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## The Last Divide: The Fur Trade and the Exploration of the Far Northwest 1821-1852

Theodore J. Karamanski  
*Loyola University Chicago*

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THE LAST DIVIDE: THE FUR TRADE AND THE EXPLORATION  
OF THE FAR NORTHWEST 1821-1852

by

Theodore J. Karamanski

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
of Loyola University of Chicago in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

January

1980

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## VITA

The author, Theodore J. Karamanski, is the son of Theodore Karamanski and Gloria (Walberg) Karamanski. He was born August 1, 1953, in Chicago, Illinois. He attended grade school at St. Nicholas of Tolintine Parish School, Chicago, Illinois. In 1967 he entered St. Lawrence High School of Oaklawn, Illinois, from which he graduated in 1971.

In September of 1971 he entered Southwest College, Chicago, Illinois. A year later he enrolled in Loyola University of Chicago, and in 1975 received the degree of Bachelor of Arts, Honors, with a major in history. In 1974 he began the field research in northern Canada which resulted in this dissertation.

In June of 1975 he entered graduate school at Loyola University of Chicago. He began service as a teaching assistant in the history department in September of 1975, a position he held until the 1978-1979 academic year, when he was awarded a University Fellowship. While pursuing his graduate studies he participated in a number of archaeological projects, including excavations at Fort de Chartres and Fort Kaskaskia, Randolph County, Illinois and The Chicago Portage, Cook County, Illinois. He currently is employed by American Resources Group, Inc. as a historian and archaeological technician.

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## PREFACE

Professor W. L. Morton has developed the thesis that Canada is essentially a northern country. In Turnerian fashion Morton maintains that the existence of a vast undeveloped northern frontier was and is the determining factor in Canadian history: "Canada is a northern country with a northern economy, a northern way of life and a northern destiny." Viewed in these terms Canadian history is the process of developing the institutions and economic systems necessary to exploit the northern frontier.<sup>1</sup>

The present study is the story of one of the first attempts of an institution, successfully established across the breadth of southern Canada (and much of the subarctic as well), to expand its operations into a remote section of the undeveloped North. Although the Hudson's Bay Company was an English based firm, its source of strength was the Canadian frontier. The experience of the Company in the far northwest is therefore part of Canada's ongoing northern expansion. The details of the fur trade explorers, the physical and environmental obstacles they overcame, the famine and hardships they endured, are not merely colorful incidents but are critical factors in the historical and contemporary development of the North.

Between 1821 and 1870 the Hudson's Bay Company ruled much of Canada as an independent power. The British Government was content

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<sup>1</sup>W. L. Morton, "The North in Canadian History," North 7, 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1960):26-29.



with this situation, and for practical purposes served as a mere broker for the Hudson's Bay Company in the area of international diplomacy. John S. Galbraith, in The Hudson's Bay Company as an Imperial Factor, 1821-1869, presents a detailed study of the Company's continent-spanning operations and the commercial and diplomatic problems which arose on its borders with foreign countries.<sup>2</sup> Territorial expansion played a large role in the Company's relations with foreign rivals. According to Galbraith, the Company engaged in this expansion in order to crush potential competitors, existing competitors, and to insulate its existing area of operations from possible encroachment.<sup>3</sup> This "negative motivation" for exploration was indeed the Company's policy toward what is now the northwestern United States. Alexander Ross, Peter Skene Ogden, and John Work were dispatched with bands of trappers to sweep clean of furs the eastern borders of the Company's Columbia District. If there were no furs in that region, the Company felt confident that it would not have to worry about competition from the American fur traders, such as those of the Rocky Mountain or American Fur companies.<sup>4</sup>

"Negative motivation" may also be applied with at least some degree of accuracy to the first phase of the Hudson's Bay Company's explorations in the far northwest. During this period, from 1824 to 1839, the Company was exploring toward the Pacific Slope in order to cut off furs which were falling into American and Russian hands along

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<sup>2</sup> John S. Galbraith, The Hudson's Bay Company as an Imperial Factor, 1821-1869 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

the northwest coast. But the desire to outflank or preempt competition was not the sole motivating force behind the explorations under discussion. These explorations have their roots in the history of the fur trade.

Since the early commercial explorations of Samuel de Champlain, Pierre-Esprit Radisson, and Medard Chouart des Groseillers, the expansion of the fur trade and the exploration of the continent proceeded as one. Regions of the greatest undeveloped fur potential were always beyond the divide which marked the frontiers of geographic knowledge. This was not because the fur traders had a finely developed geographic sense (although some of them, David Thompson, for example, did). Rather, the fur trade was forced into the role of exploration because the nature of its operations thrust it into the frontier.

The fur trade as practiced from the discovery of the continent until the early twentieth century was an extractive industry. Fur traders were not concerned with developing the total resources of a region. They had a specific object in view--furs--and did all they could to get as much as they could. When the furs of a frontier area had been significantly reduced in quantity and quality, the traders again moved westward. This a process not unique to the fur trade but common to all extractive industries. The mining frontier, particularly that of placer gold, followed a similar pattern, as does the oil industry today.

The fur trade's expansion was complicated by its dependence upon the Indian. The Indian was in most cases the trader's source of furs. However, the Indian was not a mere trapper but himself a

merchant of sorts. Utilizing prehistoric and proto-historic intertribal commercial contacts, Indians acted as middlemen between the fur traders and other tribes, yet not in contact with the whiteman. This became more and more true as the hunting grounds of the Indian middlemen became exhausted from overtrapping, and trade became their main source of furs. The fur traders then found themselves out of touch with the actual fur producers and were forced to pay a middleman's tariff on the furs.

Expansion was the only way to reestablish contact with the fur producers and expansion, therefore, was an integral part of the fur business. The fur trade played a leading role in the exploration of the continent by necessity. This same formula was also behind the Hudson's Bay Company's exploration of the far northwest.

There was a third factor which impelled the fur trade to undertake the early exploration of the far northwest: the expanding geographic perception of North America. By the mid-nineteenth century the largest tract of unknown territory on the continent lay in the far northwest. Concepts such as the Northwest Passage and the Great River of the West, which molded so much of the exploration of North America, also influenced the exploration in question. Captain James Cook, Peter Pond, and Sir Alexander Mackenzie had raised the question of a great river valley west of the northern Rocky Mountains. The Hudson's Bay Company fell heir to America's last great geographic puzzle.

Therefore, the explorations detailed below spring from three separate but entangled roots: 1) The negatively motivated exploration designed to outstrip international competitors, 2) The necessary

expansion of the fur trade as an extractive industry, and 3) The expanding geographic picture of North America. These were all, at various times, the Company's rationale for exploration.

During the three decades of the explorations toward the Yukon River the directors of the Hudson's Bay Company placed greater emphasis on one than another of these motivating factors, as commercial and political circumstances dictated. However, the men on the frontier, the chief traders, clerks, and voyageurs who actually had to undertake the explorations viewed the proceedings purely from a tactical perspective. The explorers in this study lacked what Bernard DeVoto called "continental vision."<sup>5</sup> Their concern was the matter at hand; navigating the Liard River, establishing a new trading post, or dealing with the Indians of a new area. Of the men who pioneered the fur trade's advance into the far northwest in the nineteenth century, history has given only Robert Campbell some notoriety.

The failure of men such as John McLeod and John Bell to fit the heroic mold of Jed Smith, Sir Alexander Mackenzie, and David Thompson is less a reflection on their abilities than it is an indication of the way in which the officials of the Hudson's Bay Company orchestrated their explorations.

In spite of the international, commercial, and geographic motivations for exploration, the Hudson's Bay Company never formulated a clear plan for expansion into the far northwest. The Company's commitment to the exploration of the region was always tempered by strict

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<sup>5</sup>Bernard DeVoto, The Course of Empire (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), p. 429.

budgetary restrictions. The Hudson's Bay Company was after all a business firm and the first requirement was always profit. The Company wanted expansion but was seldom willing to pay for it. This ambivalent attitude plus the petty personal differences which retarded the Company's explorations are also important themes of this study.

### The Setting

When discussing geographic exploration, the physical context of those events is of paramount importance. Throughout this study the term "far northwest" will be used. The area embraced by the far northwest is the vast mountainous regions of northern British Columbia, the western Northwest Territories, the Yukon Territory, and eastern Alaska.

Two major river valleys dominate this region: the Mackenzie and Yukon Rivers. Besides the Mackenzie River proper, the basin of this great river includes five major rivers, the Peace, Athabasca, Slave, Liard, and Peel Rivers. Of these the Peace, Liard, and Peel are of particular importance in the exploration of the region. Each of these three rivers pierces the continent-spanning system of the Rocky Mountains; thus they are potential routes through these mountains. The Peace, Liard and Peel Rivers also provide access to other water routes. The Peace River, through its southern branch, the Parsnip River, leads to Summit Lake and the portage to the Fraser River. The Peace's northern branch, the Finlay River, is a difficult but direct route to Thutade Lake, the ultimate source of the Mackenzie River, and the overland road to the Stikine River. The Liard River provides the most direct access to the heart of the far northwest, and through its tributaries, the Frances and Dease Rivers, provides access to the Stikine and Pelly

Rivers, respectively. The Peel River, the northernmost of the three, provides, via the Rat River portage, access to the Porcupine River and the Yukon River Valley.

The Yukon is the fourth longest river in North America. Like the Mackenzie, it boasts many major tributaries. The exploration of the region was centered around the areas where two of these tributaries, the Pelly and Porcupine Rivers, reach toward the westernmost fingers of the Mackenzie Basin.

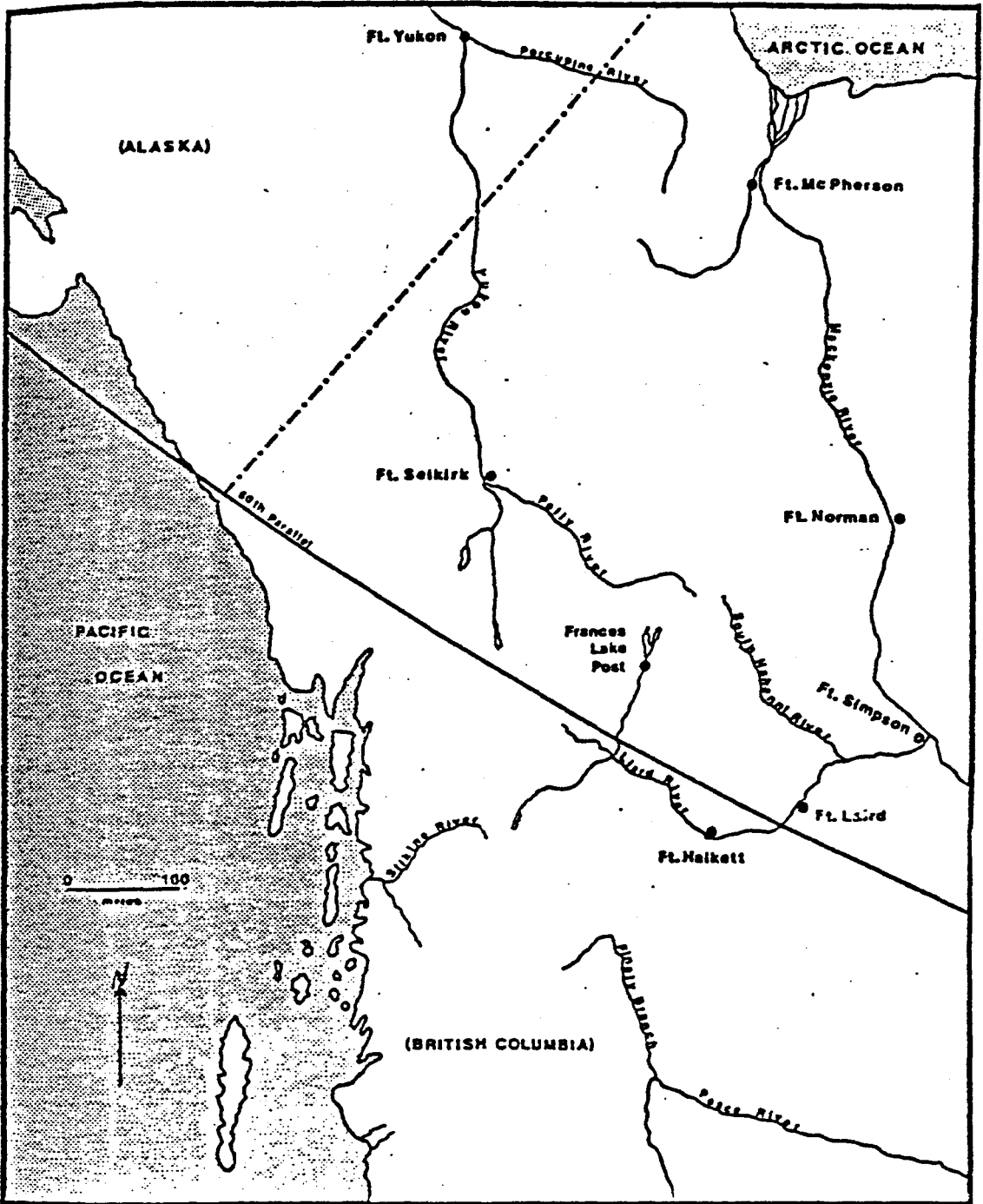
The union of Mackenzie and Yukon waters is prevented by a series of mountain ranges which mold the history and geography of the region. The Mackenzie Mountains, stretching for six hundred miles on a north-west, south-east axis between the Mackenzie River delta and the Liard River, are the major obstacle separating the two great river valleys. The main range of the Rocky Mountains dissects the region from the southeast, reaching as far north as the Liard River. North of that river the Rockies are represented by a series of ranges among which are the Selwyn, Ogilvie, and Richardson Mountains. These ranges, in addition to the Mackenzie Mountains, compose the last divide, the final section of the Rocky Mountain system to be breeched by the fur trade.

