor's plan was duplex. One of his expeditions was to reach the mouth of the Columbia River on the Pacific Coast by way of Cape Horn, the other would ascend the Missouri River and by a journey of exceptional difficulty cross the Rocky Mountains and descend by a most dangerous route to the Pacific Ocean.

The Cape Horn expedition was the first to start. Four stalwart partners of the North-West Company, induced to forfeit their allegiance, entered upon the scheme with Astor, and they were all men who knew their work—moreover, they were all Scotsmen. They were Alexander McKay, Duncan McDougall, David Stuart, and Robert Stuart. They engaged their voyageurs from among the French-Canadians in Montreal, and left Montreal for New York in the highest of spirits. Highland endurance mingled with French vivacity made themselves felt. The party-masters, clerks, and "engagés" went by boat across Lake Champlain, portaged their boats into the Hudson River,

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## *The Scotsman in Canada*

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and as they descended to New York repeated the picturesque pageant to which they were accustomed upon the Ottawa as they left "la bonne Ste. Anne," on their way to the upper country. With banners flying and rollicking songs in unison, they wakened the echoes on the sleepy banks of Washington Irving's Land, and entered New York, as that writer tells us, declaring that they could "sleep hard, eat dog—in short, do anything." In due course they sailed from New York. Omitting the details of their voyage around the Cape, we find them at the mouth of the Columbia River, arriving under the leadership of Alexander McKenzie in the ship *Tonquin*. They at once erected a small establishment at the mouth of the river, and called it Astoria. With accustomed push they decided to make a voyage up the Pacific Coast in the ship *Tonquin* to open trade with the Indians. Captain Thorn on the long voyage had shown himself incapable, and now in his dealings with the Indians he was especially unskilful. Depending upon their numbers and on the exposed position of the whites, the Indians saw their advantage after a visit to the *Tonquin*, and decided to make an attack upon her. Coming on board in great numbers, ostensibly to trade, the savages made their attack on McKay, and he was the first to fall from the blow of a war-club. They created havoc on board the *Tonquin*, but suddenly a terrific explosion took place from below in the ship, and a hundred of the Indians were killed.

## Scotsmen in the Astor Company

Duncan McDougall was another of the daring partners sent out by Astor. Along with Alexander McKay, he began as soon as the *Tonquin* arrived at the mouth of the Columbia River and the party had been welcomed by Comcomly, the chief of the Chinook tribe, the necessary operation of choosing a site for the fort, and of preparing with busy hands a residence, store-house, and magazine. The partners called the settlement Astoria. After McKay's departure on the *Tonquin* McDougall assumed full control, and on July 15th received David Thompson and his party of Nor'-Westers, who had been sent forward to forestall the Astorians, but who had been delayed upon the way by unavoidable circumstances. As soon as the bad news of the blowing up of the *Tonquin* reached Astoria the Indians became less docile, and McDougall had no force to protect him. Fearing an Indian attack, the trader took a bold step. He summoned the Indians to meet him with the shortest notice. When they were gathered together he took a small bottle from his pocket, held it up before their eyes, and announced that it contained smallpox, of which as all knew they had a deadly fear. He had, he told them, but to draw the cork and the plague would seize them. The Indians were cowed, and McDougall, being held in dread, had no further trouble with them.

Another expedition after that in the *Tonquin* was sent out by sea to Astoria. In 1811 Astor chartered a ship—the *Beaver*, sailing under Captain Sowles, for Astoria. She had on board one

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## *The Scotsman in Canada*

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partner, six clerks, and a number of artisans and passengers, well provided for.

As we shall see elsewhere, Astoria was taken by the British, after which McDougall joined the North-West Company in 1813, and remained for years on the coast. He is said to have died a miserable death at the mouth of the Red River.

Donald McKenzie, engaged by Astor at the same time as the great four who have been mentioned as proceeding to the Pacific Ocean on the *Tonquin*, was a man who became noted in different parts of New Caledonia and Rupert's Land. Donald McKenzie was a thorough Scotsman and the brother of Roderick McKenzie, the cousin of Alexander Mackenzie. He was also a Nor'-Wester and was to take charge of the overland journey to the Pacific Coast which was to co-operate with the *Tonquin* expedition. This McKenzie did in conjunction with William P. Hunt, an American, representing especially the views and interests of Astor. With them was Robert McLellan, an experienced and daring Missouri trader and a young Scotsman of energy and ability, who was acquainted with the country along the Mississippi River. In a later chapter sketches will be given of these Scotsmen and others who were known as traders on the borders.

The overland party on its way met Daniel Boone, the famous old Kentuckian hunter. The party after tedious river navigation found its way to the heights of the Rocky Mountains and then began the terrific "Mad River" descent on the

## *Scotsmen in the Astor Company*

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west side of the Mountains towards the Pacific Ocean. The party was now divided; Hunt and Crooks took command of that down the left bank of the river, while the McKenzie and McMillan party were on the northern side. The provisions soon began to fail, but McKenzie, after many hardships, secured boats from the Indians, and the members of the party, with concave cheeks, protuberant bones, and tattered garments, all indicating their privations, reached Astoria on January 18, 1812. Hunt made the journey more easily, and with his followers reached Astoria a month after McKenzie.

