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WHAT'S NEW

Electric Scotland's Weekly Newsletter for January 2nd, 2015

To see what we've added to the Electric Scotland site view our What's New page at:

<http://www.electricscotland.com/whatsnew.htm>

To see what we've added to the Electric Canadian site view our What's New page at:

<http://www.electriccanadian.com/whatsnew.htm>

For the latest news from Scotland see our ScotNews feed at:

<http://www.electricscotland.com/>

Electric Scotland News

While sending this issue out on New Years Eve I'd like to wish all of you a Very Happy New Year and hope it will bring you much happiness.

And as I hope you will all be singing Auld Lang Syne to see in the New Year here are the words so you'll be prepared...

AULD LANG SYNE

Robert Burns

Should auld acquaintance be forgot
And never brought to mind?
Should auld acquaintance be forgot
And days of auld lang syne?

Chorus

*For auld lang syne, my jo,
For auld lang syne
We'll tak' a cup o' kindness yet
For auld lang syne.*

And surely ye'll be your pint stowp!
And surely I'll be mine
And we'll tak' a cup o' kindness yet
For auld lang syne.

We twa hae run about the braes
And pou'd the gowans fine;
But we've wander'd mony a weary fitt,
Sin' auld lang syne.

We twa hae paid't in the burn
Frae morning sun till dine:
But seas between us braid hae roar'd
Sin' auld lang syne.

And there's a hand, my trusty fiere!
Andgie's a hand o' thine!
And we'll tak a right gude-willie waughs
For auld lang syne.

Footnote: The greatest name in Scots-song is that of Robert Burns - he gave us our National Anthem 'Bruce's Address at Bannockburn' (Scots Wha Hae); an international song of Brotherhood in 'A Man's A Man For A' That' and the universal parting song 'Auld Lang Syne' which is particularly associated with Hogmanay. Burns never claimed the song as his own and wrote to his publisher George Thomson - 'The air is but mediocre but the following song, the old song of the olden times, and which has never been in print, not even in manuscript, until I took them down from an old man's singing, is enough to recommend any air'. However he admitted to Johnson that the two verses beginning respectively 'We twa hae run about the braes' and 'We twa hae paid'd in the burn' were his own. Today the song is only associated with one man - Robert Burns.

Music: Auld Lang Syne by the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards
<http://youtu.be/to1xT93IIUI>

New Year Resolutions

Perhaps you might add "write articles for Electric Scotland" as one of your New Year Resolutions?

You might have noticed some of the comments from our last newsletter in that we had a discussion on why we cleaned out the fireplace on New Years Eve. To me that really illustrated that we still have some memories going back to the times of our grandparents but clearly we are also forgetting why things were done back then.

It would be great if you could start to jot down memories from your youth and sayings and traditions that came from your grandparents and parents. If you would then send them into me I could add these jottings to the site so we don't lose them.

Some of you may remember that a lot of years ago I started a page for "Old Scottish Street Poetry" which you can read at <http://www.electricscotland.com/history/literat/spoetry.htm> where we ended up with 5 pages of contributions from many of our regular visitors.

I mind one person remembered a bit of a song or saying or rhyme and lived in Australia. She would phone her father in Scotland and he would relate it to her and she would scribble it down and then send it in for these pages. Several old skipping songs sang in the playground also came in this way as well.

So perhaps we can build a new set of pages "Reminiscences from the Old Days" and you could email in some as you think of them? This could be fun and a great tribute to our own ancestors. Email them to me at alastairi@electricscotland.com

Electric Canadian

Fallbrook Farm Heritage Site

Added a link to my account of this site and efforts to make it a Heritage site for future generations. Sandy MacKay actually phoned me this week and it was himself that worked hard to try and make this happen. It was that phone call that reminded me of all the work we did together. You can read about the work that went on at <http://www.electricscotland.com/history/canada/fallingbrook.htm>

The Backwood's Life
By W. F. Munro (1869)

Stumbled across this book while looking for something else and thought it would make a good addition to our Pioneers page. You can download this pdf version at:
<http://www.electriccanadian.com/pioneering/backwoodslife.pdf>

Electric Scotland

Deeside Tales

Or Men and Manners On Highland Deeside since 1745 by John Grant Michie (1908).