West of the Rocky Mountains and its subordinate ranges is the rugged cordillera region. The cordillera is the birthplace of both the Mackenzie and Yukon Rivers, as well as a smaller but historically significant river, the Stikine. From its sources in a series of large lakes in northern British Columbia, the Yukon makes a great northwesterly arc before discharging her waters into the Bering Sea. The Stikine, however, takes a more direct path to the ocean, tearing a road through

the Coast Mountains to the Pacific. The Coast Mountains, the St. Elias Mountains, and the Alaska Range separate the cordillera region from the northwest coast and from the western boundary of the far northwest.

The terrain of this region is among the most difficult in the world. The rivers are for the most part glacial streams. Their currents are swift, the rapids and falls frequent and violent. Save for the barren peaktops and the area along the Arctic coast, north of the tree line, the region is thickly timbered by forests of spruce, tamarock, and other hardwoods. Cowlands and draws are choked with brush and stretches of muskeg. Travel through the region is difficult. Even today few roads scar its face; few towns mark the map.

MAP 1. The Far Northwest



Paul Brown



## CHAPTER I

### IRON AND CLAY: THE NORTHWEST IN 1821

Summer 1821, York Factory--here at the Hudson's Bay Company's great tidewater depot gathered two groups of wary men. One of these groups, although sullen-eyed, "stalked about the buildings of the old dilapidated fort with" a "haughty air and independent step."<sup>1</sup> They were the Nor'Westers, the now vanquished partners of the defunct North West Company. In over three decades of competition they had challenged and nearly conquered the Hudson's Bay Company.

In the end it was geography which brought them down. Their three thousand miles of canoe trails leading back to the Montreal headquarters proved too fragile a bond to hold their continent wide trade empire together. The English, with a deep water access at York Factory on Hudson's Bay, had a much more economical avenue to the interior. This fundamental advantage, plus vicious price wars, which the English, financially strong, could endure, combined by 1820 to put the North West Company in perilous straits. With destructions facing them only one or two years distant, the partners of the North West Company agreed that "union," or absorption by the Hudson's Bay Company, was the only course.

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<sup>1</sup>This description of one of the first meetings held by the "new" Hudson's Bay Company is based on the eyewitness account of John Todd. The late Professor Arthur S. Morton quoted a lengthy part of Todd's account in The History of the Canadian West to 1870-71 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), p. 626. Unfortunately, Professor Morton failed to employ footnotes in that otherwise excellent history.

By the end of February 1821, this was achieved and that summer the first Nor'Westers began arriving at York Factory. They were bitter men, independent owners of their own businesses, now bought out by a larger concern. They were haughty men, and although the accountant's ledgers may have said that they were beaten, up to the very end they had bullied, outmuscled, and outwitted the Hudson's Bay men; on the frontier they were still masters. But most of all they were wary men, unsure of what their place would be in this new concern. Would they be scorned as "junior partners," shunned from the promotion rolls, merely tolerated names on a ledger until they retired or died in some far distant corner of the continent? Were they to be partners in fact as well as in name; would they still be able to exercise their considerable skills of organization and leadership? And what of the Hudson's Bay Company "bourgeois," how was one to now work with a man who you had shot at more than once, and who in return had played havoc with your rabbit snares and fish nets, trying to starve you out of your trading post. With the disappointments of the past year, and the uncertainties of the coming years, the Nor'Westers had reason to be wary.

Finally the dinner bell rang for the gala affair that the Hudson's Bay Company had arranged in order that the two groups of officers could get acquainted. The fur traders filed into the mess hall, still remaining in two completely separate groups. John Todd,

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Dr. Lewis G. Thomas, who edited the second, and most recent, edition of Morton's history states: "This document /Todd's account/ was given to Morton by Mr. Wm. Smith, Deputy Archivist, Ottawa, who did not know its source. Morton believed it came from the Provincial Archives of British Columbia, where there is considerable material from Todd's pen" (Lewis G. Thomas, ed., A History of the Canadian West to 1870-71 by Arthur S. Morton /Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2nd edition, 1973/, p. 984).

a young Hudson's Bay clerk, described the scene:

. . . evidently uncertain how they would seat themselves at the table, I eyed them with close attention from a remote corner of the room, and to my mind the scene formed no bad representation of that incongruous animal seen by the King of Babylon in one of his dreams, one part iron, another of clay; though joined together (they) would not amalgamate, for the Nor'Westers in one compact body kept together and evidently had no inclination at first to mix with their old rivals in trade.<sup>2</sup>

But the tense situation was rescued by "that crafty fox," George Simpson, a thirty-four year old Scotsman with only one year of practical experience in the fur trade. That year, however, was spent commanding the Hudson's Bay Company's operations in the Athabasca Country. This was the very cockpit of the competition and it involved a bitter rivalry with the very best of the Nor'Westers. In this year of opposition he earned the respect of many of the Nor'Westers, as he was a man cut from the same cloth. Under the terms of the "Union," Simpson was given command of the Northern Department, which included much of the Canadian West (not to mention a good chunk of what was to become part of the United States). Now, at the very beginning of this new era in the Company's history, Simpson was faced with the problem which could nip the first shoots of progress in the bud. How did one take open enemies and mold them into a unified concern; how do you join iron with clay?

George Simpson was up to the occasion and he warmly stepped up to the Nor'Westers "with his usual tact and dexterity on such occasions, succeeded . . . somewhat in dispelling that reserve in which both parties had hitherto continued to envelope themselves." With

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 626.

Simpson's "strategems in bows and smiles" and a good natured, open attitude toward all, the natural confidence of self-made men emerged and the good natured camaraderie of the forest replaced the animosities of the past. "Their previously stiffened features began to relax a little; they gradually but slowly mingled together, and a few of the better disposed, throwing themselves unreservedly in the midst of the opposite party, mutually shook each other by the hand."<sup>3</sup>

Of course, there were a few cautions before all was good cheer. Someone had foolishly (or maliciously) seated the Nor'Westers Allan MacDonell opposite his old foe from the Swan River District, Chief Factor Alexander Kennedy of the Hudson's Bay Company. Only a few months before they had been dueling with swords and now stood literally growling at each other. Fortunately, their good natured, and no doubt slightly amused, comrades separated the two without a renewal of violence, and with the length of the table between them, their anger subsided.

Then out came the wine, puddings, and tarts which marked most fur trade feasts, with the main course of moose, goose, partridges, and whatever else the fort hunters had been able to run down. As the wine and the meal mellowed their memories, conversations turned to trapping and Indians, to far off mountains and seldom visited country, the Athabasca, New Caledonia, Peace River, the "Barren Lands," shop talk of nineteenth-century fur barons. With the words from both sides of the table tumbling forth in a thick Highland brogue, and the mutual interests, ambitions, and experiences exchanged, the scrimmages and defeats

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

of the previous years looked less like Culloden and more like a family squabble. In the good cheer of that evening, in the exciting and prosperous days ahead, the unyielding iron and the supple clay fused as one.<sup>4</sup>

The union of March 26, 1821 was a successful joining of the Hudson's Bay Company's capital and superior geographic location with the methods and spirit of the North West Company. Thus, the two greatest commercial concerns on the continent, each boasting an impressive tradition of "adventurous" capitalism, were joined as one.

The Hudson's Bay Company had been founded in May of 1670 by King Charles II of England. According to its ancient charter, the Company was to have full commercial, legal, and administrative control over the entire Hudson's Bay drainage. Even the determined attacks of New France's merchants and military men were unable to dislodge the great Company. The Nor'Westers, however, were the most serious foes that the Hudson's Bay Company ever faced.

The North West Company was formed in 1779 by an aggressive group of Montreal merchants who wished to secure a monopoly of their

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<sup>4</sup>As their bitterness subsided many a Nor'Wester would see that they had been more than just "well received" into the Hudson's Bay Company. Former Nor'Westers commanded the richest and most extensive of the fur trade districts, New Caledonia, Columbia, Athabasca, and Mackenzie River. Furthermore, of the twenty-five Chief Factors, the generals of the fur trade, eighteen were former Nor'Westers. This galled some of the Hudson's Bay Company's former inland managers, men more accustomed to bullying and brawling (which of late had been valuable qualities) than sensible commercial management. One of these men, John Clarke, of Astoria fame, bitterly wrote: "To the joint efforts of Mr. Robertson & myself are the H B Coy in a great measure indebted for the splendor & importance of their rank in the great commercial world" ("The Character Book of George Simpson, 1832," in Hudson's Bay Miscellany, 1670-1870, ed. Glyndwr Williams /Hudson's Bay Record Society, Winnipeg, 1975/, p. 172). But neither Clarke nor Colin

own in the western fur trade.<sup>5</sup> Oblivious to difficulty and disdainful of distance, they spread their trade to the base of the Rockies and eventually across the mountains to the Pacific. When economics forced amalgamation of the two companies, they held absolute sway over an area larger than western Europe.

Initially, news of the unification agreement was not well received by many in both companies. George Simpson himself was initially disappointed; flushed with his success in the Athabasca, he saw no reason to give quarter now that the enemy was on the run.<sup>6</sup> But union was in fact a very necessary action. The competition had not only wrecked the North West Company, but it had had the severest effect upon the land.

The final stages of the long rivalry brought a proliferation of trading posts in nearly every area of the Northwest. Each of these posts relied upon the food resources of the countryside to feed their staffs; this meant fish and game. If provisions for its staff had to be shipped into the interior, the post would be too costly to maintain. To keep overhead low the fur traders had to live off the land. Hence, many areas became dangerously overhunted. This excerpt from the Lac la Pluie District is typical:

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Robertson were able to adapt to the changing needs of the trade; pensions, not pelts, were in their future.

<sup>5</sup>W. Stewart Wallace, ed., Documents Relating to the North West Company (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1934), pp. 6-7.

<sup>6</sup>George Simpson, Simpson's Athabaska Journal and Report, 1821-1822, ed. E. E. Rich (London: Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1938), 141.

The large game animals are the Rein Deer and Moose, but in such small numbers that natives cannot kill enough to supply themselves with leather for their moccasins and snow shoes.<sup>7</sup>

So dire was the situation in this district that many bands were forced to reduce their trapping activities so as to devote more time to the quest for game.

Fur returns were also on the ebb. Intensive competition resulted in the diminishment of the forest's fur bearing populations. The formerly rich preserves of the Churchill River, the Red River, and Rainy Lake (Lac la Pluie) were in critical condition.<sup>8</sup> The "cry of no beaver" was even echoed in the Athabasca District, for years the very heart of the industry.<sup>9</sup> It seemed that the "boom" period of the fur frontier was at an end.

As if this were not enough, George Simpson, Northern Department Governor, was faced with a dangerous overstaffing problem. The union had rendered useless many trading posts whose sole function had been to oppose a rival trader. With all the Northwest under one flag, the men who staffed these posts became surplus. Furthermore, in the final stages of competition each side had strained to keep its staff at full strength and in doing so had often accepted men less than competent; they too were now surplus.

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<sup>7</sup>Arthur J. Ray, "Some Conservation Schemes of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1821-50: An Examination of the Problems of Resource Management in the Fur Trade," Journal of Historical Geography 1, 1 (1975): 50.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>L. R. Masson, ed., Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-ouest (New York: Antiquarian Press, 1960), Vol. I, p. 114.

In short, Simpson would have to reassess the utility of every post and sift out the incompetent and untrustworthy to make way for the energetic and responsible.

These were difficult problems and to them Simpson turned his considerable administrative skills. With characteristic energy, the Governor launched a reorganization of the overtrapped districts, moving the locations of posts out of barren territory, while at the same time reducing the number of establishments in each district. The Indians were, therefore, encouraged to follow the Hudson's Bay men to these new posts, leaving the older areas free to recover their diminished fur and game populations. This was the beginning of the Hudson's Bay Company's attempts to put the fur trade on a sustained yield basis.

Less happily received were Governor Simpson's plans to reduce the excessive employment rolls. The Company's staff was cut by over fifty percent and wages of those remaining in service were slashed from the high levels of the competitive era.<sup>10</sup> "In short, the North-West is now beginning to be ruled with an iron rod."<sup>11</sup> On the bright side of the ledger, the Company did arrange transport for those unfortunates and their families to Red River, where homesteads were made available to them.

Also struck by Governor Simpson's economy measures were the Indians. Union meant the end of price wars. Union meant the end of

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<sup>10</sup>Between 1821 and 1825, the number of Hudson's Bay Company employees was cut from 1,983 to 827. George Simpson, Fur Trade and Empire, George Simpson's Journal, 1824-25, ed. Frederick Merk (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1931, revised 1968), p. xx.

<sup>11</sup>Masson, ed., Les Bourgeois, Vol. I, p. 150.



liquor regales. Union meant the beginning of monopoly control. Prices were gradually brought into line with the reduced supply of trade goods and the native trapper had little voice or choice in the matter. The Company tried to wean the Indians on more conservation minded trapping habits. Young, underaged beaver were no longer accepted, nor were summer beaver with their next-to-worthless hides. In fact, in some districts such as Nelson River there was a complete moratorium on beaver, and only fox, marten, and other lesser furs were accepted.<sup>12</sup>

The final, and for our concern the most important, of Governor Simpson's new policies was his decision to expand the Company's frontiers. As an inducement to consummate the marriage of the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company, the British Government presented, as a dowry, the power of full monopolistic control over the whole of British North America west of Rupert's Land. This legitimized the new company's operations in the Columbia, New Caladonia, Athabasca, and Mackenzie River regions. It was in the latter two of these districts, New Caladonia and Mackenzie River, that the possibilities of expanding the trade were prime. Hence, these districts became the scene of determined exploration. As Governor Simpson explained, "I have turned my attention very particularly to the affairs of McKenzie River generally, as there is a greater Field for the extension of trade there than in any other part of the Country."<sup>13</sup> Exploration was necessary to sustain the "tired" older districts as they recovered

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<sup>12</sup>Arthur J. Ray, Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Role as Hunters, Trappers and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson's Bay, 1660-1870 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), pp. 198-200.

