CLAN McKAY in the WEST

by W. Bleasdell Cameron

The McKay family served the Hudson's Bay Company from 1790 to 1920.

IN the annals of the Canadian West, certain family names appear again and again as rendering notable services to the pioneers. Outstanding among these are the Christies, the Sinclairs and the McKays. Both of the last-named families figure in the activities of that oldest fur trading organization, the Hudson's Bay Company, as far back as the eighteenth century and on into the two centuries succeeding. The McKay family served the Great Company with distinction for one hundred and thirty years.

The first of the McKays on record to be so employed was named John—"formerly of the City of Montreal," as he described himself in his contract with the Company. He had originally traded for the North West Company and came from Sturgeon Lake to Osnaburgh House to join the English organization in 1790. From there he was sent to Albany on Hudson Bay, and subsequently served in the Rainy River district, at Nipigon, Osnaburgh, Martin Fall and Brandon House, where he died in 1810.

An episode that occurred during his stay at Brandon House serves to show the perils of fur-trade life in those times. Let John McKay tell it in his own words:

"This day, as I was riding in the Plains, an Indian wanted to shoot me just as I came up to him. I jumped off the Horse before he could get the Coat off his Gun and presented a Pistol to his Breast. I was too nigh for his Gun to be of any Service to him. I gave him 2 or 3 hearty Clinks, which softened his Head a little, and rode off. When at a distance, I heard his Gun go off. The Canadian who saw us both says he fired at me, but I rather think his Wife took the Gun from him and fired it off, to prevent him from doing mischief, for she was so frightened that I really pitied the poor Woman. This man is a N.Wt. Indian; I never had the least dealings with him in my life. Yesterday he wanted a Gun in debt, which I refused to give, this perhaps has vexed him." "Clinks" suggest metal, so it is probable the Indian gentleman's head was literally and not figuratively softened.

Two of John's sons, William and John Richards, also served in the fur trade with distinction. William joined the Company about the time of his father's death and traded at various posts in what are now the provinces of Ontario and Quebec. John Richards, the younger brother, was sent from Albany to England in 1800, apparently to be educated, and returned eight years later. He joined his father the following year at Brandon House and in 1814 was sent to Qu'Appelle. After the Company's men left that fort in the spring of 1815, it was burned by the Nor'westers. The ensuing events can best be told in the words of his senior officer, James Sutherland, whose report is found in the Selkirk Papers at the Public Archives in Ottawa:



William McKay, the second, 1818-1883, father of ten children including William the third and Angus.

In the fall of 1815 I sent John Richards McKay to Qu'Appell with 15 men and an assortment of goods, they arrived there sometime in the beginning of October, previous to their arrival all the houses they had occupied the preceding year were burnt to the ground and otherwise destroyed. This act was supposed to have been done by the servants of the N.W.Co, but no proof could be got to confirm this supposition farther than that the N.W.Co.'s interpreter named Dl. Murray who had passed the summer there with a few men informed Mr. McKay that he had himself cut down the stockades as they intercepted the view from the N.W. House.

Mr. McKay and men immediately commenced building houses & erected stockades on the old foundation. They got up a temporary store and part of their stockades when Alexander McDonell partner of the N.W.Co. arrived with a great parade of 40 or 50 Canadians, Freemen and Half-Breeds forming two distinct companies. McDonell led one of these consisting of Canadians with colours flying. The other company were half-Breeds headed by Cuthbert Grant, a Half-Breed who has been regularly educated at Canada and has acted for several years as Clerk & still continues to act as such, to the N.W.Co. This tribe had another flag hoisted, of what nation I know not. It is red with a figure of 8 placed horizontally in the middle of it and is said to be a present from the N.W.Co. along with some swords and a few pairs of pistols to these deluded young men the Half Breeds as a recompense for their exertions against the Colony, Spring 1815, and as an incentive to encourage them to further mischief this ensuing season.

McDonell sent a message to McKay telling him to desist from building as he was determined no house should be erected on that spot, it being in front of his

fort. As this threat had not the desired effect (McKay's people went still on with their work) Alexander Fraser a half Breed and Clerk to the N.W.Co. who had also received an excellent education in Canada, came to McKay and ordered him in a peremptory manner to depart from that place immediately with all his men and property, adding that the country round Red River belonged to the Half Breeds & they were determined none of the Hudson's Bay Company's servants should remain on it as they only came there to procure provisions for the support of the Colony. He also said that no Colony should exist in this country as long as there was a heart in his breast.