We're now onto the final notes section in which in Note 3 there is an interesting account of the Deeside MacGregors and in the first paragraph is states...

THE original habitat of this famous clan was in Argyll and Perth—principally the districts of Breadalbane and Atholl. When and how some of them spread north and obtained a footing on Deeside has been differently related. According to popular accounts there were two branches, the Macgregors of the Smoke (Griogairich na Smfiide) and the Macgregors of the Lime (G. an Aol). Miss Murray Macgregor prints in her History of the Clan a MS. account of the Braemar families of the name by "John Gregory." The author is otherwise unknown, and the document is undated, but from internal evidence it seems to have been written not long after 1700. According to him the Macgregors of the Lime came from the south under the patronage and protection of the Earls of Mar about 1400, and soon were able to acquire "four of the best towns in Breman—Cluny and Kilach, Dalchork and Balachbuidh," besides Inverey.

Their nickname arose from their being the first to make use of lime for agricultural purposes in those Highland regions. They burnt it and applied it to the land, raising great crops, "to the inexpressible astonishment of the whole country." Gregory's object is evidently to show that his clansmen, far from being caterans and ne'er-do-weels, were the first scientific farmers. His account is marked throughout by strong hostility against the Farquharsons, whose founders he represents as mere "cow-stealers and raisers of herships," whereas the first Macgregor Laird of Inverey was a man of such fascination that his patron "the Earl of Marr was never happy but when Inverey was with him." In the course of time, however, by force and cunning the Farquharsons succeeded in ousting the honourable members of his clan from all their fair possessions west of Crathie.

I might add that for some reason the index page of this book got corrupted and thus was not able to load so had to recreate it.

You can read this book at <http://www.electricscotland.com/history/deeside/index.htm>

John Muir's Last Stand

Touches on the present philosophical dustup in conservation. You can read this article at: <http://www.electricscotland.com/hiStory/muir/JohnMuirLastStand.pdf>

We also added a thread for him with a couple of his videos at:

<http://www.electricscotland.org/showthread.php/4724-Weir-s-Scotland-Tom-s-Favourites>

Odd Incidents of Olden Times

Or Ancient Records of Inverary by Peter MacIntyre (1904) (pdf)

This is a 99 page book and can be downloaded at:

<http://www.electricscotland.com/history/articles/oddincidentsino00macigoog.pdf>

Lands and Lairds of Larbert & Duncipace Parishes

Added this book to the foot of our page about Larbert & Stenhousemuir which you can get to at:

<http://www.electricscotland.com/history/falkirk/larbsten.htm>

Life and Letters of Thomas Campbell

Added a three volume publication about his Life and Letters to the foot of his page at:

http://www.electricscotland.com/history/other/campbell_thomas.htm

This is an Age of Global Governance

An article by James Wilkie.

All right, so independence is on the back burner until the next time, which may come sooner than we think. And in that event the case for it will have to be put a good deal more realistically and professionally than was obvious during the first round we have just experienced.

Possibly the greatest weakness of the Yes campaign was its obvious ignorance of the broader aspects of independence, and of the vast changes that have taken place in those respects within the past few years. The very nature of independence is no longer what it used to be.

You can download this article at: <http://www.electricscotland.com/independence/globalgovernance.pdf>

THE STORY

The McGregors

A Novel of an Ontario Pioneer Family By Robert Laidlaw. Here I am bringing you the Introduction and the first chapter of this book...

The McGregors. by Robert Laidlaw, is like a good country meal. It's not fancy, but the ingredients are pure and fresh and it's something to be savoured. A lot of practical knowledge and affection went into the writing about the Scottish people ('the Scotch'), Lowland and Highland, who left their mark in that part of the province of Ontario snuggled up to Lake Huron south of the Bruce Peninsula. Many of their descendants are still there, and place names such as Kincardine, Lochalsh, and Lucknow are their memorial.

I know the country well. I grew up in Huron County, just south of the Bruce. In that area my forefathers had a habit of dubbing their crossroad hamlets with the names of saints, while our Ulster brethren used ones like Donnybrook, Dungannon, and Belfast. Scotch or Irish, Catholic or Protestant, the early settlers tamed the land and the taming marked them all. I like Laidlaw's perception when he tells us of James Macgregor and Janet Ellis courting in a cutter and says wryly, "There was never a chaperone to equal a Canadian winter."