<sup>13</sup>Simpson, Fur Trade and Empire, p. 204.

their fur, and exploration was necessary to show the British Government "that no exertion is wanting on our part to secure to the mother country by discovery as much of this vast continent and trade there of as possible."<sup>14</sup>

In summary, Governor Simpson's ambitious program for putting the Hudson's Bay Company's affairs on solid footing consisted of conservation, economy, and exploration. The focus of this study is, of course, exploration, but because this was merely one plank of a platform, the other two will also be kept in view.

#### Early Exploration in the Far Northwest

When considering the early exploration of the MacKenzie, one must mention two men who never knew the great river's valley, Peter Pond and Captain James Cook. Cook, on his 1778 voyage into Arctic waters, had sailed the length of America's northwest coast. Unfortunately for the dreamers and schemers of the day, the good Captain failed to discover the Strait of Annian, the western opening of the fabled Northwest Passage. Furthermore, as Cook continued up the coast he found that the continent of North America extended much further west than most geographers thought, and most cartographers portrayed. But if Cook placed another nail on the coffin of that recurring spectre, the Northwest Passage, and quashed the hopes of the many individuals expecting a sea route through the Americas, Cook did manage to kindle

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<sup>14</sup>Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba, George Simpson-Governor and Committee, August 10, 1824, D. 4/3 fos. 83. Hereafter material from this collection will be referred to as H.B.C.A. All quotations are exact reproductions of the manuscript cited. Original grammatical and spelling errors are reproduced verbatim.

the hopes of those daring souls who sought a fresh water passage to the Pacific.

While cruising the coast of Alaska Cook entered a large inlet, which today bears his name. At first it appeared to be a deep water strait; visions of Annian, de Fuca, and Fonte danced in the heads of many of the crew, but as they proceeded west a high range of mist shrouded mountains scaled the waterway. But the drift piles of wood, the silty fresh water, and an open channel to the north of the inlet, bid a fair indication that the expedition had discovered the mouth of a large river. William Bligh, of mutiny fame, ascended the supposed river a short way finding it deep and navigable. These salt water voyageurs, however, failed to grasp the importance of their discovery. A large river flowing from east to west and emptying into the Pacific might prove a new avenue of commerce, a western St. Lawrence. But to Cook, Bligh, and their mates, it was fresh water be damned. They noted the location of the river and cast off. Had they grasped the importance of their discovery and explored this river further they would have prevented much idle speculation and fruitless searching. Just upstream, a matter of yards from where Bligh turned back, "Cook's River" became shallow and unnavigable, for it was no great stream, merely the junction of mountain freshets. That, however, was not to be known for some time, and the apocryphal concept of "Cook's River" was allowed to mold historical events.

Cook's findings were not long in reaching the various dreamers, adventurers, and fur traders who were probing westward, opening up the area to commerce and trying to sift out the geographic realities of the

continent. The failure of a salt water Northwest Passage was no news to most of them, but the discovery of a great western river was something to mark.

It was of special interest to one Peter Pond, a Connecticut Yankee who in the same year as Cook's voyage had established the first fur trade post in the Athabasca region. Pond's travels had taken him even further north--to Great Slave Lake. Here Pond heard Indian reports of a large river flowing from the west end of Great Slave Lake. When Pond returned to Montreal in 1784 he produced a map of his explorations; this chart, although only mildly in error concerning Great Slave Lake's latitude, was grossly mistaken in portraying only a small unexplored territory between the lake and the Pacific. However, Pond correctly plotted the course of the river draining Great Slave Lake; it turned north and emptied into the Arctic.

A year later Pond was back in the northwest, continuing his geographic enquiries and pioneer commerce. As he did so, his perception began to change. Having undoubtedly read the journals of Cook's expedition, he began to work its discoveries into his picture of northwestern America. Furthermore, he seems to have traveled an indeterminate distance down the mysterious river that flowed from Great Slave Lake. He found that it did not initially send its waters north but that they continued west. Could this be the beginning of the river Cook had discovered on the Pacific? The mouth of Cook's river was roughly seventy miles north of the 60th parallel, Pond's source, almost exactly the same. Considering the misconceptions of the actual longitude, and trusting that the river held its westward course, then this

river had to be what was sought, the fresh water Northwest Passage.<sup>15</sup>

Peter Pond never had a chance to follow up his theories. He was exiled from the northwest forever in 1788 after John Ross, a rival trader was accidently killed in a scuffle with Pond's men. This was the second time that Pond's name had been linked with a competitor's death and the consensus feeling among the fur traders was that two such "accidents" were enough. But before he left Pond had laid the groundwork for the further expansion of the trade in this region. In addition to the Athabasca establishments, Pond had supervised the founding of Fort Resolution at the mouth of the Slave River on Great Slave Lake, and Fort Providence on the north shore of the same lake. But more importantly, Pond had laid out, in his letters, journals, and maps, a perceptive interpretation of Indian reports and maritime discoveries.

The young man who fell heir to Pond's work was a twenty-five year old Scot, Alexander Mackenzie. With the same rare mixture of inquisitiveness and energy of Peter Pond, Mackenzie set out in the spring of 1789 to track down the truth about this promising fresh water passage.

On Monday, the 29th of June, 26 days after leaving Fort Chipewyan, Mackenzie entered the river he had heard of for so long. Its course was indeed westward, and as each day passed, the dour Scot's spirits no doubt rose in expectation. By the first of July Mackenzie

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<sup>15</sup>For further information concerning the search for a fresh water Northwest Passage see, Glyndwr Williams, The British Search for the Northwest Passage in the Eighteenth Century (London: Longmans, Greenard Co., 1962), and Grace Lee Nute, "A Peter Pond Map," Minnesota History, Vol. 16 (1933), pp. 81-84.

passed "the river of the Mountain" (the Liard River) and to the south he could see the rising ground of distant mountains. But as long as those mountains remained to the south and the river continued west, the passage would be clear. The next day, however, "we perceived a very high mountain ahead, which appeared on our nearer approach, to be rather a cluster of mountains, stretching as far as our view could reach."<sup>16</sup> Still the river drove westward, though the Scotsman could not hide his apprehension.

The next day the river turned north. For a week the great stream held substantially to this course. As each day passed Mackenzie's gloom grew until on the 10th of July he admitted defeat. "From hence it was evident that these waters emptied themselves into the Hyperborean Sea."<sup>17</sup> The great fresh water passage was not to be. The dream of a great Northwest Trade Empire, based on the far Pacific, was quashed, at least temporarily. But Alexander Mackenzie's determination and indomitable curiosity remained unshaken, though this waterway, which today bears his name, had become a river of "Disappointment." Yet he had entered upon its exploration and he would not be stopped until he had reached its mouth.

As Mackenzie bore north his attention was constantly turned to the west, to those distant uplifted shadows, the mountains. The mountains which separated him from his goal. The mountains that had

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<sup>16</sup>Alexander Mackenzie, Voyages from Montreal . . . to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans in the Year 1789 and 1793, With an Account of the Rise and State of the Fur Trade (London: R. Noble, Old Bailey, 1801), p. 29.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 54.

deflected his river to the desolate north. The mountains whose imposing and foreboding presence were to a man of Mackenzie's bent an agonizing question mark. A question to be answered, a mystery to be solved. Be it the blue ocean waters of the Pacific, the valley of a river as yet unnamed, streams alive with beaver, or meadows lush and luxuriant with flowers and game, whatever the far side of those mountains looked down upon, men like Mackenzie must know. At every occasion he would question the Indian population. From their reports, he learned (on the return voyage) of a great river, many times the size of the Mackenzie, flowing west. At this river's mouth, they reported, white men had built a fort. To the disappointed Scotsman this meant one thing; the river to the west was Cook's River, and the white outpost a Russian settlement. Excited by this news, Mackenzie began to make overtures that he would set out at once in search of this river. Fortunately, neither the Indians nor the rest of the exploration party were ambitious or foolhardy enough to join him, and the thought was abandoned.

On the 15th of July, 1789, Mackenzie's party, camped on Whale Island in the great river's delta, erected a memorial "on which I engraved the latitude of the place, my own name, the number of persons which I had with me and the time we remained there."<sup>18</sup>

The great voyage had, like Cook's, put another nail in the coffin of the Northwest Passage. If the passage had indeed existed, Mackenzie would have passed it on his trek northward. But also like Cook, Mackenzie had raised the prospect of a river to the west. Instead of answering the major geographical question of the northwest,

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 64.

he merely postponed the problem. Pond's theories and Cook's river had excited the interest of the British Government, which went so far as to authorize an expedition to trace Cook's river from its source to the sea. But the discouraging reports of Mackenzie's voyage cut short that expedition and quickly deflated public concern in the issue. The search for this great westward river would have to wait until the fur frontier had digested the huge helping Mackenzie had just claimed for it. It was enough that the Mackenzie River had been discovered and its vast territory opened up to the North West Company.

#### The Early Fur Trade of the Mackenzie Valley

At first the partners of the North West Company were less than enthusiastic about Mackenzie's discoveries. It was this type of attitude that would eventually drive Alexander Mackenzie out of their ranks and into opposition. Not until 1796 was an attempt made to take advantage of the Mackenzie River as an avenue of fur trade expansion. In that year Duncan Livingston, a North West Company clerk, founded a post on the river, not far from its exit from Great Slave Lake. After three years of trade, Duncan Livingston attempted to descend the Mackenzie to its mouth. But instead of retracing Alexander Mackenzie's great voyage, Livingston met with disaster. About two hundred miles from his goal his party encountered Eskimos, whose deadly arrows left only one survivor. This unfortunate, James Sutherland, was reportedly taken to the river, weighted with a large stone, and thrown into the water, where he drowned.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Willard-Ferdinand Wentzel, "Notice of the Attempts to Reach the Sea by Mackenzie's River, Since the Expedition of Sir Alexander Mackenzie," The Edinburgh Philosophical Journal, Vol. 8 (1823), pp. 78-79.



No doubt shaken, but undaunted, the Nor'Westers returned to the Mackenzie the following year. Clerk John Thompson, after abandoning Livingston's post, founded Rocky Mountain Fort, across from the mouth of the North Nahanni River, and Great Bear Lake Fort on the shores of that fresh water sea.

In the next four years there followed a proliferation of trading posts in the Mackenzie region. A group of wintering partners rebelled from the main body of the North West Company and formed the XY Company (later Sir Alexander Mackenzie and Company). This new concern quickly followed the Nor'Westers into the Mackenzie. During their rivalry, an opposition establishment was erected at Great Bear Lake. Fort Alexander, near the Willow Lake River, Fort George, near the Mackenzie's source, Fort Castor, below the Keele River, Fort Norman, south of the Great Bear River's mouth, Fort Good Hope, near the Hare Indian River, "Forks" Fort, at the junction of the Liard and Mackenzie rivers, as well as other less significant establishments, all date from this period.<sup>20</sup>

A reconciliation of the two warring concerns occurred in 1805, and the new North West Company consolidated its hold on the Mackenzie Valley by abandoning all of the upper posts with the exception of Fort Norman, Fort Good Hope, and "Forks" Fort. In this same year the fur trade made its first advances up the Liard, westward toward the mountains. Fort Liard was established where the Petitot River joins the Liard. And sometime between 1805 and 1807 Fort Nelson was built, where

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<sup>20</sup>John K. Stager, "Fur Trading Posts in the Mackenzie Region up to 1850," The Canadian Association of Geographers, B.C. Division, Occasional Paper 3 (Vancouver, 1962), pp. 40-41.

the Fort Nelson River joins the Liard.<sup>21</sup>

The founding of Fort Nelson and Fort Liard were signs that the Nor'Westers realized that the "River of the Mountains" (Liard River) was the best avenue for expanding the trade still further. In some ways the Liard was the only possible direction for expansion. Northward, we have seen, was blocked by the Eskimos; few traders were anxious to duplicate Livingston's fate. To the east of the Mackenzie Valley were the Barren Lands, whose thousands of miles of rock and lake knew only the roots of lichens, caribou moss, and a few stunted pine. This was hardly inviting beaver country. Besides, the furs from this region were drawn off by the Hudson's Bay Company's Fort Chruhill. With the fur traders driving up from the south, that left only the west, but the Mackenzie Mountains formed a single wall which flanked the Mackenzie river and blocked its westward progress. Only the Liard remained.

The Nor'Westers knew little of the country into which they proposed to expand their enterprises. We know it today as rough,

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 40. Stager's "Fur trading posts in the Mackenzie region up to 1850" is the most authoritative treatment of the subject. He argues persuasively that 1807 is the proper date for the founding of Fort Nelson. The Fort is thought to be named for Admiral Nelson, hero of the Napoleonic Wars. Nelson's crushing defeat of the French fleet at the Battle of the Nile in 1798 might have made him famous enough in the Northwest to have a fort named after him. This would coincide with the sometimes suggested date of 1800 for the fort's construction. However, it is difficult to believe that at this early date the North West Company would push over two hundred miles up the dangerous Liard. After the establishment of Fort Liard, a post at the Fort Nelson River would be a logical extension. Furthermore, Nelson's magnificent victory at Trafalger in 1805 would surely have made him notable in all of British America. Allow for a year time lag in the spread of the news, and there you have 1807, the date of the founding of Fort Nelson.

undulating terrain, dissected by the Rocky Mountains. But to the geographers of the time the very concept of a continent-long mountain chain was not yet in focus. There was no reason why the fur traders might not find an open and commercially feasible route around or through the Mackenzie Range. The Liard River itself was a fog. The first two hundred and fifty miles or so they had traveled regularly, but of the Liard's upper stretches nothing broke the darkness but the flickering lights of legends and Indian reports. It was a mysterious land inhabited by strange creatures, like the great beast that had "about the size and bulk of an elk, with short legs, a long neck, and has two great horns like a stag, under which two small ones sprout out."<sup>22</sup> It was also a land of venomous springs whose bubbling yet clear and invitingly cold waters quenched not the adventurer's thirst but attacked his nerves, bringing on a "slow fever" and a peaceful, reposed death.<sup>23</sup> Then there were the mountain tribes, the Nahanni, the "Dahoteena," and the "Nombahoteenais," savages yet unknown to the white man; swiftly moving shadows, secretly out of sight, staying in the high country, living on the flesh of the caribou and mountain sheep, making war on each other.<sup>24</sup>

The Liard River was thus ready for some enterprising adventurer to enter upon her upper shores and explore those wonders. Furthermore, the Liard provided the best pelts in the entire Mackenzie District.

