

# Orkney and the Hudson's Bay Company

By J. STORER CLOUSTON

The third and concluding article on the Orkney Islands and the important part played by Orkneymen in the early years of the Company. Mr. Clouston deals particularly with the success of his countrymen in rising to positions of trust and honour.

IT has been seen that the great bulk of the Orkneymen in the Hudson's Bay Company's service were engaged definitely and deliberately to do the donkey work, the heavy and often dangerous toil that required hard muscles, stout hearts, strong constitutions, and the moral qualities of sobriety, honesty and fidelity. They were not intended to form an officer class, and it would seem as if even the more ambitious of them regarded the service simply as a means of bettering themselves in their own country, and very often buying a farm when they came home. In more than one known instance, and no doubt in many others of which I have no record, the farms they purchased had once been their own ancestral heritage which their fathers or forefathers had been forced to sell when hard times were at their hardest. To this end they had toiled in the wilds through arduous years and refrained from spending a sixpence that could be saved.

There was, however, a certain number with the education and qualities required for administration, who played a not inconsiderable part in the Company's far-flung territories. To trace the careers of at least a selection of these officers—the "governors," "factors," "traders," and "masters" of the Company's, and also sometimes of local Orkney records—and give some picture of their trials and adventures, their explorations through trackless forests and up uncharted rivers, the bit of empire building they did so well in their own way, would have made a fitting finish to this paper. It proved, however, an impracticable ideal, since the story of their exploits is contained only in the Company's archives and, obliging as the Company has been, to ask them for such a mass of details was out of the question. In one or two cases, however, their Secretary was kind enough to give me, unasked, particulars of men whose names occurred in family notes, so that I can supply at least a sample instance of such a career. For the rest, I am under further obligations for a general list of names and dates through the period when complete records exist, and any details added must concern, in the main at least, the purely Orkney side of these officers' lives.

Regarding the service to which they belonged, it may be said briefly that up to the year 1810, when an extensive reorganization of the Company's administration in Hudson's Bay was undertaken, the system was based, or at least largely based, on their charter of 1670 granting them "liberty, full power and authority to appoint and establish Governors and other officers," to control the forts, factories etc. in the Bay. Though the strictly official designation of these officers was "Chief Factor," the officer in charge of such a fort or factory at this period was generally designed "Governor"

or "Chief," while the officer commanding an "inland" or subordinate trading post was usually styled "inland trader" or "master at So-and-So House." "Seconds" are also several times mentioned now: i.e., second-in-command at one of the forts on the Bay, who at the same time was sometimes in command of a subordinate post as well, and who automatically assumed control of the major post during the Governor's temporary absence.

By the reorganization scheme of 1810, the Company's territories were divided into Departments, Factories, and Districts. Instead of all the forts in the interior being subordinate to one or other of the ports on the Bay, the general regulation of affairs was now given to two Superintendents, one responsible for the five northern factories and the other for the three southern. Each of these eight factories, or forts, was under a "Chief Factor" (the title regularly used from that time onwards) with subordinate traders under his command.

In 1814-19 "district masters" first appear on record, this being the rank next to Chief Factor; evidently corresponding approximately to the more important of the old "masters," though apparently with widened powers and higher pay, since a few of them received the same salary as a Chief Factor.

This reorganization period was comparatively brief, and immediately after the union between the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company in 1821 yet another reconstruction took place, and thenceforward down to 1871 two commissioned ranks are found, with the definite titles of Chief Factor and Chief Trader, promotion being from clerk to Chief Trader and from Chief Trader to Chief Factor. Finally, after 1871, three further ranks of commissioned officers were introduced, but as that was only twenty years before Orkney's severance from the Company, one need not go into this last phase.

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As complete lists of the Company's servants are lacking before 1774 and the places of origin are not included till about 1790, not even the most obliging secretary could give me information regarding Orkney officers before those years, since there is nothing to show who were Orkneymen and who were not. In one case, however, where, from private notes, I was able to supply the name of an early Governor known to come from Orkney, the flow of detailed information gave me a deepened respect not only for the vast stores of facts contained in the Company's archives, but for their arrangement.

This solitary recognizable Orkney Governor of the first half of the eighteenth century was Joseph Isbister, son of Adam Isbister, merchant in Stromness, and his wife Helen MacKinlay. She was the daughter of William MacKinlay, owner of the estate of Washbister in Hoy, with its curiously contrasted pertinents—"the privilege of the Craigs of the Kaim and the seat in the Kirk of Hoy"; these Isbisters themselves being a branch of an old Harray family, styled in earlier days "of that ilk."