If you were born and raised in the country, and if like me your first home was a log cabin built by a grandfather in the middle of the eighteen-hundreds, you'll be fascinated by this story, and especially by the way the author has dealt with the experiences and hardships and joys of people who had to "make do". These people had little, could afford less, and somehow found the skills to make what they needed. The next time you encounter a pioneer's cradle, cabinet, or chair, collected to decorate a modern house, remember how it was made. Objects like these are perfect illustrations of how an early settler was forced by necessity to discover skills he had never been aware of—and, in doing so, made articles of genuine artistic worth.

Laidlaw captures the quality of strong men, shy in the presence of women. He portrays the quiet, iron determination of women faced with unending work, who also had to cope with disasters such as a sudden accident crippling a husband forever, with trying to make certain that their children captured some education, and with the loneliness of their isolation in the bush. Remember, these were women capable of fending off wolves and bears coming to prey on precious livestock. It was all in a day's work.

The McGregors is genuine. In fact it reads like a true chronicle. Laidlaw knows about barn framings, about the value of good land, about rowdiness and rough pleasure and stern, long—winded preachers. He delineates the pride of workmanship in a Scottish stone—mason, descended from a line of men with the same principles, summed up in the words: "When you build with stone you build forever: it must be true, it must be right, or it is there to shame your memory forever and a day."

The forever and a day is only a figure of speech, but those houses are still around in Western Ontario. Travel the back roads and concessions of Bruce or Huron counties and you'll see them, as true and right as the day they were finished.

In a sense this book is something like those products of the early stone-masons. Solid and substantial, with a rough grace, it is a volume that will last 'forever and a day' in your memory. It's not a flossy love story and yet it's touching. The language is unpretentious, but that's in keeping: they were unpretentious people.

For those of my vintage this book is like a tonic. I hope younger Canadians will read it, because it is one of the most straightforward and unbiased accounts of the particular time in our country that I can recall. If you want to know what it was like living on a cleared farm in the middle 1800s in Western Ontario, through into the next century, you'll get a splendid account in *The McGregors*. It was a time when English, Irish, and Scotch, who had fled their homelands because of privation, were beginning the slow assimilation into being Canadians.

If you're a Canadian literature buff, you'll also get a clue to the perceptive, incisive way Alice Munro portrays the characters she grew up with. Her father, Robert Laidlaw, wrote *The McGregors*. She has every reason to be proud and grateful for her heritage.

Harry J. Boyle
Toronto, Ontario
October 17, 1978

Chapter I - Starting Out

The small cavalcade climbed the long hill as it left Goderich. They had crossed the Maitland River on the new wooden bridge. The water ran shallow and fast underneath and sparkled in the sun.

The McGregors were moving north to Bruce County. First there was the two-seated democrat, driven by Roderick McGregor himself, with his wife by his side. Roderick McGregor was a barrel of a man, of middle height only but broad in the chest and with short, powerful arms. His thick, bowed legs were spraddled wide on the seat now while he leaned forward, a rein in each hand, as though urging the whole outfit on.

He had a full beard of well-trimmed reddish hair and wore a hat to conceal his partial baldness. His teeth were large, white, and somewhat fearsome, and at times it was difficult to know if he was smiling or preparing to take a bite. Roderick, known mostly as Rory, had a "good conceit of himself" his acquaintances said. This self-confidence had helped him get through life with a minimum of effort up to now and he had no reason to think that it would not continue to do so.

His wife Margaret, as often happens in marriages, was almost his exact opposite. Quiet, well-bred, and unassuming, she wielded more influence in the family's affairs than one would have thought and although she never had been pretty, there was a certain patrician carriage, a cool air of family good breeding which refused to yield altogether to Roderick's overwhelming presence. Her skin was delicate, her features were fine and good; she was one of those women who become beautiful in the latter half of life.

Smaller McGregors overflowed the rear seat of their vehicle and rode in the two wagons following behind with the family's household goods. The wagons, the democrat, and the horses had all been hired from the livery barn in Goderich, and the two drivers would return with the outfits after they had deposited the family in Bruce County.

