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**The Pre-Selkirk Settlers
of Old Assiniboia**

by

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*The Pre-Selkirk Settlers of Old Assiniboia*

By REV. GEORGE BRYCE, D.D., LL.D., F.R.S.C.

(Read May Meeting, 1918)

The story of the Selkirk Settlers of Red River (1812-70) has been told by the writer and others, but it is important to notice that half a century before Lord Selkirk's colony took root, the Traders of the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company of Montreal had put their foot on the far interior of Rupert's Land. Founded in 1670, for a century the English company carried on their trade on the shore of Hudson Bay, but as the Montreal Company led by Joseph Frobisher penetrated the waters of the interior for trade in furs, and built the Fort of Sturgeon Lake, the Hudson's Bay Company men led by the distinguished Samuel Hearne, faced Sturgeon Lake Fort by a rival post—Fort Cumberland. These hostile establishments were at Poskoiac, or as we call it to-day "The Pas," on the great Saskatchewan River. Hearne's men were chiefly Orkneymen, engaged on the Orkney Islands, the last place of call made by the London ship as it came up the east coast of Scotland and crossed the North Sea to York Factory. The Nor'Wester voyageurs and workmen were chiefly French Canadians from Canada and their leaders of Scottish origin from Montreal. The employees of the two companies largely intermarried with the Indian women of the Cree nation. They rarely returned to their homes from the far West, and their children grew up a sturdy, agile, and daring race—the autochthons of the Interior, and like the Randolphs of Virginia, who claim descent from Pocahontas—the Indian Princess—boastful of the land of their birth. These children of the wilderness were in some cases sent for their education to Montreal or even at times to Edinburgh and Aberdeen. In most cases, however, whole families when their trading days were done, as Governor Archibald used to say, floated down the streams to the "Paradise of Red River" to make their homes alongside the Selkirk settlers—to enjoy schools and churches—the well known "Fiddler Library" and the society of the Selkirk colonists.

This paper will give an account by the writer of men and manners, as he saw them, on his making his abode under the shadow of Fort Garry in the year 1871.

The descendants of those of Orkney blood and those of French Canadian ancestry—while differing in temperament, speech, and

often in religion—lived and worked harmoniously together, occupying strips of land running back from the Red or Assiniboine River—about two miles long. The junction of these two rivers, near which stood Fort Garry, was the centre of "Old Assiniboia." The groups of settlers usually of the same tongues were clustered into parishes. North from Fort Garry chiefly on both sides of the river were the English speaking parishes of St. Johns, Kildonan, St. Paul, St. Andrews and St. Clements. Southward from the centre of Assiniboia on Red River were the French parishes of St. Boniface, St. Vital, St. Norbert, Ste. Agathe and St. Jean Baptiste. On a small tributary of Red River was Pointe des Chênes. On the Assiniboine River were the English parishes of St. James, and Headingly, and further west the French parishes of St. Charles, St. Francois Xavier, Baie St. Paul, and still further west the English settlements of Poplar Point and Portage la Prairie, although the last two were not spoken of as being in Assiniboia. Near the junction of the two rivers stood Fort Garry, the nucleus of the city of Winnipeg. Fort Garry was the centre of life and business of the Colony. Here lived the Great Mogul of Assiniboia—The Resident Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company.

II.

THE BOIS-BRULÉS OR METIS.

The Traders of the Great Montreal Company, to obtain a continued service of voyageurs and trappers, encouraged their men to marry the Cree women and continue on in the fur trade. Their children became an active, impulsive and powerful clan. The daring native youths grew up to use firearms as well as the paddle and canoe in the lakes and rivers. Living as they did invariably in cabins on the banks of the streams they also became mighty trappers and hunters. From the southern American prairies they bought "bronchos"—horses. The young Metis became most skilful riders, and were remarkable for success in following the buffalo herds on the western prairies. They became ardent supporters of the Montreal traders as the Selkirk settlers were of the Hudson's Bay Company.