From the Company's archives, his intrepid career can be traced from his first appearance in the Company's service aboard their frigate *Hannah* in the year 1726, through his further sea service which in 1735 culminated in his becoming master of the Company's sloop *Eastmain*, on to his appointment in 1740 as "Chief" of Albany Fort. Here he spent an active four years, pushing his way for 120 miles up the Albany River to build and establish Henley House—the first post occupied by the Company away from the shores of the Bay—an enterprise primarily directed against the encroachments of the French and their interference with the Company's trade.

A year's respite at home followed, and then reappointment as Governor of Fort Albany, and later of Churchill River, where in 1748 he is designated (in an Orkney record this time) by the resounding title of "Commander-in-Chief of Prince of Wales Fort." Twice over—in 1747 and 1752—a welcome was extended to him by the Governor and Committee of the Hudson's Bay Company on his return to London, accompanied by a special money grant for his services on both occasions. Finally his service career came to an end in 1756, when he was again Governor of Albany, under circumstances that showed him a man of more resolution than the prudence of the Governor and Committee quite enjoyed. He had, in fact, executed three Indians for their part in the massacre at Henley House, a measure of justice which so exasperated the tribes that he was recalled to England, a sacrifice to diplomatic considerations. There he retired from the Company's service, though with his colours still flying, for a third special money grant was made to him a couple of years later.

Even after this, the long arm of the Company's records still reaches him. In 1770 we find him writing to the Committee from Quebec, where he would seem to have died either in that year or 1771.

As Governor Isbister is by many years the first known Orkney officer in the Company's service, and in fact the only individual Orkneyman who can be identified during that earlier period, I have given this brief outline of his career. Doubtless there were others

holding responsible positions in the Company's service, but one would have to discover their names from other sources, and it is only when we reach the 1790's that the Company's books enable one to identify Orkneymen and note their rank. For the reasons already mentioned, as also through the exigencies of space, all that can be attempted here is a list of the names supplied to me, together with a word or two about those holding the higher rank of Governor, or its equivalent Chief Factor, when I happen to know any facts.

In the period from the 1790's to 1821, three Orkney Governors are on record in the Company's books. The first of these was William Tomison, from South Ronaldsay, who entered the service in 1760 and was chief of York Factory (inland) from 1786 to 1803. Not only was his period of service with the Company exceptionally long, but in Orkney his name is permanently enshrined in Tomison's Academy, endowed by him in his native island. This, says the "New" Statistical Account of the 1840's, represented his gains for the first twenty-five years of his service; and not content with his generous and public spirited action, he also left £200 in aid of the poor of his own parish, and moreover a sum for the creation and endowment of a girls' school. Altogether Governor William Tomison was a highly creditable product of the northern isles.

The other two Governors were John Ballenden of Stromness, who entered the service in 1770 and was Chief of York Factory from 1798 to 1802, and William Sinclair, from Harray, who joined in 1792 and was Chief of Winnipeg Factory in 1812; but about neither of these have I any further information.

A fourth Orkneyman certainly held the same rank, since in 1807 "Edward Clouston, Esquire, residing in Stromness, late Governor in the service of the Hudson's Bay Company," is so styled in the formal record of an Orkney legal action against him, and he was, moreover, always remembered as "Governor Clouston." The Company's books, however, only record his service career (in which he bore a "remarkably good character," did his bit of exploration, and founded a new House) to the stage of "master" of successive inland trading posts, and at the same time "second" at Osnaburgh; from which offices he retired in 1798 at the age of thirty-nine. It is evident that he must have received his appointment as Chief after his return home in 1798, and either there is a gap in the Company's records about then (not perhaps a likely alternative, though not impossible after a lapse of a century and a half), or he decided to retire permanently and never actually served in Canada as Governor. He was a

Kitchener Memorial, Marwick Head.

Longskail, Gairsay



nephew of Governor Isbister and a first cousin of the Rev. William Clouston.