Where the road went across swampy ground the surface had been spread with logs laid side by side and covered with earth or gravel. These were known as corduroy roads and, fortunately for the McGregors, for it made for a smoother, less troublesome ride, this one had been covered with gravel from near by. The bridges they crossed were makeshift affairs, sometimes put up fresh after

each spring flood. Roderick had been told that the only stream of any size was at Port Albert, a small, straggly settlement about halfway to their destination, and they planned to stop there for a rest.

As they approached Port Albert, Margaret McGregor saw that it was a pretty place. The little river was running clear, unlike the muddy creeks they had passed earlier, and she knew there was a small harbour and several mills around about. A pleasant, tranquil place, but not for them: their home was to be in the bush.

Rory swung the democrat off the road and pulled up in front of a tavern. Weeds grew stubbornly here, defying the considerable traffic; clumps of camomile, locally called Stinking Rogers, and plantain showed the only spots of green.

The tavern's unpainted walls were of weathered lumber, the cracks battened by three-inch strips, and a slim pillared porch leaned, exhausted, against it. Several barefoot children sat on the low floor of the porch, their feet in the dust, and a lanky man with a droopy moustache held up a pillar.

"I presume," said Rory, using his best English. which had little trace of the Gaelic accent, "that we may feed and water our horses here and take some refreshment ourselves. Are you the proprietor, sir?" The man raised himself casually and looked at Rory with a strange expression.

"If you mean do I own the place, no, but I'll show your men to the stable. The boss is in the bar and if the ladies go in that there door, they'll find someone. Guess you can eat if you want. We mostly just serve drinks."

Margaret and the girls disappeared through the door. The boys followed the horses to the barn and Rory headed for the bar. The bartender, red-faced and beef in his shirt-sleeves, hastened to serve him.

"What will it be, boss?"

The bottles on a shelf behind the bar bore labels of different popular brands, but they had a used look.

"I'll take the Black and White."

"Black and White it is, boss," and the host poured a generous jollop for Rory and one for himself.

"You're moving north I see. Going far?"

"Going up to the Bruce. I intend to buy land there and settle among my own people. McGregor is the name."

"Rough country up there yet, but opening up fast they tell me. Good land too. Another shot?"

"Yes, if you please. Rather sharp stuff that. Imported, I suppose?"

"To tell the truth I cut the Scotch a bit. Man back down the road makes pretty good stuff. Doesn't get a chance to age much though. Tastes good enough after you get the first one down. But throw it back fast, burns a bit on the way if it lingers."

He tipped back his own drink quickly and wiped the top of the bar with a flour sack. Three or four drunken flies fell to the shavings on the floor and buzzed happily there. Rory finished his second drink and ate some salted crackers from a barrel and a cut of cheese from the plate on the bar. His hunger satisfied, he joined the family. In what passed for the dining room they had finished a meal of potatoes, salt pork, and sauerkraut, topped off with johnny cake and maple syrup. Flies buzzed in and out the open windows, but this did not upset anyone: few places in the country had screened windows.

By mid afternoon the caravan was on its way again, all members accounted for and more or less organized. Rory was in a good mood and broke into song, his booming voice carrying well ahead of the caravan. He sang in the Gaelic, and this aroused some curiosity along the way, for they had not yet reached the Highland settlements.

It was dusk by the time they arrived at a farmhouse near where they planned to spend the night. The mother and girls had beds of a sort in the house, and the men made do with the barn.

Jim, the youngest boy, was only six and to him the whole thing was an astounding adventure. The trip by train and stagecoach, the stop at Goderich, the lake stretching blue to the horizon, all had been like a miracle. Who would have thought that there could be so much water? On the shore road the lake was sometimes near, sometimes miles distant, but they could still see it hanging to the edge of the sky in a darker blue semicircle. "Angus. how can the lake sit up high like that? Why doesn't the water run down on us?" Angus was the oldest of his brothers. He could ask Angus questions, but never Rory, his father.

"It's not up high, it's lower than us. It just seems that way." "Is there land across there?"

"Yes, but a long way across. A man in Goderich told me the lake is like a big wedge. It gets wider the farther north you go."

The new-cut hay in the barn served as beds for Rory and his sons. Although the smell was pleasant, it was hot underneath, for it had not been fully cured and there were thistles as well. Part of the time Jim was awake, and in the early morning he heard a thunderstorm. A blackness swept in from the lake, there was a gust of wind and a swift dash of rain that lasted only minutes, and then the squall was gone inland over the woods. He slept.