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<sup>22</sup>Masson, ed., Les Bourgeois, Vol. I, p. 87.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 78.

But surprisingly, the Nor'Westers did not follow up their fine beginning on the Liard River. This was not because of a lack of adventurous spirits. Instead, the North West Company's enterprises in the Mackenzie Valley were checked by a number of **unforeseen reverses**.

In the winter of 1812-1813, Fort Nelson, whose walls marked the North West Company's deepest penetration of the Liard Valley, was destroyed. An unfortunate mixture of distress, starvation, and despair amongst the local Indians (the Beaver Indians, probably a branch of the Slave), and the "morose" and "inconsiderate" nature of the post trader, Alexander Henry, no doubt ignited the unfortunate affair.<sup>25</sup> Although fur trade sources provide few details of the massacre, Indian tradition has preserved the event.

It had been a difficult winter that year; there were no doubt many empty bellies in the Fort Nelson area. Alexander Henry, post factor, was upset at the fur returns he was receiving, as they were considerably less than previous years. The Indians, not successful in trapping furs, were short of ammunition, a necessity if they were to keep their families fed. In distress, they adopted a desperate plan. A runner was sent to Fort Nelson, informing Henry that one of the bands had made a successful hunt, and that they had much meat. Henry and a couple of engagés set off for the hunting camp to trade for provisions. This was the routine method by which the Nor'Westers' posts were supplied--Henry suspected nothing. The Indians waited in ambush along the trail; when the fur traders passed, the Indians sprung to the attack

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<sup>25</sup>Masson, ed., Les Bourgeois, Vol. II, p. 126.

and Henry and his men were swiftly slain. Triumphant, the Indians descended on Fort Nelson, killing Henry's wife and children, while plundering the post.<sup>26</sup>

The massacre shook the entire district. It was a blow to the traders' strongest prop in maintaining their empire, their elevated and respected position among the native peoples. Hence, one trader considered the situation so serious that "unless some strong measures are applied soon to recover in some degree our former respectability, matters must soon come to an end in this Department."<sup>27</sup>

Supply also proved to be a problem for the Mackenzie River posts. Because the fur traders depended upon the "country" for the bulk of their foodstuffs, they were immediately susceptible to the fluctuations of wild game. In the winter of 1810-1811, the rabbit, which was an important food resource in the Mackenzie, suffered a drastic population shrinkage. Where once they had been abundant, hunters found them practically nonexistent. To make matters worse, even the moose seemed to disappear. Hardest hit was the Fort of the Forks, near the junction of the Liard and Mackenzie rivers. Here Willard-Ferdinand Wentzel, a Norwegian-born fur trader, suffered a winter of unrelenting hardship. As his own strength wasted away, he watched his comrades die one by one. When spring came, he and his family were still eating only every three days. Unfortunately for the Company, one of Wentzel's main

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<sup>26</sup>J. J. Honigmann, "The Fort Nelson Slave," Yale University Publications in Anthropology (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1945), p. 30.

<sup>27</sup>Masson, ed., Les Bourgeois, Vol. II, p. 126.

foodstuffs was beaver skins, "upward of three hundred" were eaten.<sup>28</sup>

The failure of local food resources meant that increased supplies had to be shipped into the Mackenzie River area, and the corollary of this was, of course, an increase in overhead for the North West Company. At the same time that the Company was hit by these Indian problems, the provisions crisis, and increased costs, fur returns from the entire northwest region declined. Even the Athabasca District, whose high quality and dependable flow of pelts had been the rock upon which the Company was based, began to suffer the effects of overtrapping.<sup>29</sup> Nor did the harassments and restraints brought on by the War of 1812 do anything to alleviate these problems.

The culmination of these developments came in 1815 when the North West Company adopted a new economy program to reduce their expenses on the Arctic slope. After reviewing the Mackenzie District's operations, it was decided that its high overhead rendered the District "incapable of defraying the expenses." That summer the fur traders were ordered to abandon all of their forts along the Mackenzie and Liard rivers. This greatly angered the Indians of the region; after nearly a generation of having fur posts in the Mackenzie River valley, they were not pleased with the prospect of having to travel all the way to Great Slave Lake or Fort Chipewyan for the trade goods they had grown to depend upon. According to one trader, the evacuation of the region was done "with great hazard of our lives."<sup>30</sup> The Indians,

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., Vol. I, pp. 106-107.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>30</sup>Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa. "Account of Mackenzie

having gotten wind of the move, "had formed the design of destroying us on our way out."<sup>31</sup> There, was, however, no violence and the retreat went smoothly; twenty-six years following Alexander Mackenzie's journey, the great river valley was again the little explored domain of the red man.

The North West Company maintained its trade contacts along the Mackenzie River by dispatching a trade canoe to descend the river. Willard-Ferdinand Wentzel carried out the operation in 1816. The Indians greeted him with "extravagant demonstrations of joy."

They danced and cried by turns, rushing up to their knees in the water to pull my canoe ashore, begging at the same time that the whites would return to their lands and promising their utmost endeavors to render our situation with them as comfortable as possible.<sup>32</sup>

Wentzel reported to the Company the Indian's desire to have the Mackenzie River trade reopened.

In 1817, the wintering partners, heeding Wentzel's information, sent Charles Grant, with a limited number of trade goods, to reestablish the Company's presence on the Mackenzie River.<sup>33</sup> Rather than reoccupy any of the Nor'Westers' former posts, Grant chose to construct a new fort. Building at a site about three hundred miles down the Mackenzie River, Grant named the establishment Fort Alexander.<sup>34</sup>

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River" by Willard-Ferdinand Wentzel, 1821, MC 19A, p. 1.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Alan Cooke and Clive Holland, "Chronological List of Expeditions and Historical Events in Northern Canada," The Polar Record 16, 2 (1974):41.

<sup>34</sup>Robert R. James, The Archaeology of Fort Alexander, N. W. T.:

Between 1818 and 1820, the North West Company again increased its presence in the Mackenzie valley, reestablishing many of its former posts in an attempt to keep the Hudson's Bay Company out of the region. But by this time, the North West Company was well on the way to extinction, and the stage had been set for the merger of iron and clay in 1821.

### The First Franklin Expedition

In the summer of 1820, the Mackenzie District was again the scene of exploration. The British government, whose interest in exploration had been deferred by the Napoleonic Wars, emerged from the conflict eager to sustain the island nation's leadership in the field of Polar Exploration. The year 1818 saw the Admiralty dispatch John Ross and William Edward Parry on another attempt to discover the Northwest Passage. A year later, Parry led a second naval expedition on the same mission, achieving a good deal of success but being stopped short of the Passage. At the same time, the British Arctic Land Expedition was making its way through Rupert's Land. This expedition, commanded by Lieutenant John Franklin of the Royal Navy, was under orders to journey to the coast of the Arctic Ocean, and there make a survey of North America's northern shoreline. After wintering at Cumberland House in Saskatchewan, the expedition proceeded to Great Slave Lake.

Willard-Ferdinand Wentzel, of the North West Company, served as the expedition's liaison with the Indians of the Barren Lands north of



Great Slave Lake. He also helped in the construction of Fort Enterprise, the expedition's winter quarters, near the headwaters of the Coppermine River.

On the fourth of June, 1921, Franklin's exploring party set out for the Arctic coast. After hard travel, they reached salt water and began to survey the top of the continent--only once before seen by white men. In open birchbark canoes, the explorers pushed up the rocky coast, risking heavy rolling seas, and more than once only narrowly missing disaster during dangerous traverses of exposed water. They eventually mapped approximately 675 miles of coastline, before turning back on the seventeenth of August with their canoes damaged and their supplies exhausted.

The return march, overland across the Barren Lands, was an epic of human suffering. Hunger was an ever present numbness in their stomachs, and starvation gradually settled in among their ranks. As the brief Arctic autumn began, their march was slowed by snow, ankle deep, and by ice not yet strong enough to support a man, but treacherous enough to lure him out on to it, before breaking beneath him, plunging the voyageur into the frigid water. A major part of their diet became tripe de roche, a lichen that they scrapped from bare rock, and when lucky, cooked over a fire made from a few twigs from a willow bush. When they were fortunate enough to shoot a muskox, the explorers fell upon it like wolves, wasting nothing, "the contents of its stomach were devoured upon the spot."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>John Franklin, Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea, In the Years 1819, 20, 21 and 22 (London: John Murray, 1824,

The three months of enduring trials that the return march entailed did not bring out the best in some of the men. On more than one occasion food was stolen from the expedition's stores or from a weakened member of the party. Eventually, one of the voyageurs, Michel Terohaute, an Iroquois Indian, was accused of cannibalism. Before being shot himself, Michel slew Midshipman Robert Hood, one of the expedition's most valuable officers.<sup>36</sup>

When the beaten explorers finally reached their winter quarters at Fort Enterprise, they faced further difficulties. The fort, instead of being well stocked with provisions, which they had assumed Wentzel would have waiting for them, was in fact abandoned. Franklin and his men were reduced to rooting about in the year old garbage dump for any nourishing scraps. Midshipman George Back volunteered to set out and search for the Indian hunters who were supposed to be supplying the fort with meat. Fortunately, Back was successful, and with help from the Indians **Franklin** and the remaining members of the expedition were saved.

Franklin's expedition traveled, all told, 5550 miles, conducting the first survey of the top of the continent, and making important scientific observations and collections.<sup>37</sup> But ten of the twenty men who made up the exploring party perished from hunger or exposure.

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reprint edition, Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle, 1970), p.141.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 456.

<sup>37</sup>C. Stuart Houston, ed., To the Arctic by Canoe, The Journal and Paintings of Robert Hood, Midshipman with Franklin (Montreal: The Aeon Institute of North America and McGill-Queen's University Press, 1974),

Franklin's activities, concentrated as they were along the Arctic coast and in the Barren Lands, were not immediately significant in unlocking the major geographic mysteries of Northwestern America's interior. But the expedition was important to the Hudson's Bay Company because it demonstrated the British government's commitment to exploration.

One of the factors which spurred the British government was the fear of Russian activities in the North Pacific. England was not going to allow the sacrifices of her mariners, from Martin Frobisher to Captain Cook, to be overshadowed by Russian explorers profiting from England's pioneering. The Hudson's Bay Company also could be hurt by Russian advances into the northwest. Exploration was a policy by which the Company could show its solidarity with British Imperial aims as well as a method of forestalling a foreign competitor.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Canada, Certain Correspondence of the Foreign Office and the Hudson's Bay Company (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1899), Part I, pp. 3-6. Sir John Barrow, second secretary of the Admiralty and founder of the Royal Geographic Society, was a particularly strong advocate of exploration.

## CHAPTER II

### THE DIPLOMATIC HORIZON

The North American fur trade, from the discovery of the continent, through the nineteenth century, was intimately intertwined with international rivalries. Where profits were to be made on the frontier, the fur traders, regardless of boundaries or the lack of them, energetically entered the fray. The far northwest, the very edge of the continent, was no exception to this pattern. By the second decade of the nineteenth century, a complex, tripartite rivalry had sprung up among the traders of Russia, Great Britain, and the United States.

#### The Origin of the Russian-American Company

The story of Russia's imperialist drive into Northwest America is complex and lengthy. It began with the daring and colorful conquest of Siberia. An epic endeavor, seldom celebrated, it was launched through the efforts of almost mythical figures such as Ivan the Terrible, Boris Godunov, and Yermak, a bold, turbulent frontiersman who broke the Tartar's hold on the trans-Ural region. With the door forced open, Cossack fur hunters, or promyshlenniks, fanned out across northern Eurasia, pushing up new rivers, crossing mountains and marshes, wrestling from the Taiga fortunes in ermine and sable. By 1639, the promyshlenniks, who were Russia's equivalent to the Coureurs de bois, had

reached the Pacific Ocean.<sup>1</sup>

The sea proved to be only a temporary obstacle to the wild Cossacks. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, they had exchanged their skin boats and canoes for rudely rigged sailing vessels. Risking the frigid waters of the Okhotsk Sea, they extended the fur frontier to the Kamchatka Peninsula. In 1725, Peter the Great, "to find glory for the state and science," dispatched Vitus Bering to survey the Kamchatka coast and to seek a land bridge to North America. Bering, a Danish navigator, was destined to lead two expeditions eastward toward Alaska. He proved that the continents were not joined, and on his second voyage gained a glimpse of the Alaskan Peninsula. The expedition's return voyage was beset by shipwreck and scurvy, to which Bering and thirty of his men eventually succumbed. Those who did survive the ill-fated voyage returned with tales of rich fur lands to the east.