In this period eight Orkney district masters are on record. Their names, with the year in which their service began, and the post they commanded, with the years of holding it added in brackets, are as follows: Adam Snodie from Orphir—a remarkable surname, quite strange to me—(1808; Churchill 1818-19); John Eunson, St. Ola, (1808; Albany 1813, Moose 1814); James Kirkness, Harray, (1797; Norway House 1818-19); George Gladman, Senior, St. Andrews—another unfamiliar surname—(1797; Eastmain 1818-19); James Slater, St. Ola, (1797; Albany Inland 1818-19); Peter Spence, Birsay, (1797; Kenogamissi 1818-19); James Tait, Ronaldsay, (1797; Albany Inland 1818-19 [sic]); and James Russell—more correctly Rusland—Shapinsay, (1797; Eastmain 1814-16).

After the amalgamation, when the two grades of commissioned officers were Chief Factor and Chief Trader, down to 1891, when the official connection with Orkney ceased, five Orkneymen held the higher rank. In 1821 Alexander Kennedy from South Ronaldsay (already mentioned as among the contingent who enlisted in 1798) was Chief Factor. Of him and his ancestry there is a very full account in Mr. Mooney's paper on "Kennedys in Orkney and Caithness" (*Proc. Ork. Antiquarian Soc. Vol. XI*). Alexander himself was actually the head of an ancient and once important family, the Kennedys of Karmucks, hereditary constables of Aberdeen and afterwards proprietors of Stroma, who had parted company in turn with both those estates and now owned Braehead in South Ronaldsay. He retired from the service in 1829, and died in 1832. His son, Captain William Kennedy, then living in Canada, was a sailor of some distinction, since he was brought from Canada to lead Lady Franklin's expedition to the Arctic in search of Sir John Franklin and his men.

Contemporary with him, another Orkneyman, James Sutherland, also from South Ronaldsay, held the rank of Chief Factor from 1821 to 1827. I can discover nothing further either about him or about a second John Ballenden of Stromness, Chief Trader 1844, Chief Factor 1848, retired 1856.\*

The next name, however, is well known both in and outside Orkney. It is that of Dr. John Rae, the Arctic explorer, born at the Hall of Clestrain, in Orphir, where his father was factor on the Honyman estates. He first studied medicine and qualified as a doctor, and then joined the Hudson's Bay Company's service, in which he rose to Chief Trader in 1847 and Chief Factor in 1850. Partly during his period of service and partly afterwards, he earned his renown as an explorer, the

discovery of Franklin's fate being his best known exploit. He died in 1893 and was buried in the churchyard of St. Magnus Cathedral, where his monument stands conspicuous in the choir crowned with his leonine figure lying asleep, his gun at his side.

The fifth and last Chief was James Stewart Clouston, Chief Trader 1853, Chief Factor 1864, died 1874. His father was Edward Clouston of Smoogro, representative of another closely akin branch of the same old Norse family to which the Rev. William and Governor Edward belonged. Like other of the retired Company officials, he settled permanently in Canada, where his eldest son became afterwards well known as Sir Edward Clouston, Bart., of Montreal.

The Chief Traders make a longer list. In order of date (with the year of appointment in brackets), they run: James Clouston, Stenness, (1821, retired 1827); Jacob Corrigan, Kirkwall or Birsay, (1821, retired 1840, died 1844); William Glen Rae, Orphir, (1841, died 1845); John Black, St. Andrews, (1848, retired 1855); Robert Clouston, Stromness, (1850, died 1858); James S. Watt, Stromness, (1854, retired 1871); James Hackland, Birsay, (1863, retired 1871); Hamiton Moffatt, Stromness, (1863, retired 1871); Magnus Linklater, Birsay, (1865, died 1868); William H. Watt, (1868, raised to new rank of "factor" 1873, retired 1876).

The last appointed of these officers have long passed away; the close connection of the Company with Orkney has been severed for well nigh half a century; circumstances, methods, economic conditions have altered vastly; but the memory of the long association still lives both in Orkney and Canada; and not only that, but certain of the consequences are likely to endure long beyond today.

Though the Orkney folk remain "sparing of their words . . . especially of what seems to have a connection with their (own) interests," this does not prevent them from sometimes discussing their neighbours' affairs, and, unless report be far astray, many a household in Stromness continues to live very comfortably, and many a peerie laird thrives prosperously, on their forebears' winnings from the Hudson's Bay Company, won either by adventure in the Nor'West or shrewd trade in the seaboard town.

And out in Canada the surnames in themselves bear evidence to a stronger tie with the islands than even cash profits can forge—the tie of blood.

\*In these and the other cases where nothing is known, I should add that no special research has been made. No doubt further facts could be discovered if this were done.

St. Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall

Stromness Harbour.