He woke again to the sound of wind whistling through the chinks of the barn logs. Thunder rolled and lightning snapped and Jim burrowed closer to Angus under the horse blanket as the rain rattled briefly on the roof. The storm woke the little company and the teamsters shuffled off to look after the horses. Rory pulled a bottle from a pocket and took his morning eye-opener as the boys ran screeching around the building in sheer high spirits. Cool air came in from the lake and the sun blinked an eye between the clouds rolling back over the woods. The day would be good.

They gathered in the summer kitchen of the farmhouse for breakfast. It was a large, gaunt room without a ceiling, and the exposed rafters were of cedar poles with strips of bark hanging from them. The long, narrow table was made of three-inch planks split from logs with wedges and hewn smooth with a broadaxe. The seats were planks nailed to blocks of wood.

For breakfast the farmer's wife served steaming bowls of oatmeal sweetened with maple syrup. The guests dipped spoons full of their oatmeal into large cups of milk and ate bannocks made of flour, sour milk, and baking soda and served hot with salty butter.

On the road again, his small belly full, Jim was supremely happy. He could not know that he was to spend the next seventy years of his life in this country and see it turn into a land of plenty, tamed and obedient. Sufficient was the bright morning, the bumping wagons, and the new sights and unexpected events around every bend of the road.

At Pine River they turned their backs on the lake and headed inland. Pine River village consisted of a tavern, a store, a mill, and a few houses scattered around the mouth of the river that gave the village its name. The road leading away from the lake was only a trail, though it had been surveyed, and the right-of-way, twenty-two yards wide, made a beeline through the bush. The trail followed it, swerving right or left only when there were difficulties like a steep hill or a bog hole.

Five miles east of the lake the travellers came on more settled country. The trail followed the survey closer now. Fences began to appear, marking off the farms, snug log cabins and barns indicated that the land was beginning to be lived on and cared for. All of a sudden, it seemed to Jim, they came upon the Scottish settlement. Rory drew the democrat up beside the two tall, bearded men splitting rails by the roadside.

"I am looking, gentlemen," he said, again using his best English and most polished manner, "for one John McGregor, my brother, whom you may have heard about as living near by. I trust I am on the right road."

"Aye man," said one, speaking with the Lowland accent. "There's a power of McGregors on by. Nae doot there'll be a John among them."

"I've haired of John McGregor," said the other. "About a mile on. A big house with a porch, and he's built himself a wee hoose oot back. Shit-house Jack they call him."

At the John McGregor home they were welcomed with some reserve. Counting the teamsters there were twelve in all.

"Christine," said John to his wife, "here are Roderick and Margaret and the children. See to a meal for them now and they will sleep here the night."

Christine watched the family boiling out of the wagons with dismay. She had six of her own as well.

"Now Christine," said Jim's mother in her gentle way, "we'll have to trouble you for the night, but very little will do. The men and boys can sleep in the barn. The girls and I need but little. It's so nice to be in a house again. This travelling does weary one so. I hope we never have to move again."

"I spoke to old McAlister as you wished, Roderick." John spoke in the formal English which they both knew well enough. "He will sell his place for one hundred dollars."

Peter McAlister was over sixty, which was old for the frontier. He had taken up one hundred acres of Crown land, cleared a ragged ten acres of it, put up a cabin and a cow shed, and then grown weary; and he longed to get back to Scotland.

Rory decided to settle his family on the McAlister place and Peter's shack provided them with shelter. It was filthy, and Margaret and the girls had to shovel out the corner where he had kept the potatoes. There was only one bedroom, so the girls slept in the loft above on straw ticks laid on the floor. The roof was of basswood scoops, hollowed out and laid like a tile roof, and though it could hardly be called weatherproof, the warm weather had come and the family, young and hardy, paid little attention to a few leaks. The boys cleaned up the cow shed and slept there on the fragrant new-cut hay, where they were free to spend a hilarious hour before falling asleep, exhausted, in what was practically the open air.

The John McGregors were what the neighbours called "well fixed" and they were anxious to help. As soon as the family was settled John approached his brother.