McKay gave evasive answers and said he could not then remove as he had neither carts nor horses to remove the property. Fraser replied that carts and horses would be furnished by the N.W.Co. if they would remove off quietly. McKay then said he would not comply with such an order untill he had consulted his men. Fraser on hearing this got in a violent passion and told McKay that he would give them that night to prepare themselves for the journey and that if they were not off early next morning he and his countrymen would kill every one of them and sweep the earth with their dead bodies & leave their carcasses for the wolves to eat.

McKay returned to his men and told them the story. They were all unanimous to remain and sell their lives as dear as possible. At the same time an Indian chief who was at the house with 8 or 9 of his young men, offered their services to assist our people and live or die with them. This was accepted of and ammunition and guns were given to the men and Indians and every preparation made for defence.

On the ensuing night no person went to sleep. In the dawning of the morning a great bustle was observed in the N.W. fort and before the sun appeared a messenger was sent to McKay to know whether he intended to remove or not. All our men said they were determined to remain whatever might be the result. As soon as this was known at the N.W. House, the Half Breeds flag was hoisted, a great number of men assembled in arms before the gates of the N.W. House, one of the Colony Field pieces was put in the block house, the other in the gates and both pointed at our people and lighted matches were seen ready to fire them off. By this time the sun had risen and objects became distinct, and the N.W.Co.'s people to their great disappointment observed that several Indians were intermixed among our people.

This made them pause for a little and they sent word to the Indians to depart, otherwise they would be killed along with the English. This the Indians paid no attention to but still stood firm. When the N.W.Co. saw that menaces had no effect they tried what seduction would do and sent one of their own Indians to ours with fine stories saying that McDonell wanted to see them and intended to give them presents of Rum, etc., etc. But all would not do, they would not be deceived.

When A. McDonell saw this he thought it dangerous to commence hostilities as it would be the means of bringing on an Indian war. He therefore sent for McKay to meet him between the houses, which he did. He then wished to make McKay promise that no part of the provisions procured at that place would be given to the Colonizers. This McKay could not agree to. They however arranged matters so that our people were to be permitted to go on with their buildings until I arrived, then all differences were to be settled. . . . This was the state of affairs as I found it on the 8th of December.

The West saw some stormy and even tragic times before the amalgamation of the rival companies in 1821.

McKay probably was with the Hudson's Bay men when they were captured by the Nor'westers on their way down the Assiniboine the following spring. Next spring, however, he was at Fort Hibernia in the Swan River district, and later he built the post at Beaver Creek, fifteen miles from the old post at Fort Qu'Appelle. At the time of the union in 1821 he was in charge at Brandon House. Chief Factor John McDonald described him at that time as "very active and much beloved by the Indians of this Quarter."

In 1824 he retired to Red River, but seven years later he re-entered the service. Subsequently he served at Portage la Prairie, Fort Ellice (near Beaver Creek), Partridgecrop, Shoal River, Touchwood Hills and Cree Camps. In 1859 he retired altogether from the service.

About the time of the troubles at Fort Qu'Appelle, McKay was married to Harriet, daughter of Chief Factor John Ballenden, without benefit of clergy. This was the custom in a country where missionaries were unknown. A commissioned officer of the Company generally officiated at such weddings, just as the captain of a ship may do today. In 1820 Rev. John West was sent out to be the Company's chaplain and the marriage was properly solemnized by him the following year.

In the Red River census of 1829, McKay was listed as the father of four sons under sixteen and two daughters under fifteen. In after years his wife presented him with three more sons and two more daughters—eleven in all.

John Richards McKay's second son was named William—possibly after his uncle. William, the second, was born in 1818 and joined the Company at the age of nineteen. He saw most of his service in the Swan River district, including twelve years at Fort Ellice. In 1865 he was made a chief trader, and five years later was appointed to the charge of the district at Fort Pelly. In 1873 he was promoted to factor and took charge of the Saskatchewan district at Fort Pitt. He died at Fort Edmonton in 1883.

Like his father, William the second had many children—Mary, Thomas, Katherine, William, George, Henry, Angus, Gilbert, James and Joseph.

Mary became the wife of Walter E. Traill, also a Company man and a scion of the Traills of Ontario pioneering fame.

Angus McKay, in charge of Fort Pitt in 1884, holds up a beaver skin. On his right is Chief Big Bear, dressed for the photographer. On his left, E. Dufresne (with beard), H B C cook; Stanley Simpson (with book), H B C clerk; and Cst. Loasby (sitting), N.W.M.P.





William McKay, the third, hero of many a daring exploit among the wild tribes of the Plains. W.B.C.

Thomas was a well known businessman of Prince Albert and at one time a member of the North West Territories Legislature.

Katherine married Chief Factor Laurence Clarke, one of the best known Company officers of the nineteenth century.