On the banks of the Swan River, a tributary of Lake Manitoba, and near by Qu'Appelle, was a paradise of the traders. Here young Cuthbert Grant, the son of a sturdy Highlander of the same name, and of a Metis woman—thus having Scottish, French and Cree blood,—became the beau-ideal of the Swan River Parthian band. Around the Nor'Wester council-fire it was planned to attack and sweep out of existence the newly come Selkirk settlers—whom they called "jardiniers" or clod-hoppers. To make the plot more easy to be carried

out, a part of the Selkirk settlers had been coaxed away by an adroit, dashing Highlander—Duncan Cameron—who sported a soldier's uniform—and used a plausible tongue as he promised to lead them to an El Dorado in Upper Canada. Following this departure Cuthbert Grant, the younger, with his band of cavaliers, on June 19th, 1815, swept down the northern bank of the Assiniboine River, turned northward to the plain near Kildonan—Lord Selkirk's Settlement—killed Governor Semple, and followers to the number of twenty-two men, at "The Seven Oaks." The wild intruders seized Fort Douglas, the colony fort, which stood on a site which is within the limits of the city of Winnipeg of to-day. To the whole "Bois-brulés" population it was a great triumph and they held Fort Douglas till the following spring of 1816, when Lord Selkirk and his DeMeuron mercenaries recovered the lost fort to be a nucleus to gather around him again his Scottish colonists.

The time-being conqueror, Cuthbert Grant, had his victory celebrated by the singer of the district of St. Francois Xavier on the banks of the Assiniboine, where Grant and the rhymer—Pierre Falcon—afterward took up their abode. The poet is singing of the victor Grant and satirizing the Governor his military opponent.

Extract:

(A military officer comes to parley with the Red River Metis).

"C'est à la Rivière Rouge,
Nouvelles sont arrivées,
Un général d'armée
Qui vient pour engager."

(He wishes to have the Metis who are great warriors serve him)

"Il dit qu'il veut emm'ner
Beaucoup de Bois-Brulés.
Ils sont en renommée
Pour de braves guerriers."

(He offers Cuthbert Grant, leader of the Bois-Brules, his silver epaulettes as a gift)

"Vous, Monsieur Cuthbert Grant,
Maître de régiment,
Mes épauettes d'argent
Je vous en fais présent."

(The disappointed captain wishes much to flee off to the Far West)

"Bourgeois de compagnie,
Je dois remercier
De me faire ramener
Au fort de Mackenzie."

(The poet Falcon calls upon all to drink! drink! at the defeat of Governor Semple and victory of Grant).

"Amis, buvons, trinquons,
Saluons la chanson
De Pierriche Falcon,
Ce faiseur de chansons."

III.

A CHAMPION OF NATIVE RIGHTS.

As the natives born on the soil became more numerous and more educated by the School and Church they sought to enjoy greater freedom and the possession of natural rights. When communities were formed the Company saw a spirit of independence growing up. The Hudson's Bay Company had for more than a century and a half enjoyed a monopoly. Instead of meeting popular demand half way they introduced Judge Thom, a Scottish lawyer from Montreal, and constituted with a monopolist spirit an appointed Council of Assiniboia. The agent to guard their monopoly was made Recorder or Judge with almost absolute power. Twenty leading natives of fair means approached the Governor to gain information as to whether they with a trace of Indian blood could "hunt, buy, sell or traffic in furs, etc." The Governor was pacific but the Recorder was inexorable. James Sinclair of the same stock as the Earl of Orkney of the same name, who is well known by Scott's beautiful ballad of "Rosabelle," became leader. The whole native population of Orkney and French descent was aroused. The crisis came in the case of a native trader Sayer being thrown into prison for selling furs. At his trial being held on Ascension Day, French and English comrades seized him and liberated him from the court room—the Metis shouting, "Vive la liberté! Le Commerce est libre! Le Commerce est libre!" The Recorder never sat as judge again, and the writer knew him in London some forty years afterward—a retired beneficiary of the Hudson's Bay Company.

IV.

ISBISTER—A BRILLIANT SON OF RED RIVER.

One of the most distinguished sons of old Red River Settlement was Alexander Kennedy Isbister who was born in 1822, son of an Orkney father in Fort Cumberland and at The Pas on the Saskatchewan River. He was educated at the McCallum School, now absorbed into St. John's College, Winnipeg. Having served as a clerk with the Hudson's Bay Company, Isbister went to England. He became a lawyer, took part in the passing of "The Reform Bill" and devoted

himself as representative and adviser of his countrymen who were struggling as we have seen for liberty in Red River Settlement. Isbister's advice to his friends and relatives in the struggle of Sinclair and Sayer against "The Company" was invaluable. Having a bent to serve as an educationalist he retired from the Law Courts, and became Head of the College of Preceptors in London. It was in this capacity that the writer knew him. Having accumulated a considerable fortune, Isbister left all, with an obligation to support his mother and sister, to Manitoba University. By successful management the bequest has reached in value to \$100,000 of invested capital of which all the revenue now goes in scholarships to Manitoba University. Dr. Isbister was a warm friend of liberty. He was devoted to his native land and will always be kept in memory on account of his magnificent bequests.