"Roderick, Christine and I would like to give you all a little start. There's a fresh cow you can have and a sow that's due soon, and Christine can spare a dozen hens and a clutch or two of chickens when you have a place for them. It's too late now to sow anything except turnips, but you are welcome to the team betimes, or the oxen."

Roderick accepted the offer as stiffly as it had been made.

"I thank you kindly, John. We will be glad of the help, but I must pay you for the stock. And I'll have you know, John, I take favours from no man, brother or not. I am short of cash at the moment, until our affairs in Halton County are settled, but I will give you a note payable on demand. I trust you will give me time to pay."

The stock changed hands but John never asked for payment and Rory never brought the subject up again. All that mattered was that his Highland pride had been upheld, his self-esteem unpunctured. But he was not the only one of his race to carry a high head and a light pocketbook; for although Highlanders were adventurous settlers, they were not always the best farmers. And now that he owned land, Rory, like many others, thought of himself as the squire of an estate. In the old country a landowner seldom worked his own land, they had always kept a little above that, and accordingly, Rory spent much time in the taverns of the nearest village discoursing on religion, politics, or the mechanics of farming. Much of the time he talked in the Gaelic, in booming tones that seemed to originate in his toes and to travel upward with increasing strength until the words issued from his mouth like the reverberations of a bell.

Most felt timid about contradicting opinions voiced with such authority, and indeed after Rory had hoisted three drinks it wasn't safe to differ. He felt himself to be infallible. None of the other McGregors talked as well or as much as Rory did, and none who came after were able to challenge the legend.

The first concern of the family was to improve the cabin and get a little more room. Trees of all sizes were close by, ready for the cutting, and the boys, already trained to work with axe and saw, felled and trimmed enough to make logs for an extension.

"Show us where you want the door, Father, and the windows." Angus was marking out the foundation. "Get your walls up, we'll cut the holes after." Rory quickly disposed of that problem.

"See," he said, pointing to the shack, "how old Peter notched the logs at the corners so they fit tight and hold firm together. The old boy made a fair job at that."

As the boys examined the corner, Rory turned to his eldest son. "I must away to the village now on business. See that a nice bit of that wall is up when I come home."

Angus watched his father drive off.

"He's gone on business for sure, the business of getting drunk, and he'll come back stewed to the gills. He'll think no more of any wall until the morn, but then look out. We best get to work right now. I've watched them put log walls up. It isn't so hard."

The three oldest boys were almost able for men's work and they notched logs and built the walls fast enough. When the sides got higher they slid logs upon poles at some risk to themselves, while Jim chinked the cracks with a mixture of cow manure and clay.

"I wish Pa would stay on the job," complained Neil, the next in age to Angus. "We'll have trouble getting those top logs on."

"Leave the small ones for the top," Angus said. "If the old goat don't like it, he can lump it."

In a few days the boys completed the walls and cut enough slim, straight tamarack poles to make the rafters. Jim plastered himself, as well as the chinks in the wall, with the cow-manure mixture. Rory continued to be away a lot on business.

"What about the roof, Angus?" asked Neil. "We can't chop out scoops for all that." Angus was imperturbable.

"Uncle John has a pile of lumber left over from when he built his house. I'm going to ask him for it. Maybe Pa would pay for it sometime, though I doubt if he has much money left. I'd ask Mam, but she's sick half the time, and it would just worry her."

Uncle John loaned his yoke of oxen and they skidded the lumber to the house on a jumper sled. Then they put cross-boards on the rafters and nailed the balance up and down two boards thick to cover the cracks. Rory viewed the job when he woke at noon.

"What sort of a roof do you call that? It will leak like a sieve, and where did you get the lumber?"

"We told Uncle John you would pay for it."

"Well, ye can gang the three of you and work for Uncle John until it's paid for. He'll no get a cent out of me."

So the boys worked for Uncle John, but not for long, for it cost as much to feed the ravenous three as their labour was worth. Finally Rory showed them how to split shingles out of blocks of cedar. He was never backward about explaining how things should be done. The wing was finished before the fall rains.

Finding enough to eat was a continual problem. Margaret and the girls had planted a late garden which flourished after some lucky summer rains and provided the family with potatoes and vegetables as well as wild fruit in season. Oatmeal was standard for breakfast and sometimes for the evening meal. There were two cows now, for Margaret had bought one, and they kept the family in milk and butter. The jittery hens which lived off the land laid eggs intermittently, and Rory bought the tea and sugar with his diminishing funds. Meat, of course, was scarce, and Neil undertook to supply the lack.