A stampede followed the news and the promyshlenniks threw themselves into the Alaskan trade. Based on Russia's Pacific coast, the traders used the Aleutian Islands as stepping stones to the mainland. As one promyshlennik described it, "the sea was like a river," and along its banks vast profits in sea otter were waiting men bold enough to claim them.<sup>2</sup>

One such man was Gregor Shelekhov. Unscrupulous and ambitious, Shelekhov founded the first permanent Russian settlement in America at

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<sup>1</sup>James R. Gibson, Feeding the Russian Fur Trade (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

Kodiak Island in 1784. It was an unimpressive collection of log huts, with small patches of pastureland and an experimental farm plot nearby.<sup>3</sup> But it was the basis for the Russian-American Company which was chartered in 1799. Tsar Paul I granted the Company mercantile and administrative control of Russia's ill-defined American territories.<sup>4</sup>

Those territories grew swiftly under the guidance of Alexander Baranov, the overseas governor of the Company. Washington Irving described him as "a rough, rugged, hospitable, hard-drinking old Russian; somewhat of a soldier, somewhat of a trader; above all, a boon companion of the old roystering school, with a strong cross of the bear."<sup>5</sup> It was his initiative which spurred the Russian-American Company to remove its American headquarters from Kodiak Island to Sitka, or, as the Russians called it, New Archangel. This strategic move extended Russian influence into the rich fur area of the Alexander Archipelago, and six hundred miles closer to British North America. But this was just the beginning for Baranov, who in 1812 supervised the extension of Russian-America into northern California with the construction of Fort Ross. Even the Hawaiian Islands, for a brief while, seemed destined to

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<sup>3</sup>p. A. Tikhmener, A History of the Russian-American Company, trans. and ed. Richard A. Pierce and Alton Donnelly (Seattle University of Washington Press, 1978), p. 14.

<sup>4</sup>The charter was very much like the charter granted to the Hudson's Bay Company. But with the Tsar as well as other government officials being shareholders, the Russian-American Company always had a closer relationship with its government than did the Hudson's Bay Company.

<sup>5</sup>Washington Irving, Astoria (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), p. 465.

become part of the Tsar's Pacific empire.<sup>6</sup>

But expansion was not without its costs. The Tlingit Indians of the Sitka region were a proud and powerful lot, not at all pleased with the growing Russian presence in their homeland. In 1802, they assaulted Sitka, overran the fort's palisades, and scattered or killed its entire garrison. It took Baranov two years to recoup the Company's strength and make a successful counterattack.<sup>7</sup> Still, by 1818, when Baranov was replaced as governor, the Russian-American Company could boast of twenty-four trading posts scattered about the Alaskan coast, and a trade worth seven million rubles.<sup>8</sup>

In spite of these profits, the Company's directors were troubled. Alaska's waters were becoming flooded with foreign competition. The once abundant sea otters, which had gathered in large numbers in the bays about Sitka, were swiftly diminishing. The Russian-American Company's trade was being attacked by interlopers who threatened to ruin all that Baranov had built.

#### Background of the Russian-Anglo-American Trade Rivalry in the Northwest

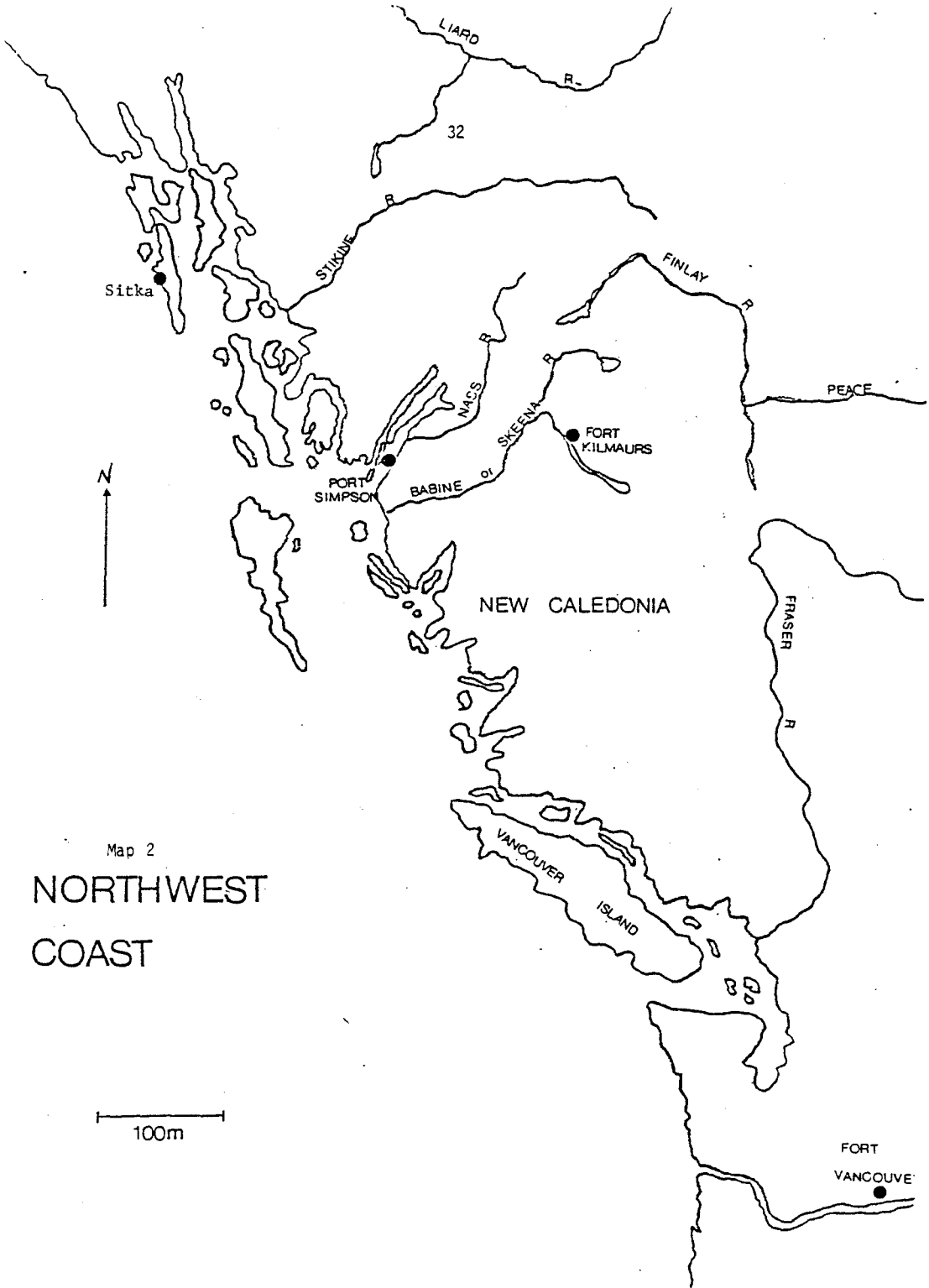
Principal among the Russian-American Company's rivals were American maritime merchants. The Americans were drawn to the northwest coast by Captain James Cook's journals, which were published in 1784.

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<sup>6</sup>James R. Gibson, Imperial Russia in Frontier America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 11.

<sup>7</sup>Tikhmener, A History of the Russian-American Company, pp. 65-66.

<sup>8</sup>Hector Chevigny, Lord of Alaska, The Life of Alexander Baranov (New York: Viking Press, 1956), pp. 290-291.



Map 2  
NORTHWEST  
COAST



Shippers and traders, particularly the ambitious New England variety, paid close attention to Captain James King's account of the small fortunes that Chinese merchants had offered for sea otter furs.<sup>9</sup> In 1787, a group of merchants organized the first American effort to enter the Pacific Northwest trade. Captains Robert Gray and John Kendrick, aboard the bark Columbia, did not reap large profits from their voyage. But the knowledge that they acquired was the basis for the lush prosperity that New England skippers would enjoy in future decades.<sup>10</sup>

The British seamen, who after all had discovered the maritime trade, met little success in their attempts to exploit it. One of their paramount problems was the ancient charters of the British East India **Company** and the British South Seas Company, which together barred much of the Pacific to the private entrepreneur. Those who paid the exorbitant license fees levied by the monopolies found themselves underpriced by the scores of Yankee traders who descended upon the coast. With the dawning of the "Great Age of American Sail," the British merchants were forced into a secondary role.<sup>11</sup>

This, however, was not enough for one American merchant. John Jacob Astor, a German immigrant with ambition and a genius for commerce on a continental scale, **aspired** to monopolize for himself the trade of the northwest coast. By 1812, Astor's Pacific Fur Company had a

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<sup>9</sup>King had assumed command of Cook's expedition following the death of the great navigator in Hawaii.

<sup>10</sup>Samuel Eliot Morison, The Maritime History of Massachusetts, 1783-1860 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1921), pp. 55-57.

<sup>11</sup>Wade C. Caruthers, "The Sea-Borne Frontier on the Northwest Coast," Journal of the West 10, 2 (April 1971):216.



permanent base on the Columbia River, a number of inland posts, and had dispatched a trading vessel up the coast. Astoria represented a far-sighted attempt to dominate the trade's inland source of furs as well as that of the maritime region. Unfortunately for Astor, the first shoots of progress were nipped by the commencement of war with Great Britain in 1812.<sup>12</sup>

The War of 1812 signaled the return of the British into serious contention for the trade of the northwest. The North West Company had reached the Pacific Ocean on three separate occasions; the probes of Alexander Mackenzie in 1793, Simon Fraser in 1808, and David Thompson in 1811. Yet the Company had no trading posts on the tidewater. However, when war broke out with the United States, the North West Company, through the leverage of its liaison "with His Majesty's Government," Edward "Bear" Ellice, was able to receive Royal Navy support to expel Astor's Americans from the Columbia River Valley.<sup>13</sup>

The Nor'Westers enjoyed a good trade along the Columbia River, but did not take a large role in the maritime trade. The Company made half-hearted efforts to circumvent the East India Company's monopoly through an arrangement with the Boston firm of T. H. Perkins.<sup>14</sup> But in the main, the North West Company's furs were directed overland to its Montreal headquarters rather than to the uncertain conditions of the China trade. The Company's energies were invested in building up the

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<sup>12</sup>Irving, Astoria, pp. 482-485.

<sup>13</sup>Barry W. Gaughn, "The 1813 Expedition to Astoria," The Beaver (Autumn, 1973), p. 46.

<sup>14</sup>Caruthers, "The Sea-Borne Frontier," p. 219.

trade of the interior, not only along the Columbia, but in New Caladonia as well.

Nevertheless, the Russian-American Company's principal concern was the maritime trade of the Yankee merchants. There were three American trading practices which most troubled the Russians.<sup>15</sup> The first of these was the unrestrained trading practices of American ships. For the Russians, who not only traded for furs, but also trapped them on their own and had permanent establishments on the coast, it was of paramount importance that the warlike coastal Indians be held in check. The Americans, mere "birds of passage," shared no such concern and freely traded firearms, ammunition, knives, and liquor to the Indians. This not only hurt Russian trade but cost them dearly in blood as well. In 1805, the Russians discovered that the very Tlingit Indians who had slain several promyshenniks and sacked Sitka three years before, had been rearmed "by the Bostonians with the best guns and pistols, and even have falconets."<sup>16</sup> The Russians angrily laid the mutilated bodies of two hundred Aleutian hunters and over one hundred promyshenniks at the door of the Yankee traders.<sup>17</sup>

With such vigor and in such large numbers did the Americans enter the northwest trade that the sea otter, the principal object of their efforts, was dangerously overhunted. But neither the American

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<sup>15</sup>Tikhmener, A History of the Russian-American Company, pp. 151-52.

<sup>16</sup>Nikolai Petrovich Rezanov, The Rezanov Voyage to Neuva California in 1806, ed. T. C. Russell (San Francisco: Privately Printed by T. C. Russell, 1926), pp. 69-72.

<sup>17</sup>Gibson, Imperial Russia in Frontier America, p. 159.

seamen, the Russian traders, nor the coastal Indians wished to decrease their trade. As a result, by the second decade of the nineteenth century, coastal commerce had begun to rely more, and more, upon mainland furs such as the beaver. The majority of these furs came from the interior of British North America, particularly the New Caledonia area with the coastal Indians acting as middlemen rather than as trappers. The decline in furs along the coast intensified the competition, and made the Russians less than willing to accept their American rivals. It was becoming clear that there were not enough furs for all.

Finally, the American merchants augmented their fur trade profits by trading with the Russian-American Company's Alaska settlements. Originally, this was a mutually accommodating commerce. The Yankee shipmasters often had surplus goods and the chance to turn them into a profit was welcomed. The Russian settlements chronically suffered from supply shortages, particularly foodstuffs. Their settlements in north California were designated to alleviate that problem, but they were plagued by innumerable problems and never became a paying proposition.<sup>18</sup> The American ships rounded off their northwest trade by calling at Sitka and exchanging bread, rice, and molasses for otter and beaver furs.<sup>19</sup>

Supply was just the first step of growing American influence in Russian America. Soon Yankee skippers were transporting Russian furs to Chinese markets and American artisans and craftsmen were finding work in the Russian settlements. An American businessman in St. Petersburg, Benedict Kramer, Jr., sat on the Company's board of directors.

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., pp. 156-157.

An example of some of the strange cultural results of close contact with the Americans came in 1809. A revolutionary society was formed in Russian-America. The nine conspirators, hopefully with the help of their fellow republicans, the Americans, planned to assassinate Baranov, pirate a ship, and sail to Easter Island, where a model republic would be formed. This harebrained scheme came to nothing as the dismayed revolutionaries found the Yankees more interested in sea otter pelts than in politics.<sup>20</sup>

Beginning in 1810, however, the Russians were increasingly alarmed by American influence in the northwest. Russian naval officers, visiting Alaskan waters for the first time, were repelled by the presence of "North American hucksters" in the Tsar's territory.<sup>21</sup> When Alexander Baranov was ungratefully dismissed from control of the colonies in 1818, the era of promyshennik and adventurous capitalist control of the Russian-American Company was over. The Company became the responsibility of the Imperial Navy officers. These maritime martinets were not disposed to view the American traders in the correct light, as a necessary evil; instead, they ordered a ban on trade with the Yankee vessels. The Americans, however, clandestinely continued their commerce.