V.

CAPTAIN WILLIAM KENNEDY.

Forty years ago on the banks of Red River at the Rapids lived a cousin of Alexander Kennedy Isbister of whom we have just spoken. Of good Orkney descent he also was born on the Saskatchewan River and after various adventures became one of Lady Franklin's captains to go in search of Sir John Franklin who was lost in the Arctic Sea. While in command of his vessel he very nearly reached the spot where traces of Sir John Franklin were afterwards found by Captain McClintock in 1859. Lady Franklin herself fitted out the Prince Albert schooner and placed Captain Kennedy in command. On their long journey Kennedy's second in command was Lieutenant Bellot of the French Navy. Bellot made a long sledge journey in the great search, and discovered the Strait which now bears his name between North Somerset and Boothia in the Arctics. After returning from his Arctic Expedition Captain Kennedy, having done benevolent work in Central Ontario, settled down at the Rapids of the Red River where the massive bridge now stands some eighteen miles below the City of Winnipeg. The writer knew him well and remembers a most interesting lecture before the Manitoba Historical Society in which he declared that the Magnetic Pole discovered by Captain John Ross in 1831, where the magnetic needle stands vertical, as being at the centre of terrestrial magnetism for the Northern Hemisphere of the earth, lying directly north of Winnipeg might be tapped to Winnipeg to supply the whole continent of North America with electricity. It was a matter of interest to the writer, to take part in the obsequies of the old Captain at the burial place of St. Andrew's on the banks of the Red River.

VI:

LOUIS RIEL—THE ELDER.

Perhaps no name connected with "The Selkirk Settlement" is better known than that of Louis Riel. The name, however, applies to two men—father and son—senior and junior. They were both men of distinct mark. Louis Riel senior figured largely in the strike for freedom led by Sinclair, Isbister and others. Riel the Elder was proverbially known as "The Miller of the Seine." The Seine is a small tributary of Red River that flows in opposite to what is known as Point Douglas—(Douglas so called from Lord Selkirk's family name). The Seine empties within the limits of St. Boniface—the eastern suburb of the City of Winnipeg. Riel the Elder was always said to have been of Sioux, Irish and French descent. He was noted for his fiery temper, his dashing bravery, and his fearless opposition to "The Company." His water-mill ran during the spring and early summer, when the water was at high mark. His triangular descent left no doubt as to his fierceness of temper or manner. In the great Sayer affair which disturbed all Assiniboia to the very heart, it was the senior Riel who gathered his French compatriots in St. Boniface Cathedral on Ascension Day, 1847, made a fiery oration at the doors of the Church, dashed across the river at Point Douglas, and took five hundred men across on Sinclair's ferry boats who fired volleys from their guns, rushed to the Court House, and liberated Sayer—shouting "Le Commerce est libre! Vive la liberté!" Violent although the eruption was, it settled for all time the fact that to the Autochthons of Red River Settlement, there was freedom of trade as far as hunting and using and exporting natural products of the soil and river, both as regarding use or trade.

VII.

LOUIS RIEL—THE YOUNGER.

The fiery leader of the Metis revolt in 1869-70 was Louis Riel, Junior, who though sprung on the mother's side from a respectable Metis family, carried a more violent disposition even than his father, and having a good education—a part in St. Boniface College and a further training in Montreal—added to his inherited disposition a megalomania unknown to the "miller of the Seine." It is not the purpose of the writer to discuss the rights and wrongs, the blunders and mistakes, the rashness and the stupidity, the cruelty and the cowardice on the part of both parties, who opposed each other in the Red River Rebellion of 1869-70. It was a melange of grossly dispic-