"I don't see why we go hungry when there is so much game running around. Why don't you leave me free every day? I'll fill your stomachs for you quick enough."

At fifteen Neil was already six feet tall and thin as a lath. His pale red hair was cut off in a bowl haircut at ear level. His sharp blue eyes looked out from a maze of freckles. "Just let me have the musket, buy me some powder and shot, and turn me loose."

This seemed reasonable enough to the family, so Rory bought the ammunition.

"Be careful, Neil," his mother warned. "I'm never easy when you're away with that cannon."

Neil grinned to himself; cannon was a good name for the ten-pound gun, but he handled it with a careless confidence as if it were a mere extension of himself, and the family menu improved at once. Neil was a born backwoodsman. He wasted little ammunition; an hour's stalking to get close to game meant nothing to him and he would sit quietly for half a day waiting for a deer to pass. His gun had a ten-gauge bore and it had seen the Peninsular War with Wellington's troops; the word Badajoo was scratched on the stock. Neil managed to reduce the loading time by half. He made brown paper cartridges containing the correct amount of powder and shot and twisted them at both ends. As the cartridge was rammed down the barrel, the powder end opened and the paper provided the wadding to hold the charge in place. Although the gun was not too accurate with a ball, and sprayed shot in such a wide circle that the hitting power was poor, Neil made the best of it, patience and woodsman's instinct winning out over the gun's deficiencies.

There was plenty of game: partridge, squirrel, duck, rabbit, and of course deer. In the spring flocks of wild pigeons flew over seeking their nesting places, and with them came the season of pigeon pie. Part of the township bordered a large swamp, and there was a wide range of game there for the taking. Few of the settlers bothered to hunt, since the chopping and the clearing took all their spare time. And hunting, somehow, was not quite respectable.

In the early dawn of a fresh summer morning Neil left on what was to be a short expedition, and Jim went with him. When he was hunting, the older brother travelled light, carrying only a hatchet and clasp knife, a battered tin saucepan, a package of mixed salt and pepper in one pocket and one of oatmeal in the other. Ammunition was safe from the damp in a leather satchel attached to his belt, and he held his gun loosely in one hand, ready for quick action. Jim, unused to such a steady pace over rugged ground, was hard pressed to follow Neil's ambling lope. He hopped over downed timber and ducked under thick branches, trying at the same time to make speed and move quietly.

"Watch your feet, Jamie," Neil said as the boy went headlong over a root. "Pretend you're a deer, not a cow. Walk behind me and take it easy."

"I can't take it easy and keep up to you, Neil," Jamie managed to gasp.

Neil slowed his pace. Time, after all, was not a big thing in his life. They followed a small stream for some distance until it widened into a beaver pond, and then they circled the muddy edge until the dam came in view. Warned by the slap of a sentinel's tail on the water, a few workers dove off the dam. There was no chance for a shot. Neil led the way past the outlet.

"I'm not fussy about beaver this time of year, the pelt's no good and they're mighty strong eating."

After a few minutes more Neil turned to his brother and said softly, "Go quiet now, Jamie, there's a deer-lick close. I put some salt on it last week. We'll just creep up, careful like."

They moved, stooping and crawling, until a clay bank showed white at a turn of the stream in the shadow of the trees. Neil choose a place within gunshot of the bank, arranged the gun and himself comfortably, and settled down to wait. The creek murmured gently, insects buzzed, barely audible in the warm summer air, and Jim was soon asleep. He woke to the roar of the old gun and saw Neil scrambling headlong for the clay bank. A deer had been knocked off its feet and was pawing desperately, trying to rise. Just as Neil was almost within reach, it succeeded and fled, at first slowly, then with gathering speed. Jim raced up to Neil, who stood looking at the blood on the ground.

"We'll follow it. The blood's pretty red. It's bad hurt."

They followed. Sometimes the tracks were plain and the spots close together, other times they had to stop to line up the deer's

probable route; but whether by instinct or guesswork, Neil always found the trail again. By this time the sun was low in the west, for Jim had slept and Neil had watched for hours before the shot. Neil was reluctant to give the deer up.

"It will die anyway," he said. "I don't want it to be wasted."