#### The Ukases of 1821

A pivotal year in the escalation of the northwest trade rivalry

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<sup>20</sup>Howard I. Kushner, Conflict on the Northwest Coast, American-Russian Rivalry in the Pacific Northwest, 1790-1867 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1975), pp. 15-16.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

was 1821. On September 16, Tsar Alexander I issued an imperial ukase, or decree, claiming for Russia nearly the entire northwest coast of North America. Henceforth, the territory "from Behring straits to 51<sup>0</sup> northern latitude" was off limits to British and American merchants, and their pursuit of "commerce, whaling, and fishery, and all other industry" was to cease.<sup>22</sup> To enforce this decree, the Tsar also claimed that the waters surrounding the American territories for one hundred miles were also Russian territory. He also dispatched three Russian warships to the region to remind anyone who chose to forget this fact. A second ukase followed nine days later. The Russian-American Company's charter was renewed and its authority extended to the above claimed territory.

The Tsar's ukases, promulgated at the Company's insistence, sought to redress the Russian merchants' grievances with the Americans. The Yankee liquor and gun trade with the coastal Indians, as well as the trade with Russia's settlements, would be ended by making the coastal waters Russian territory. At the same time, the Americans would be barred from the trade of land furs by the Tsar's claim to control of the mainland north from 51<sup>0</sup> latitude. The naval officers and the board of directors of the Russian-American Company were delighted; with one bold stroke, they congratulated themselves, the petty Yankee traders had been put in their place.

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<sup>22</sup>United States Congress, Proceedings of the Alaskan Boundary Tribunal, Senate Document 162, 58th Congress, 2nd Sess., "Ukase of September 4, 1821," Vol. II, pp. 26-29. Hereafter this volume will be referred to as A.B.T.

Unfortunately, in their desire to secure a monopoly of the northwest's trade, the Russians had made a very serious blunder. By claiming the "shores of northwestern America," Russia ran smack up against the interests of the British fur trade in New Caledonia.<sup>23</sup> The British trade, of course, had only recently been reorganized by the merger of the North West Company with the Hudson's Bay Company, to create a gigantic, monolithic, business concern. George Simpson, at the helm of the English company's inland operations, was, as demonstrated, planning expansion into the very area that the Tsar's ukase claimed. Russia had committed the unforgivable diplomatic crime of opening up a two-front international dispute.

The Russian position was made even more uncomfortable because John Quincy Adams was the United States Secretary of State. Adams was an old Russian hand, having served as the American minister in St. Petersburg from 1809 to 1812, and due to his distinguished parentage, was a man weaned, so to speak, in the atmosphere of continental diplomacy.<sup>24</sup> As a New Englander he was acutely aware of the value of the maritime fur trade.

Count Karl Nesselrode, the Russian foreign minister, was quick to assure the British Government that the ukase was not directed against them. He told Sir Charles Bagot, the British minister in St. Petersburg "that the object of the measure was to prevent the 'commerce interlope' of the Citizens of the United States."<sup>25</sup> However, George

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Samuel F. Bemis, John Quincy Adams and the Foundations of American Foreign Policy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950), pp. 175-179.

<sup>25</sup>A.B.T., Vol. II, Sir Charles Bagot--Marquis of Londonderry.

Canning, the British Foreign Secretary, knew that to ignore the ukase would be to give tacit recognition to Russia's territorial pretensions in the northwest. So at John Quincy Adams' suggestion, the British and American governments collaborated in pressing their protests against the ukase.<sup>26</sup>

British interests in the northwest were, of course, the interests of the Hudson's Bay Company. Canning based Britain's case upon what the Company decided were its objectives. Initially, these were rather grandiose. John Henry Pelly, the Company's London Governor, claimed that his traders had been the only ones to occupy the territory from the mouth of the Fraser River to 60° north latitude. Thus, the entire mainland should be considered British territory.<sup>27</sup> Although what Pelly claimed was strictly true, it was misleading. His traders did occupy sections of the interior between the mouth of the Fraser and the 60th parallel, but his nearest post to the coast was Fort Kilmaurs at Babine Lake. That post, established after the Russian ukase, was still over one hundred miles from the nearest ocean inlet. The British had a valid claim to the interior, not the coast.

The Duke of Wellington presented Great Britain's claims to the Russians at the Congress of Verona in November of 1822. The Tsar's negotiators complained of the misrepresentation involved in Britain's

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11/17/1821, p. 101.

<sup>26</sup>A.B.T., Vol. II, John Quincy Adams--Rush, 7/22/1823, pp. 52-56.

<sup>27</sup>A.B.T., Vol. II, Hudson's Bay Company--George Canning, 9/25/1822, pp. 109-110.



case, but little more occurred.<sup>28</sup> Even so, the Russians were shaken. The extreme pretensions of the Hudson's Bay Company showed the Russians that they were in danger of losing the very territory that the ukase was designed to secure. This was followed by the news that the United States and Great Britain would jointly pursue their negotiations. It was only then, in the spring and summer of 1823, that the Tsar's government realized how imprudent the ukases had been.

The most logical thing for Count Nesselrode to do was to fragment the opposition, to try and reach an independent settlement with one of the parties. Great Britain and Russian were facing each other over a score of international questions, not the least of which were the Spanish and Greek revolutions. In negotiations between the two governments, the northwest coast often had to take second place to more pressing, continental concerns. Furthermore, the dispute with Britain was a territorial matter and promised to be a very involved question.

Thus, the Russian government was drawn into negotiations with the United States. Nesselrode was now playing a game he could not win. The inadvisability of the ukase was by now apparent to all. Russian-American settlements were suffering severe distress as a result of the ban on American supply ships. The foodstuffs dispatched from Baltic Russia were always a matter of too little, too late, for too high a cost. Matvei Muraviev, the new Governor of Russian-America, pleaded with his government to lift the ban and allow the Yankees back into

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<sup>28</sup>A.B.T., Vol. II, Count Liever--Duke of Wellington, 11/23/1822, pp. 115-116.

Sitka.<sup>29</sup> One of the principal reasons for the ukase had already been rendered meaningless.

John Quincy Adams drove a hard bargain. The Russian-American Convention of 1824 was a complete surrender of all the ukase's claims. Both parties agreed to the 54° 40' north latitude line as a boundary between their spheres of influence, but the Americans were allowed the right to trade with both the Indians and the Russian settlements north of that line. The Convention, which was to last for ten years, gave the Americans **irrevocable** trade privileges in waters where, prior to the ukase, they had had no rights at all. Russian policy had been completely reversed.<sup>30</sup>

The American treaty, as distasteful as it was, strengthened Russia's hand with Great Britain. With his flank protected, Nesselrode was prepared to back up the Russian-American Company's claim to control of the northwest coast. But for over a year, negotiations remained deadlocked, with Russia's determination to back her fur traders matched by Canning's support of the Hudson's Bay Company.<sup>31</sup>

Meanwhile, on the frontier, Governor Simpson was maneuvering for position. It was in the background of these lengthy territorial negotiations that he dispatched the Hudson's Bay Company's first exploratory surveys of the far northwest. The Company hoped to legitimize

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<sup>29</sup>Kushner, Conflict on the Northwest Coast, p. 59.

<sup>30</sup>A.B.T., Vol. II, Treaty between Russia and America, 1824, pp. 10-12.

<sup>31</sup>John S. Galbraith, The Hudson's Bay Company as an Imperial Factor (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), pp. 130-31.

its claims to the territory west of its establishments, while at the same time "keep the Russians at a distance."<sup>32</sup> To do this Governor Simpson needed information concerning the trade patterns of the interior. He suspected that the land along the northwest coast was not valuable fur territory. The furs that the coastal Indians had were either sea otter furs, or were furs bartered from inland tribes.<sup>33</sup> If this were true, the company merely had to control the trade of the interior Indians; then it would, for commercial purposes, be immaterial if Russia controlled the coastline.

The Hudson's Bay Company's explorers were not the only ones roused by the Russian ukase. Sir John Barrow, Admiralty Secretary, and the guiding hand behind English Arctic exploration, feared the ukase's impeachment of freedom of the seas. In November 1823, his protege, John Franklin volunteered to lead a second expedition to the Polar Sea. Franklin believed that the "objects to be attained are important at once to the Naval character and the Commercial interests of Great Britain."<sup>34</sup> He proposed to push westward from the mouth of the Mackenzie River, exploring the top of the continent. If successful, Franklin would have pushed forward the frontiers of science and succeeded in "the preservation of that Country, which is most rich in

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<sup>32</sup>R. Harvey Fleming, ed., Minutes of the Northern Department of Rupert Land, 1821-31 (London: Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1940), p. 303.

<sup>33</sup>Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba, George Simpson--A. R. McLeod, January 2, 1923, D. 4/2 fos. 34.

<sup>34</sup>Barry M. Gough, The Royal Navy and the Northwest Coast of America, 1810-1914 (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1971), pp. 31-32.

Animals, from the encroachment of Russia and preventing the Establishment of another and at some Period perhaps a hostile Power on any part of the Northern Continent of America."<sup>35</sup> The Hudson's Bay Company eagerly fell in line with these plans and offered its considerable assistance. The Admiralty was also excited, and escalated the effort by dispatching Captain William E. Parry to try and find a navigable Northwest Passage. Captain Frederick W. Beechey was even sent to the Bering Sea to rendezvous with Franklin or Parry if they succeeded in making the passage.

Nor were the Russians inactive in the area of exploration. Since 1818, increasingly alarmed by English Arctic exploration, they had begun a modest program of survey and expansion. Russian interest centered on a vast terra incognita, the mainland of western Alaska. In 1821 and 1822, V. S. Kromchenko and A. K. Etolin, Imperial Navy officers in the service of the Russian-American Company, surveyed the coastline of the region. Inexplicably, they failed to discover the mouth of the Yukon River, but they did bring back valuable details concerning Alaska's second longest river, the Kuskokwim.<sup>36</sup> This became the basis of future fur trade expansion, as the Kuskokwim became one of the most important trade centers in Russian-America. Thus, both Russia and Great Britain, while engaged in controversy over the northwest coast, made moves to secure additional room for expansion away from the

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>James W. Vanstone, ed., "V. S. Khromchenko's Coastal Explorations in Southwestern Alaska, 1822," Fieldiana: Anthropology (Chicago: 1973), Vol. 64, p. 25.

the disputed area.

In the negotiations with the Russians, George Canning had a critical advantage over his opposite number, Count Nesselrode. The Russian government had already given away much of what it had hoped to gain by the ukase in their treaty with the United States. Nesselrode was now trying to hang on to the last remaining fiber of the ukase's claims, Russian control of the North American coastline from 51° latitude--or at least 54° 40' latitude--to the Bering Sea. Without this territory secured, the Russian-American Company would perish. Canning, on the other hand, was representing the extreme pretensions of the Hudson's Bay Company.<sup>37</sup> The Company would have liked to control the entire northwest coast, but its principal aims were: 1) keep the mouth of the Fraser River open and have available for expansion the coast as far north as the 55th parallel, 2) right of passage through Russian territory via any rivers flowing from New Caledonia to the Pacific, and 3) protection from competition of the Mackenzie River District, the Company's treasure vault.<sup>38</sup> Thus, Canning and the Hudson's Bay Company had considerable room for negotiation between what they claimed and what they would settle for.

The Anglo-Russian Convention of 1825 reveals how skillfully Canning used this flexibility. He acted out the role of a moderate man trying to bring agreement between the unmoving Hudson's Bay Company and the entrenched Russian-American Company. His Machiavellian performance

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<sup>37</sup>Galbraith, The Hudson's Bay Company as an Imperial Factor, p. 131.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 127.

completely duped Russia's chief negotiator, who confided to Count Nesselrode: "I must confess that Canning has exerted himself very faithfully to satisfy us completely, but he has to struggle against a violent opposition on the part of the companies interested."<sup>39</sup> Hence, when Canning offered the Russians the control of the northwest coastline, it appeared to them to be a major concession. The Russians, almost out of good faith, agreed to his provision that the English would have the right to pass through the Russian zone via any rivers falling into the Pacific.<sup>40</sup>

On paper it looked as if Count Nesselrode had secured for the Russian-American Company all that it had hoped to gain from the English. The Russians would control a strip of land, from the ocean to "the nearest chain of Mountains not exceeding a few leagues of the coast."<sup>41</sup> This strip of land, or lisiere, would be the boundary between Russian and British America from 54° 40' north to the point 141° west longitude, and from there north to the Arctic Sea. But Nesselrode actually gave the game away when he allowed the Hudson's Bay Company free passage through the lisiere. It was an invitation to the English to outflank the Russian trading posts and intercept the furs as they came down to the coast.

Both the Russian-American Convention of 1824 and the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1825 were stunning blows to the Russian-American Company. All that the Company had hoped to gain had been reversed, all

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>41</sup>A.B.T., Vol. II, George Canning--Sir Charles Bagot, July 12, 1824, p. 181.

its worst fears realized. How such an unfortunate train of events had befallen them must have been the subject of much discussion among the Company's directors. However, the answer is quite obvious; the liaison between the Russian-American Company and the Imperial government had been poor. Nesselrode could not have been too pleased with the Company's timing in appealing for the ukases. Russia was mired in a morass of post-Napoleonic diplomatic problems and it is unlikely that he would have welcomed another, especially in an area peripheral to Russia's vital interests. John Middleton, the American Minister in St. Petersburg, advised John Quincy Adams that the ukase "appears to have been signed by the Emperor without sufficient examination, and may be fairly considered as having been surreptitiously obtained."<sup>42</sup>

Once having gotten the ukase, the Russian-American Company's directors did not make adequate provisions to supply their settlements, and within a year they were begging the Tsar to allow the Yankee ships back into Sitka. This imprudent policy of drawing the Imperial government into dangerous diplomatic waters and then withdrawing did not endear the Company to the Tsar. Furthermore, an investigation into the Company's employee practices and treatment of Indians and Russian clergy revealed extensive abuse. Alexander I, a humanitarian and sometime liberal, was disgusted.<sup>43</sup> The Russian-American Company was not even consulted during the final negotiations with Great Britain. The

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<sup>42</sup>A.B.T., Vol. II, John Middleton--John Quincy Adams, August 8, 1822, p. 42.