George took clerical orders and became an archdeacon in the Anglican Church. In 1885 he carried a rifle which he used to good purpose in the Loon Lake fight when Major (afterward Sir Sam) Steele harassed Chief Big Bear's fleeing miscreants following the battle of Frenchman's Butte.

Angus spent the whole of his forty-three years of active service with the Company in the Saskatchewan district, being at one time or another in charge of every one of its numerous posts. He left his last assignment at Lac la Ronge in 1920 for his homestead near Prince Albert, where he has since resided.

James graduated in law in Manitoba, practised for many years at Prince Albert, was elected to the federal parliament and at his death a few years ago was a justice of the Court of Appeal for Saskatchewan. Both he and Angus served with distinction as scouts in the Northwest Rebellion of 1885.

All the sons were educated at St. John's College in Winnipeg, although the future archdeacon also spent two years at Cambridge University on the advice, and at the expense, of Bishop Machray, who was impressed by his brilliance as a student.

William Jr. (that is, the third of the name in the line) was by vocation and choice a trader among the Cree, Assiniboine, Saulteaux and Chippewa Indians and the central figure in many a thrilling adventure and exploit among these wild and erstwhile savage tribes. He was my hero and we were intimate friends from the time I reached Battleford in '81 until his death. He took an active part as scout, combatant and interpreter in the stormy events of '85. There is space here only for a brief account of one of the last and boldest of all the many perilous experiences of William McKay. Here it is:

For weeks in the early spring of 1885 rumours that the Crees and Assiniboines were massing at Poundmaker's, thirty miles to the west, had been thick in the air of the old territorial capital. When preparations were completed, reports further alleged, their purpose was to march on Battleford. So insistent were these rumours that the settlers on the homesteads in the vicinity, becoming alarmed, had flocked with their families to the stockaded Mounted Police fort, on the high point between the Battle and Saskatchewan rivers, for safety.

McKay, manager at the time of the Hudson's Bay Company's trading post in the old town of Battleford, was convinced that the rumours were based on actuality. To guard against surprise, he had dispatched a loyal and dependable Indian on a good horse to a point midway between Battleford and the reserve, with instructions to watch the trail leading into town and, if or when the hostiles appeared, to ride in at top speed and report.

The courier had obeyed orders. And now there were no longer rumours but facts. Not only had the Indians marched, they were already gathered about the lieutenant-governor's residence and the Indian office on the high south bank of the Battle overlooking the town, and William decided that the time had come for him to act.

The McKays had bought their furs, come to the rescue when they were in need, been their friends and advisers for generations. They were respected by the red men and had their confidence. Accompanied by the Indian agent and other citizens, William left the police barracks to meet the chiefs and if possible convince them of their folly in taking up arms against the whites; hoping, too, to persuade them to disband and go back peacefully to their reserves. The white men in McKay's party all lived beside the long trail leading from the river up the hill on the south side to the level land above. Here also the stores of the trading organizations were located.

The bridge spanning the Battle had been dismantled to guard against its being swept away with the ice in the spring breakup and the timbers were piled on the north bank. Water was flowing over the ice when the party reached it, but an enterprising Indian was using his skiff as a ferry for those wishing to cross. As they approached the river a French half-breed woman, Mrs. Louis Flammand, came down to the water's edge.

"Go back!" she shouted. "Don't come across." McKay wanted to know why. "Because the Indians are going to kill you people," was her answer.

"Oh?" questioned McKay. "Well, you might let us know who they are going to kill."

"You, for one. And the Indian agent. And the school principal with you there."

"That settles it," said the Indian agent. "We'll go right back."

"You gentlemen may do as you wish," returned William, "but as for me I left to meet the Indians and I'm going on. Bring the boat over," he called to the ferryman.

Accompanied by Peter Ballendine, like himself a native of the Northwest, McKay reached the ground about the Indian office and there he faced a large and formidable assemblage of painted and befeathered savages with rifles in their hands. The chiefs, Poundmaker, Sweet Grass, Little Pine, Lucky Man and others, with their leading followers—including Fine Day, war chief—sat a little apart. They regarded him with faintly disguised hostility. But he went round, shaking hands with the unamiable chiefs.

"You don't seem particularly pleased to see me," he remarked, following this formality, "but nevertheless I have put out my hand in token of friendship to your leaders. But if any of the rest of you wish to take my hand," he added significantly, "he must come to me."

Poundmaker: "What's the matter here? The houses seem all deserted."

McKay: "Yes; the whites are all in the barracks. And if you are surprised, you are not alone. To find you here in a body, armed and painted, that is what surprises me. I understood from your agent that you would stay on your reserves, take no part in any outbreak. Yet here you come to town, marching like soldiers going to war."

