

"Seven Oaks"

The tragic turning point of Northwestern history one hundred years ago
By Isaac Cowie



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A simple monument marks the site of the shambles into which the Governor of Rupert's Land led the Hudson's Bay Company's officers and men, who followed him to death and butchery with courage and fidelity. Small as they were in numbers and so lowly in rank that their names have not even found a place on the inscription, their blood was not shed in vain. For their slaughter aroused the British and Canadian Governments to intervene and enforce the policy which caused the union of the rival companies, and thereby made possible the permanent and peaceful establishment of the Red River Settlement. (Company of Adventurers.)

While, "with loyal heart and true," the veterans of Winnipeg annually parade and decorate the monument and graves of their comrades who fell in the Saskatchewan Rebellion, no such regard has been ever paid to the memory of the forgotten Pioneers of Rupert's Land, who followed Governor Semple and fell with him on the field of Seven Oaks. And yet about the same number of men were slain in the one action at Seven Oaks as of Canadian troops in the whole campaign of 1885; while as marking a turning point in the direction of the future history of the North West the action at Seven Oaks was certainly not of secondary importance.

Those familiar with the published histories of the North West may have their recollections revived, and others who as newer comers may not be much acquainted with the ancient history of the country will be interested in the two versions of the "Battle" of Seven Oaks which are given hereunder.

The Ballad of the Metis Minstrel, Pierre Falcon

Falcon sang to his own glory and that of his fellow Burnt woodsmen who participated in the fight as partisans of the North West Company; in the language of an illiterate French halfbreed. His testimony as a participant in the affair, given in the ballad he composed immediately after it took place, may be turned into the form of English narrative as follows:

On 19th June (1816) we, Bois Brules like brave warriors, arrived at Frog Plain where we took prisoner three Orkney men, who had come to pillage our country. Just as we were about to dismount (to encamp) two of our men shouted, "Look. The English come to attack us." We promptly turned about to encounter them. We enveloped them. They halted, dispirited. Like men of honour we sent a messenger to parley with them, saying "Governor, will you stop a little moment, we wish to speak to you?" But he was enraged and commanded his soldiers to fire. They fired the first shot. Our messenger sent to parley barely missed being killed. The governor, thinking himself Napoleon (L'Empereur), behaved much too rigorously for his own good. Having seen us passing, from the fort, he came out mistakenly thinking to intimidate us, with the result that his whole party, except four or five who saved themselves by flight, were slaughtered. As the Bois Brules with exultant shouts pursued the English they tumbled heels over head from side to side. This chanson was composed by Pierre Falcon, "Le ban-garcon" in celebration of the Victory and glory gained by these Bois Brules.

The Fur-Traders' Version

The point of view of these authorities is given in Cowie's book, "The Company

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of Adventurers," from which the quotations hereunder are made:

The Tragedy of Seven Oaks

"On June 19th, 1816, a party of North-West Company's men, numbering sixty-five, and composed of French Canadian English, Scotch and Metis engaged servants, besides a large number of Metis and Indians hired for the occasion, while conveying provisions from a point above the fort to one below it on the river, in making this portage, out on the prairie to avoid the cannon of Fort Douglas, were pursued by Governor Semple, with a following of twenty men. The historian of Red River, Hargrave, says, The party under Governor Semple were provided with guns, but they were in an unserviceable state, some being destitute of locks and all more or less useless. (It is also said by another authority that they went without ammunition to recharge their guns.) 'This fact,' continues Hargrave, was, of course, unknown to their opponents, who were apparently sincere in the belief that the governor was prepared to offer serious resistance to them before the carnage commenced, after which their entire want of order and discipline rendered them incapable of reason or consideration. The infatuation which led the governor's party to attempt, by a vain exhibition of useless weapons, to intimidate nearly three times their number of men, to whom the saddle and the gun were instruments of their daily occupation, is almost incomprehensible.

"The native levies of the Nor'-Westers had a superstitious horror of cannon. But as soon as they had drawn their pursuers out of range of the fort, choosing their own time and ground, they faced about. Opening out into skirmishing order, at which they were experts, they then confronted the compact body under Semple with an equally strong opposing force, and threatened his flanks simultaneously with treble his numbers.

"While thus outnumbered and unsupported and nearly surrounded by his already incensed adversaries, the unfortunate governor lost his temper with the North-West clerk, Mr. Boucher, who had advanced to parley, and seized the bridle of the latter's horse. On this the first shot was fired on the governor's side, by a woeful accident it is said, and was followed by an exchange of volleys. One account says that on delivering their fire the natives threw themselves backwards on the ground to reload, which was mistaken by the governor's men as the deadly result of their fire, and they raised a cheer of triumph, bringing their opponents quickly to their feet with recharged weapons, which poured in a volley and converted the cheer into the shrieks of the dying and the groans of the wounded.

"Up to this point the affair had been a fight, forced upon a well-armed, skillful and superior body by a very inferior force, which can scarcely be said to have been armed, blindly led into the jaws of death by their incompetent governor. But from this point on it became a brutal butchery of the wounded and the fiendish mutilation of the dead also, which revealed in all its horrors the danger of employing savages in disputes between the whites.

"The lives thus uselessly sacrificed by Semple's unmitigated mismanagement were his own, those of his officers, Dr. White, Secretary Wilkinson, Captain Rodgers and Lieutenant Holte, and the only comparatively wealthy colonist, Mr. Alexander McLean, besides those of three other colonists and fifteen Hudson's Bay servants, whose names are not to be found in any of the histories mentioning the massacre. Only one of the North-West levies, Batoche, was killed, and one, Trotter, was wounded. Could not the names of those who perished with him be discovered and graven with that of Governor Semple on the monument which has been erected at Seven Oaks?"

(Editorial note—Professor Martin of Manitoba University has discovered an official list of all these names.)

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