<sup>43</sup>Irby C. Nichols, Jr., "The Russian Ukase and the Monroe Doctrine: A Re-evaluation," Pacific Historical Review, No. 36 (February 1967), p. 24.

commercial and diplomatic arms of the empire were estranged; the diplomatic reverse was inevitable.



## CHAPTER III

### OPENING MOVES: THE HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY'S PRELIMINARY WESTWARD EXPLORATIONS

Chief Trader Alexander Roderick McLeod was a worried man in the fall and winter of 1822. As the gentleman in charge of the Mackenzie District, he felt that his destiny and the fortunes of the District were intertwined. Of late he had seen signs which did not bode well for the District.

First of all, news arrived that Willard-Ferdinand Wentzel, a clerk in the District, was to be recalled. Wentzel was a former Nor'-Wester who had recently served on the Franklin Expedition. Although his "jovial" disposition and happy talent with a fiddle won Wentzel friends among his fellow traders, his "sarcastic turn of mind" and indiscrete ways often left him unappreciated in high places.<sup>1</sup> None the less, of all the fur traders in the entire northwest, few could claim the expertise of Willard-Ferdinand Wentzel when it came to affairs in the Mackenzie District. He had spent over twenty years in the far north. Only the year before he had supervised the relocation of the Fort of the Forks. The old site under the shadow of the Gros Cap at the Liard's mouth was abandoned and construction begun on an island

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<sup>1</sup>L. R. Masson, ed., Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-ouest, recits de voyages, lettres et rapports inedits relatifs au nord-ouest Canadien, Reprint edition (New York: Antiquarian Press, 1960), Vol. I, p. 69.

a short distance up the Mackenzie.<sup>2</sup> If the District was to grow, men of Wentzel's talents were going to be needed. His sudden recall no doubt caused Chief Trader McLeod to pause.

Also plaguing McLeod was another action by Governor Simpson. Following the latter's tour of the Athabasca District during the past summer, the Governor traveled north to Great Slave Lake. McLeod expected the Governor to continue north and visit the new District headquarters at the Mackenzie Forks. But when McLeod heard that the Governor had turned about, and was returning to Fort Chipewyan, he was left speculating about the possible reasons for Governor Simpson to avoid the District. Perhaps as part of his new economy programs he would withdraw the fur traders from the Mackenzie District, just as the North West Company had done in 1815.

At the base of A. R. McLeod's doubts was the uncertainty of what the recently completed amalgamation would bring. An old Nor'-Wester like the Chief Trader was suspicious of what this "gentleman," George Simpson, planned to do. Was Wentzel to be merely the first of many Nor'Westers to be axed from the District's rolls? Perhaps in his agitation McLeod looked back on his own role in the North West Company's "Athabasca Campaign," that violent yet unsuccessful attempt to drive the Hudson's Bay Company from the valuable far north. Were the sins of the past really buried? To ease these doubts McLeod resolved to address a letter directly to the Governor, who was wintering at Fort

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<sup>2</sup>James F. V. Millar and Gloria J. Fedirchuk, Report on Investigations: Mackenzie River Archaeological Survey (Environmental-Social Committee, Northern Pipelines Task Force on Northern Oil Development, Ottawa, 1975), p. 99.

Chipewyan on Lake Athabasca.

Simpson responded promptly and his letter of January 2, 1823 alleviated McLeod's uncertainties. Not only did Simpson accept McLeod's judgment that Wentzel should stay in the District, confessing "I find we have been giving the prooning hook too much latitude," but he also went on to reassure McLeod that it had been only the want of a guide to the lower Mackenzie that had prevented him from visiting the "Forks" that past summer.<sup>3</sup> As for curtailing the Mackenzie District operations, Simpson chided McLeod, he could not have been more wrong:

The Trade of Mackenzie's River is so valuable and important and holds out such prospects of extension to advantage that instead of wishing to curtail its means as you seem to apprehend the Council is desirous of rendering its every support and assistance, that may be considered necessary.<sup>4</sup>

After easing McLeod's mind, Simpson proceeded to instruct him in the specifics of his policy of expansion, first the New Caledonia plans:

With Mr<sup>er</sup>s Smith and Dease I have had a great deal of conversation on this topic,<sup>5</sup> . . . the later has undertaken a very interesting and I hope important expedition next summer (in) the country laying to the West of the Mountains, through which by Indian reports there is a water communication running pallel with the Mackenzie

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<sup>3</sup>Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba, George Simpson--A. R. McLeod, January 2, 1823, D. 4/2 fos. 34. Hereafter material from this collection will be referred to as H.B.C.A. All quotations are exact reproductions of the manuscript cited. Original grammatical and spelling errors are reproduced verbatim.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Edward Smith was a former Nor'Wester commanding the Athabasca District in 1822. He was soon to be transferred to the Mackenzie River District. W. Stewart Wallace, ed., Documents Relating to the North West Comapny (Toronto: The Champain Society, 1934), p. 499.

Peter Warren Dease, one of four brothers who pursued the beaver into the Northwest-- a nephew of Sir William Johnson, a famed Indian

River is quite unknown to us, altho supposed to be rich in Fur bearing animals.<sup>6</sup>

Once again rumors of a western river, Cook's River? This expedition would proceed up the Peace River to a place where that river divides into its two main feeders, the Parsnip and Finlay Rivers. From there the expedition was to strike out:

. . . due west accross the Mountain and along the skirts of it or as the water communications to the North West may serve as far as the season permits with safety, and when accross it so as to fall upon the headwaters of the River au Liard, or some of the streams leading into Mackenzie's River.<sup>7</sup>

Simpson then turned his attention to affairs in McLeod's District. For many years the fur traders had heard reports of Indian tribes dwelling in the mountains west of the Liard and Mackenzie rivers. One of these tribes was known to the Slave Indians of the Mackenzie as the "Nahanny" (Nahanni) Indians. Their mountain retreats were reported to be rich in beaver. Simpson wanted these savages lured down from the mountains and induced to bring their furs to trade at Fort Liard. Dispatches from Fort Norman, one of the lower posts, also mentioned a distant tribe, the "Dahotys," who were known to extend their hunting grounds to the Russian settlements on the coast. Hence, Simpson

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agent, he joined the XY Company in 1801 and in their service as well as in the service of the North West Company he traded in the Mackenzie District. At the union of 1821 he was elevated to the rank of Chief Trader. He worked on the Second Franklin Expedition during the 1826-27 season. His most important exploit was the 1836-39 survey of the Arctic coast from the Mackenzie delta to Point Barrow. He died in 1863 after twenty-one years of prosperous retirement. The Dease River and Dease Lake in northern British Columbia are named after him. Wallace, ed., Documents Relating to the Northwest Company, p. 436.

<sup>6</sup>H.B.C.A., George Simpson--A. R. McLeod, January 2, 1823, D. 4/2 fos. 34.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

suggested to A. R. McLeod, "it is desirable that our discoveries and intercourse with those distant tribes should be prosecuted,"<sup>8</sup> and "I trust you will set every engine to work consistent with your means."<sup>9</sup>

A. R. McLeod was relieved and pleased with the Company's plans for expanding the trade. It was in true keeping with the "ancient spirit of the Nor'West" and imbued with that spirit McLeod immediately began preparations to follow through with the Governor's wishes. Setting out in the middle of the subarctic winter, A. R. McLeod was accompanied by a group of Indian trappers. The Chief Trader, about forty years old and a "stout strong active man; a good pedestrian," headed southwest, up the frozen Liard.<sup>10</sup> After a one hundred and ten mile march, McLeod and his party arrived at the junction of the Liard and "Nahanny" rivers. The "Nahanny" was a large river which tumbled through the mountain sanctuaries of the Indians of the same name. Up the river and into the Mackenzie Mountains, McLeod led his party.

The exact details of McLeod's winter journey have been lost. We do know, however, that he passed through rich beaver country. But excepting this, the voyage was a failure. They met no Nahanni Indians, an unfortunate consequence of bringing Fort Liard Indians on the trip; the Nahanni Indians remained in their lairs, wary of a party containing their bellicose enemies. McLeod retraced his steps in disappointment.

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>R. M. Patterson, "The Nahanny Lands," The Beaver, (Summer, 1961), p. 40.

<sup>10</sup>Glyndwr Williams, ed., "The Character Book of George Simpson, 1832," in Hudson's Bay Miscellany 1670-1870 (Winnipeg: The Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1975), p. 191.

On the sixth of March he was back at Mackenzie River Forks, but not before he "suffered considerably from privation--for the natives who accompanied him were no animal hunters."<sup>11</sup>

A. R. McLeod's unsuccessful endeavor did not deter the Company's desire to open commercial relations with the Nahanni Indians. In April of 1823 the Chief Trader wrote to Simpson about his failure, but he hastened to add that he was not giving up the fight by announcing that he had "appointed Mr. John McLeod to command a party . . . on a voyage of discovery to the westward."<sup>12</sup>

John M. McLeod, no relation to A. R. McLeod, was twenty-nine years old when he reached Mackenzie River Forks. Born in 1794 in Lochs, Scotland, John McLeod, like many a young Scotsman, left his homeland with the hope of finding better prospects in Canada.<sup>13</sup> He joined the North West Company in 1816, and saw service on the Churchill River. While stationed at Ile-a-la-Crosse, John McLeod seems to have been the trader who sacrificed his own supplies to aid the Franklin Expedition. He further helped the explorers by dispatching a canoe to lessen their overloaded outfit.<sup>14</sup>

McLeod had recently spent an interesting winter as Governor

<sup>11</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal 1823, B. 200/a/1 fos. 31.

<sup>12</sup>A. R. McLeod--George Simpson, April, 1823, quoted in R. M. Patterson, "The Nahanny Lands," The Beaver (Summer, 1961), p. 40.

<sup>13</sup>H.B.C.A., Northern Department General Accounts, 1825-26, B. 239/g/5 fos. 8.

<sup>14</sup>C. Stuart Houston, To the Arctic by Canoe, the Journal and Painting of Robert Hood, Midshipman with Franklin (Montreal: The Arctic Institute of North America and McGill-Queen's University Press, 1974), pp. 112-113.

Simpson's traveling companion on the long journey from York Factory to Fort Chipewyan. Throughout the arduous day on the trail, and around the evening fire, McLeod came to know the Governor. He also learned of Simpson's plans for the northwest, his dream of pushing the frontier to the shores of the western sea. Simpson, likewise, was favorably impressed with what he saw of McLeod under the revealing conditions of life on the trail and he described him to A. R. McLeod as "a young gentleman of much promise . . . and I am mistaken if he does not turn out to be a valuable acquisition on your staff."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, it seems that John McLeod may have been Simpson's personal choice to lead the western explorations. In any event, he left the Governor in the early spring of 1823 and arrived at Mackenzie River Forks, now beginning to be known as Fort Simpson, before the ice went out.

From his journals and letters only a cursory outline of John McLeod the man emerges. John McLeod has not a man of reflection; in times of despair he would not muse on the fickleness of fate but strive to alleviate reversals. In this same vein he was not like his successor, Robert Campbell, who would turn to Providence for consolation and guidance. John McLeod would just as soon be left up to his own means rather than drag the Almighty into the affair. He would later explain to missionaries: "There is no Sabbath in this country."<sup>16</sup> On the trail McLeod was boss; griping or sullen and mumbled complaints were likely to be treated with a dose of "corporal chastisement." On his 1831

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<sup>15</sup>H.B.C.A., George Simpson--A. R. McLeod, January 2, 1823, D. 4/2 fos. 34.

<sup>16</sup>Bernard Devoto, Across the Wide Missouri (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1975), p. 329.

voyage when he noted "some discontent in the bosoms of some part of our crew," he prescribed just that "medicine." But he was wise enough not to embark them the next day in the rain, keeping them "snug to our encampment" to rest and revive their spirits.<sup>17</sup> This same firm yet flexible disposition marked his dealings with the Indians. A man with an unyielding nature could never successfully trade with Indians. McLeod used his firmness to keep relations with the Indians on an even keel; respected but not overly aloof. His success at this can be seen by his impressive trade returns and a record devoid of violent confrontations. McLeod further enamored himself with the Indians through his skill as a woodsman and by proving himself a crack shot and a successful hunter; qualities the Athabaskan Indian culture, by necessity, valued highly. Post journals also show him to be an active man more comfortable out-of-doors handling the tasks of maintaining a fort than remaining indoors checking inventories or account books.

Later in life while leading Hudson's Bay brigades to the Rocky Moundain Rendezvous, McLeod revealed another side of his personality. Returning from the 1836 rendezvous, McLeod agreed to escort the Whitman Mission party to Walla Walla. Narcissa, Marcus Whitman's bride, had already been the belle of the mountains as she had won the rough frontiersmen's hearts with her kindness, smiles, and plucky attitude toward the adversities of the trail. John McLeod was no different; he had her tent ready and waiting as she rode into camp. When Narcissa grew weary of pemmican for breakfast, lunch, and supper, he would hunt up some

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<sup>17</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1831, B. 200/a/14 fos. 9.



ducks, grouse, or perhaps a mess of fine mountain trout. Around the evening fire he spun tales of his lifetime of wilderness travel. It is clear that John McLeod was especially attached to Narcissa Whitman, but his conduct was ever exemplary and his relationship with Narcissa was that of a "gentleman to a lady."<sup>18</sup>

McLeod's tenure in the Columbia Department, in addition to showing us a very human side of the man, also presents a wrinkle, one that should be straightened out. It comes from that same return trip from the 1836 rendezvous. William Gray, a young American with the mission party, took sick and could not keep up with the fast moving Hudson's Bay party. Whatever the illness, it was not serious, just somewhat inconvenient. After struggling to keep up, the young man could not go on and wanted to rest by the side of a mountain stream. As Gray tells it in the third person, "A word from McLeod would have stopped the caravan." But the word did not come, leading Gray to surmise, "My impression of this transaction has always been that McLeod wished to get rid of this young American."<sup>19</sup>

This is, of course, rubbish, but the record should be clear. William Gray, by the time he "could not keep up" was miles behind the caravan and even further from McLeod, who was probably at its head. He was in the care of a physician, Marcus Whitman, and was obviously not on death's door as he caught up with the caravan before the end of the day. The fact is, Gray was not McLeod's responsibility, the caravan

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<sup>18</sup>Clifford Drury, Marcus and Narcissa Whitman and the Opening of Old Oregon (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur Clarke Co., 1973), p. 325.