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able greed and unreasonable alarm on the part of the Metis; of confused uncertainty upon the part of the English-speaking descendants of the Selkirk settlers, and of the natives of the English parishes, with a third element of the imbecility and helplessness of the Hudson's Bay Company officials. As to the leader of the revolt, Louis Riel, junior, he gave in his youth as a student promise of quickness and intelligence, but by his self-conceit, importance, and his assumption of a Kaiserlike air and attitude as he dwelt in Fort Garry, in whose cells he kept in misery a band of prominent and innocent Canadians charged with no crime. It is far from being just to say that Louis Riel had no good parts. He had some prominent features of leadership in speech and in demeanour he was impressive; his courage and executive ability were undeniable. His authorization of some acts of cruelty and injustice probably arose from fear. An exile for fifteen years, his inspiration of the natives and Indians to rebellion in Saskatchewan in 1885, led to an ignoble end, and his attempt to introduce a new religious faith seems to have indicated a disordered mind. The attempt to make Louis Riel a martyr has failed to impress itself on any class of Canadian people.

VIII.

HON. JAMES MCKAY.

The prevailing distinction among the native people of Rupert's Land was to be able to run a foot race, chase a wolf, ride a restless broncho horse, or pursue the dangerous rush of a herd of buffalo. As in the old Biblical day a man was famous when he could with rapidity and skill cut down the mighty oak trees, so here men of great nerve and muscle gained a general reputation for deeds of skill or unwearied bravery. Such a man was Honourable James McKay having a trace of threefold blood in his veins. Broad and heavy set, he was nevertheless a champion runner or sprinter as the local usage would speak of him. His two brothers were respectively a Government official and a missionary to the Indians. When Assiniboia became absorbed in the new Province of Manitoba, after the transfer of 1870 it was thought necessary to have an Upper House or Legislative Council. McKay became a member of it and on account of the French blood in his veins he became a representative of the Metis section of the people. He was a man of means, of high reputation, as well as an example of political skill. When the Legislative Council was abolished in Manitoba in 1876 James McKay became a member of the Provincial Cabinet, while a majority of his colleagues were given other positions. His residence of "Deer Lodge" west of the young



city of Winnipeg was a place of resort and James McKay was always looked upon as a peacemaker among the many disturbing elements of Old Assiniboia.

IX.

HON. JOHN NORQUAY.

Among the men of note of the native people of Old Assiniboia was Honourable John Norquay, a man of greatest ability in affairs, of skill as a speaker and a successful leader of men. He was an honour to Manitoba. Of Orkney and native descent he was a nephew of the Arctic explorer, Captain Kennedy. Born at Cumberland House on the Saskatchewan River, he was educated at St. John's College, Winnipeg. Early in 1870 he became a representative in the first local Parliament of the Province, and became premier of Manitoba in 1878. He was an excellent speaker, a patient and cautious leader and being of mixed blood was a most successful peacemaker among the Manitoba gathering of people of polyglot tongues. His efforts led on to the strong community feeling in his province, which has grown markedly from year to year since his day. The Orkneys of Scotland may well be proud of their eloquent son who died at forty-eight years of age in 1889.

X.

SHERIFF COLIN INKSTER.

While almost all of these notables described have passed away, there still remains the popular Sheriff of Manitoba, of Orkney and native blood, who is still actively performing the duties of his office. Born in Kildonan of The Old Red River Settlement he was on the formation of the province in 1870 appointed a member of the Legislative Council. On the Upper House of Manitoba being abolished by the Mackenzie Government at Ottawa the Hon. Colin Inkster was appointed High Sheriff and for forty-four years he has done his duty without shortcomings or criticism.

XI.

REVIEW.

It has been the good fortune of the writer to be a contemporary and to have acquaintance with almost all of the personalities that have been described since 1871. The scattered elements of early Manitoba have wonderfully coalesced. The heads of almost all of these native families who saw the transfer of their prairie homes to Canada have gone, but their descendants are to-day true and loyal Canadians.

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For the fathers have grown up the children, and it is but just to take notice of others not so noted but yet worthy of honourable mention as having been nation builders in establishing a consolidated Manitoba. It is right to give their names "Lest we Forget," noble deeds quietly done by unostentatious "nation builders." Among the French are the worthy family names: Marion, Dauphinais, Delorme, Hamelin, Lepine.

Among the English-speaking people notable as industrious and sturdy children of the land are Vincent, Murray, Logan, McBeath, Gunn, Bannatyne, Pruden, McDermott, Bird, Flett, Hardisty, McFarlane, Cunningham, Lillie, Burke, Ross, Heron, Cooper, Harper, Garrioch, Tait, Spence, Truthwaite, Pruden and McKay families.