Up until now Jim had been able to keep up because of the frequent delays in tracking the wounded deer, but as the evening shadows closed in he was almost spent, his feet feeling like lead as he lifted them over the forest's debris. Then a brighter splotch of red was followed by another and then another, and they found the deer lying, gasping and helpless; it paid no attention to them, concerned only by the effort to stay alive. Neil did what had to be done. Jim turned his head away. "I don't mind the squirrels and the rabbits, but deer are more like people."

"We have to eat," Neil said, although a slight tremble in his voice betrayed his true feelings. "And more than that, we have to eat right now. It will be dark in an hour and there's no use travelling in the dark. We'd get lost for sure. Help me hang it up, we'll have to skin it before dark."

While Neil skinned and dressed the deer and hung the quarters well off the ground, Jim searched for bits of broken twigs and branches and built the fire. They roasted slices of venison on the end of sticks of green wood. Jamie had thought he would be too tired to eat but, although the meat was tough and strong-tasting, Neil's salt-and-pepper seasoning made it just fine. The travellers were almost too hungry to care. They drank their tea in a companionable silence, broken only by the various forest sounds.

As the dark of the night fell around them, Neil gathered balsam boughs and Jim dry grass, enough to make a bed to protect them from the worst of the ground's hardness. From the balsam boughs they made a low lean-to shelter to keep off the dew and to reflect the fire's heat. Under the deer skin and snuggled close to Neil, Jim was warm enough. He knew nothing more until daybreak.

"Come on, Jamie, rise and shine." Neil already had a fire going and slabs of venison sputtered on a spit. Jim crawled from under the deer skin. He was stiff and sore but no longer tired. The meat was smoky and only half-cooked, but it tasted wonderful. Neil stirred some oatmeal with hot water in the saucepan and added a pinch of the salt-and-pepper mixture.

"It tastes funny, Neil, not much like Main's porridge, but it goes down awful good."

The sun was still not up as they finished, and the mist lingered in all the low places. Jim couldn't remember getting up so early before. Certainly he had never wakened outside at this hour. The chill air was heavy with cedar and balsam. Everything was damp, but a refreshing dampness that sank into the lungs with every breath. He looked at his brother, who was breaking camp and burying the fire with damp forest earth.

"It's great to sleep outside, Neil."

"Lucky it didn't rain, Jamie boy. That changes the picture. I like it, though; even when it rains you feel so free. Look, it's getting lighter over there; that must be east. I didn't tell you but I lost my directions yesterday, we came such a twisting way, so we'll wait for old Mr. Sun before setting out now, just to be sure."

As the sun rose they headed west. Neil had marked the place carefully in his mind.

"There's that dead elm on the ridge with the broken stub on top. Should be able to see that far enough. We'll just keep west, we're bound to hit a trail."

Neil had been lost before. It meant nothing special, just a temporary inconvenience. He blazed their trail with a hatchet, trying to keep three trees lined up at a time, not an easy matter in the thick undergrowth. They came out at last on a surveyor's trail. Neil marked the place of exit carefully.

"Two boulders close to the trail and a birch sapling between. Mustn't forget."

The trail went south, held reasonably straight by the survey markings. Soon it became a double track and then a road. A man driving a two-wheel gig picked them up. Jim sat on Neil's knee and went to sleep again. At the cabin door their mother met them.

"Well, praise the Lord and here ye are. I worried all the night through."

Jim ran to bury his face in his mother's apron.

"Och, my wee laddie, are ye tired and hungry then? Praise be that ye are safe."

"What about me, Mam? Leave off petting that little muskrat and give me a hug."

Neil dumped the deer skin on the step.

"Ah, you, you long monstrosity, you turn up always like a bad penny."

She grabbed Neil by both ears and kissed him.

"Now I suppose the two of you will eat everything in sight."

After a second breakfast, this time of his mother's oatmeal, Neil joined Angus and borrowed Uncle John's horse and buggy, for Rory was again away on business. They packed the meat out of the bush and were home by evening. When there was venison the family lived well.

And you can read the rest of this book at: <http://www.electriccanadian.com/pioneering/mcgregors/index.htm>

That's it for this week and year and hope you all have a Happy and Prosperous New Year. I also hope I'll hear from many of you in 2015.

Alastair