Ross Cox, Alexander Ross, and Washington Irving have all given us accounts of these frightful journeys; but, as has been pointed out, Irving in his description is not a scientific delineator, but rather a writer of fiction.

Donald McKenzie afterward led a party to the taking of Astoria by the British, and rejoined the North-West Company in 1814. His connection with this affair calls for a little fuller treatment. In the troubles of 1812-15 the fortune of war led to the taking of Astoria by the British, and McKenzie took his part in the transfer. He had gone to the interior ostensibly to trade; but in a few days the Astorians were surprised to see him return down the Columbia River, his party carrying the British flag. Along with him were two Nor'-Wester partners of note. These were two well-known Scotsmen—George McTavish and Angus Bethune. After their "light" canoes came

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## *The Scotsman in Canada*

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eight others laden with furs, these under the Scottish leaders, John Stuart and James McMillan. They bore a letter to McDougall, the master of Astoria, from Angus Shaw, his uncle, stating that the vessel *Isaac Todd*, with letters of marque, had sailed from London, with the frigate *Phæbe*, to seize Astoria. The whole flotilla of canoes, now led by McKenzie, carried seventy-five men. Though the British vessels had not yet arrived at Astoria, yet, after some negotiation, Astor's fort was handed over by McDougall to the North-West Company. The American colours were hauled down and the British ensign rose up over the fort. Some of the Astorians returned to the East, but the greater number of them joined the North-West Company and remained in the Fur Country.

Two of the Astorians have written excellent accounts of their movement under Astor. These are Ross Cox and Gabriel Franchere.

Britain was now in the ascendant at the mouth of the Columbia River. The *Isaac Todd* and the *Phæbe* being assigned to other work on the way out, never reached Astoria. Instead of them the ship *Raccoon* took possession of the fort and settlement. Donald McKenzie had, however, much work to do after he had seen the successful transfer of Astoria to British hands. He was at Fort William in 1816, and traded in the Rocky Mountains in the year following. He continued in the Fur Country until the union of the Hudson's Bay and North-West Companies in 1821. Returning

## *Scotsmen in the Astor Company*

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eastward from Caledonia two years afterward, Mackenzie became Governor of Red River Settlement for eight years up to 1833. He died in Maysville, New York State, in 1851, and his descendants are still to be found in that place.

McKenzie was a man of remarkable ability, was noted for his conciliatory disposition, and fully won the reputation of being a "canny Scot."

Among those who arrived before Astoria on the ship *Raccoon*, of which we have made mention, was a very notable Nor'-Wester, whom we may describe. This was John McDonald—commonly known for years afterward as "McDonald of Garth." There was no one who had more of the Scottish pride of family than this McDonald, claiming as he did to be descended from the "Lord of the Isles." His father had obtained for him a commission in the British Army, but on account of a blemish in his arm, caused by an accident in his boyhood, he failed to pass the entrance examination. The nickname "Bras Croche"—*i.e.*, "Crooked armed"—clung to him through life. In 1791 he had come to Montreal to Simon McTavish, and was soon sent out to Beaver River, north of the Saskatchewan. For four years he passed from post to post. In 1802 he went to the West and built a fort to meet the Kootenay Indians. This was Rocky Mountain House. At the junction of the Red Deer River and South Saskatchewan he erected New Chesterfield House. In 1806 he was appointed to the Red River district, where a fort had been established



## *The Scotsman in Canada*

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two years before. He also founded Fort Esperance on the Qu'Appelle River. McDonald of Garth was truly a fort-builder. In the spring, being at Fort William, he obtained the news that David Thompson, the surveyor, was in danger from the Blackfoot Indians in the Rocky Mountains, and McDonald and thirty chosen men rushed to the rescue and found Thompson among the Kootenay Indians. McDonald was thus well acquainted with the affairs of New Caledonia. We have seen that the *Isaac Todd* and *Phæbe* were expected at Astoria. On this expedition were Edward Ellice, of an Aberdeen family, and John McDonald, who was connected with the Nor'-Westers. Their two ships had reached Rio Janeiro on their mission to Astoria. But they were sent on other work by the Admiral, and the *Raccoon* went, as has been shown, to the mouth of the Columbia River. After the occupation of their fort, McDonald became senior partner in charge of Astoria, and the name of the establishment was changed to Fort George.

In 1814 McDonald left the Pacific Coast, and coming down the Saskatchewan reached Fort William. At Sault Ste. Marie he found the fort in the hands of the Americans, and with some difficulty reached Montreal. He speaks in his journal, which is published by Masson, of meeting in Terrebonne Lord Selkirk's party which was going to the West to oppose the Nor'-Westers.

McDonald spent his last days in the county of Glengarry in Ontario, and died in 1860, between eighty-nine and ninety years of age. He was

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## *Scotsmen in the Astor Company*

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somewhat irritable and set in his prejudices, but was noted for his spirit and courage ; he was a most energetic trader ; indeed, his life was most romantic. He had the zeal of the Highland Scotsman for his own company and his "ain folk."