Poundmaker: "We came to learn about the Duck Lake fight."

McKay: "Well, that to me is a strange explanation. Ballendine, here, went with the agent to the reserves and told you all about it, the fight between the half-breeds and the police. However, since you ask for news, I'll give you some. I knew you were coming down and it was I who warned the whites. That's the reason you see the houses deserted."

Fine Day, war chief, who led the Indians in the Cut Knife battle, 1885. W.B.C.





Chief Poundmaker, one of the leaders in the 1885 rebellion.

Poundmaker (flushing angrily, with a wave of his hand): "Blood will be spilled all over here!"

McKay: "What? That's strange talk again. When I heard you were coming I hurried back over the river to speak to you for your own good, to advise you not to listen to these *keeskwayowuk*—these crazy half-breeds who have taken up arms. Having themselves got into trouble, they now wish to drag you in with them. When I reached the river I was told not to come across; a woman yelled to me that you were going to kill me. And not only me but others—the Indian agent, and the clergyman who takes care of your children at the school. But I came, and I asked no one to come with me. Now I am here."

The Indians heard him in sullen silence. He went on: "Anybody could do it, even a woman. I am alone and unarmed. Men are not needed to kill me."

They began to crowd him. A tall headman, his eyes blazing, leaned forward, launching against him a sizzling tirade of abuse, shaking his clawlike fist in the trader's face.

"Stand back!" ordered McKay, sternly. "If you wish to speak to me, keep your distance. Don't try to cow me; I'm not to be frightened. If I was I wouldn't be here."

Fine Day, pumping a cartridge into his Winchester, jumped to his feet. An ominous hush fell. The Indian turned and spoke to the young men behind him.

"Ho, *skinecekeetuk*!" he goaded. "You crowed when we were on our way to town to show you were with me, that you backed me up. Why don't you crow now? Is it because you're afraid of what may happen if you do? Why, why don't you crow?"

McKay continued in a level voice: "Though there are hundreds of you here, I repeat: Don't think I'm to be frightened by your guns or threats. But, do you think this looks well when I, a single man, have come to give you good counsel? As for this fellow who thinks himself such a great brave, what I should like better than anything is to meet him when this trouble is over, alone, and there are just the two of us; when he has no young men behind him to whip on to bloodshed! That would be the time for him to jump round, to talk big. Not now.

"Can any Indian say I ever did him a wrong—ever gave him anything but fair treatment? What reason, then, have I to be fearful of anybody?"

Poundmaker: "Oh, this is all wrong, *Mukwyanasis* —that you were to be killed. All lies!"

Fine Day was silent. McKay knew Fine Day. And Fine Day had good cause to remember McKay; but that is another story. The conciliatory speech of his chief and the disappointing collapse of vocal support from the young men in the presence of actualities left him faltering before the crowning enormity of pressing the trigger, and he dropped morosely into the background.

Once more McKay reverted to the reason for his visit. He told again of the Duck Lake fight; he talked to the simple tribesmen as he would have spoken to unruly children.

"You might succeed in killing a few whites," he told them, "but your success would be short-lived. Don't be so foolish as to think you can beat the whites. For every white man killed hundreds will come, demanding payment in blood, and you who are still alive will be hiding in the woods, afraid to show yourselves in the broad light of day. Forget this madness, go back to your reserves and later when the half-breeds are beaten you will be glad that you live because, in spite of threats against my life, I came to you today with good advice."

McKay did not know when he spoke that on their way to town they had pillaged and burned the homes of settlers who had fled for refuge to the barracks at Battleford. Nor did he know whether or not they were aware of the murders that morning by the Assiniboines of Bernard Tremont and James Payne in the Eagle Hills south of town. In any case, though they listened without interrupting him, they were in no mood at that moment to accept counsels of peace. They were on the warpath, had merely started and had no intention immediately of abandoning it.

Concluding the interview, McKay tempered their hostility for the time being by issuing to them provisions for a meal and returned to the barracks. That night the stores along the hill were broken into and sacked. The wave of insurrection had swept westward and engulfed Battleford, bringing death and destruction in its wake. Weeks were to pass before the last ripple had died away.

William McKay died only a few years ago—in 1931 —at his farm near Prince Albert, aged 79. Of his nine brothers and sisters, only two are alive today. The archdeacon, now ninety, lives in retirement at Sturgis, South Dakota; and Angus, four years younger, at Prince Albert. He is the last of that long line of McKays to serve the Hudson's Bay Company.

Poundmaker surrenders at Battleford, May 1885. From the painting by R. Lindemere.