<sup>19</sup>DeVoto, Across the Wide Missouri, p. 264.

was. Gray eventually made it to camp with the aid, Narcissa relates, of an Indian, probably sent back by McLeod. This fact is reenforced by Gray himself who deviously neglects to mention the Indian. William Gray was a bitter man, envious of many, spiteful toward all. He hated mountain men, he hated the Whitmans, and he hated gentlemen. John McLeod was a friend of the Whitmans, part mountain man, and every bit a gentleman, especially to Narcissa. Furthermore, in all that this researcher has found, this is the only black mark against John McLeod, and considering the source of the accusation it is probably to McLeod's credit that Gray was his enemy.<sup>20</sup>

John McLeod began his first exploration for the Company on June fifth, 1823. His party consisted of two Canadian voyageurs, a half breed interpreter, and seven Indian hunters. The expedition was later joined by several other Indians who were recruited on route. Their goal was to ascend the South Nahanni River (which enters the Liard River just over a hundred miles upstream from Fort Simpson) and open commercial contact with the Indians who lived along its banks.<sup>21</sup>

The headwaters of the South Nahanni River reach far westward to near the very crest of the Mackenzie Mountains. This long valley makes the South Nahanni one of the largest tributaries of the Liard River. Unfortunately, the Nahanni's course through the mountains to the Liard is scarred by frequent rapids and unpassable cataracts--the most impressive Virginia Falls, is actually higher than Niagara Falls.

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 264. DeVoto discusses this whole episode, and it is his rendering upon which I based my account.

<sup>21</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1823, B. 200/a/2 fos. 2.

All of this helps to make the South Nahanni one of the most beautiful rivers in North America. But for John McLeod and his voyageurs the canyons and hard driving current of the Nahanni made his task of pushing west extremely difficult.

After two days of trying to push their North Canoe upstream, the explorers decided to abandon river travel and proceed overland. Their line of march took them over various types of terrain, sometimes through the thick vegetation of swampy lowlands, other times over barren, tundra-like mountain ridges. Eventually McLeod made contact with the Nahanni Indians.

The Nahanni band numbered fourteen all told, and they were led by a man known as White Eyes, "a tall strong and robust built man," who, according to McLeod, had a beard which reminded him of "an old Roman Sage." McLeod made the chief and his band recipients of many "wonderful" gifts designed to whet their appetites enough to make them regular customers in the future. The Nahannis were honored with such marvels as mirrors, metal kettles, axes, knives, fire steel, and vermilion.<sup>22</sup>

The friendly reception by the Nahanni Indians should properly be credited to two Indians that McLeod had sent out to scout a few days before. These men met up with the Nahannis and no doubt assured them of the Hudson's Bay Company's peaceful intentions.

McLeod was unable to receive much geographic information from the Nahannis, but after a second night of singing and dancing, he did make arrangements to rendezvous with White Eyes and his band the

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<sup>22</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1823, B. 200/a/2 fos. 11.

following year. Before starting for home, he also "sent five young Indians to the upper part of the Nahanny River with instructions to make pine canoes and go downstream, and await my arrival where we left our canoe."<sup>23</sup> After a hot and uncomfortable march, the party reached Mattson Creek, where the canoe was found in fine shape. Upon regumming it, the expedition set out for Fort Simpson, which they reached on July tenth.<sup>24</sup>

When McLeod reached Fort Simpson that July, it was quite a different place from the active bustling establishment he had left in June, the reason being that, since he had embarked, the summer brigade had departed. About the middle of every June the gentleman commanding the district would travel downstream to the lower posts, Fort Norman and Fort Good Hope, inspect those establishments, and collect the annual fur returns before arriving back at Fort Simpson. He would then supervise the loading of the Fort Simpson and Fort Liard returns (the latter having been brought downstream by canoe or boat) and again embark, this time for Fort Chipewyan and Portage La Loche. To help speed the brigade on its summer long race with fast closing winter, Fort Simpson would be stripped of every available hand; hence, the quiet, peaceful atmosphere McLeod found at the post.

After leaving Fort Simpson, the brigade would head east, up the remaining two hundred miles of the Mackenzie and out across the Great Slave Lake. Passing Fort Resolution, the brigade would abandon lake travel and enter the Slave River. The most trying part of the journey

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., fos. 14.

came at Pelican Rapids, where the river rips through a succession of chutes and falls, dropping over one hundred feet in sixteen miles.<sup>25</sup> The Mackenzie brigade would eventually leave the Slave River and enter one of the great river deltas in North America. Just northwest of Lake Athabasca, the Slave, Peace, and Athabasca rivers all come together, creating a mass of ponds, channels, and backwaters. Upon emerging from the delta's swampy environs, the brigade would reach Lake Athabasca and Fort Chipewyan.

At Fort Chipewyan the fur traders deposited the Mackenzie District's furs and reloaded their boats with a year's supply of trade goods. During the few days the Mackenzie men remained at the Fort, it became a small scale reenactment of the larger rendezvous held annually at Norway House or in the Rocky Mountains; **contests of strength and daring**, drinking and gambling, friendships renewed and acquaintanceships made.

Beginning in 1826, the Mackenzie brigade's itinerary was modified. Governor Simpson, who studied the Company's operations, always looking for a more efficient mode of business, eliminated Fort Chipewyan as the Mackenzie District's exchange point in favor of Portage La Loche.<sup>26</sup> This added an additional two hundred miles to the Mackenzie brigade's summer odyssey, but it saved the voyageurs coming up from Norway House near Lake Winnipeg the ordeal of the long portage.

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<sup>25</sup>Charles Camsell, Son of the North (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1954), pp. 18-19.

<sup>26</sup>H.B.C.A., George Simpson--London Governing Committee, Hudson's Bay Company, August 31, 1825, D. 4/7 fos. 142d.

La Loche's twelve and a half miles had long been the crucible of a voyageur, a test by which a man measured his mettle. Following Simpson's directive, the voyageurs would seldom have to hike the entire trail; instead, the men coming up the Churchill would pack the trade goods just over halfway across the portage to a point known as "Rendezvous Lake," where they would meet the Mackenzie brigade. Here, the voyageurs would exchange burdens, a bale of furs for a load of trade goods. For the Mackenzie brigade, it was the end of a summer of what had mostly been an upstream battle; from here to Fort Good Hope, it was downstream all the way.

In the summer of 1822, Chief Trader Alexander R. McLeod had been the factor commanding the Mackenzie brigade south. But when it came time for the boats to again head north, A. R. McLeod was not in charge; Edward Smith, a Chief Factor, would be the new master at Fort Simpson. Although some fur traders accused Alexander McLeod of "preposterous and galling use of authority" in managing the District, Governor Simpson assured A. R. McLeod that the change was not a reflection on his ability.<sup>27</sup> Instead, Chief Factor Smith was given

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<sup>27</sup>Glyndwr Williams, ed., "Sir George Simpson's Character Book, 1832," Hudson's Bay Miscellany, 1670-1870 (Winnipeg: The Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1975), p. 190. In spite of what George Simpson may have told Alexander McLeod, the Governor does not seem to have had a high opinion of the Chief Trader. In 1832, in the privacy of his infamous "Character Book," Simpson described McLeod as "arrogant; does not confine himself to plain matter of fact, annoys everyone near him with the details of his own exploits; 'I did this', 'I did that' and 'I did the other thing' continually in his mouth, but it unfortunately happens that he rarely does anything well." Not only did Simpson find him "a most overbearing Tyrannical fellow," he thought him "capable of little mean tricks" and suspected him of being "fond of a glass of Grog in private." In summary, McLeod "would have made an excellent Guide altho' he adds little respectability to the 'Fur Trade' as a Partner" (Ibid., p. 191).

charge because the Company felt that the Mackenzie District "is now so important and extended a charge that the presence of another commissioned gentleman is considered desirable."<sup>28</sup>

According to the hierarchy of Rupert's Land, the title of Chief Factor was the most coveted honor. This select group, limited to twenty-five men, were full shareholders in the Company, occupying a position similar to that of the "wintering partners" of the North West Company. They were generally senior fur traders, long, able, and loyal employees of the Company. Each summer a representative group of Chief Factors would meet in Council with Governor Simpson and plan fur trade policy. The second tier of "commissioned gentlemen" were the Chief Traders. They held only half as many shares as the Chief Factors, with their ranks limited to only twenty-eight men. These men were actively employed in the field and had less administrative authority than the Chief Factors. The day to day responsibility of most trading posts, however, rested with the Company's clerks. The clerks were a genuine mixed bag. Some of them entered the Company's employ at the early ages of fourteen or fifteen, serving, as part of their training, for five years as apprentice clerks. Others were the half-breed sons of fur trade marriages, raised at trading posts and ignorant of any other life. Some clerks were young men, bored with the drudgery of rural life in Canada and Scotland, who entered the trade with the hope of an adventurous life and the prospects of improving themselves. If the Hudson's Bay Company's personnel policy had a flaw, it was that it failed to

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<sup>28</sup>H.B.C.A., George Simpson--A. R. McLeod, June 16, 1823, D. 4/2 fos. 60.

allow much upward mobility for the ambitious clerks who bore the brunt of the frontier's hardships. With the numbers of Chief Factors and Traders limited, openings came only with death or retirement; thus, only a handful of deserving clerks could hope for promotion into the executive branch of the Company. Postmasters and interpreters, non-commissioned officers as it were, rounded out the Company's administration.

Of the men to rise to the rank of Chief Factor, few were more able than Edward Smith. He joined the North West Company prior to 1806, served as a clerk in the Athabasca District, and in 1814 was made a wintering partner.<sup>29</sup> Following the Union of 1821, he was appointed a Chief Factor. Smith made a favorable impression on Simpson during the winter of 1822-23 when the Governor wintered at Fort Chipewyan. Simpson no doubt wanted a man he could trust in this far removed corner of Rupert's Land. As an administrator, Smith was able to get the most from his subordinates "through his kind conciliatory manners and upright conduct."<sup>30</sup> He became known for his "regularity & system" in Company affairs and was affectionately referred to as "daddy Smith."<sup>31</sup>

When the Mackenzie brigade again arrived at Fort Simpson, John McLeod had a new officer to report his explorations to. Smith was well versed in Governor Simpson's expansion strategy, and with John McLeod

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<sup>29</sup>Wallace W. Stewart, ed., Documents Relating to the North West Company (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1934), p. 499.

<sup>30</sup>Williams, ed., "Simpson's Character Book," Hudson's Bay Miscellany, p. 175.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 176.



also wintering at Fort Simpson, the two would have plenty of time to plan the next year's exploring campaign. The first thing to do would be to assess the accomplishments of the recently completed expedition. Most importantly, contact with the Nahanni Indians had been effected and a trade rendezvous had been arranged. But McLeod had also discovered that the majority of the Nahannis inhabited "the West branch of the Riviere au Liard" and that White Eye's band "had not visited them now three winters."<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the South Nahanni River area might not be the best place to focus exploration, as it would seem to be only peripherally in the Nahanni tribe's range.

As for the coming year's plans, John McLeod would be sent back into the South Nahanni River area. His main goal would be to meet up with White Eye's Nahannis and try to induce them to bring their furs down to either Fort Liard or Fort Simpson. Furthermore, McLeod was to scout out the fur possibilities of the Nahanni area and enquire about the country west of the mountains. At the same time, explorations were to be pursued in the country of the upper Liard. An ambitious clerk, Murdock McPherson, would advance up the Liard until he arrived at one of its main tributaries, the Beaver River. He would then scout as much of this stream as possible, keeping an eye as to its promise as beaver country and making contact with any of its natives.<sup>33</sup>

#### John McLeod's 1824 Nahanni Expedition

On the eighth of June, 1824, John McLeod began his second

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<sup>32</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1824, B. 200/a/2 fos. 4.

<sup>33</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1824, B. 200/a/5 fos. 22.

Nahanni expedition. He again was forced to abandon his canoe after ascending the South Nahanni River only forty miles. Marching overland the Hudson's Bay men rendezvoused with White Eyes and his band on the twenty-fifth. The Nahannis were glad to meet with McLeod. They had passed a hard winter and had been near starvation; consequently, they had gathered little in the way of furs. Equally disappointing was the trader's inability to get sound geographic information for want of an interpreter.<sup>34</sup>

McLeod, however, was not going to let the voyage prove fruitless; he tried to lure White Eyes to visit Fort Simpson. He was successful in this after his hunters provided nine caribou to feed the Nahanni band while their leader was away.

When they arrived at Fort Simpson, McLeod had the Nahannis instructed on how to dress skins so as to best preserve the fur. Edward Smith also questioned them at length concerning their country. In particular he asked them if they knew of a great river west of the mountains. On this matter the traders were disappointed; the Nahannis did not have any knowledge of a western waterway. However, White Eyes did mention a tribe which lived even further west than the Nahannis. This tribe, which he called the "Dahadinnis" were supposed to dwell on the western slopes of the Mackenzie Mountains, and have trade contacts with white traders from the sea.<sup>35</sup>

On the fourth of July, John McLeod ferried White Eyes and

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<sup>34</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1824, B. 200/a/5/fos. 35.

<sup>35</sup>R. M. Patterson, "The Nahanny Lands," The Beaver (Summer, 1961), p. 47.

his relations across to the west bank of the Liard. The Nahannis had a difficult march ahead of them but the Company supplied the needed provisions, not to mention a few gifts, and the Nahannis left "pleased and elated beyond description."<sup>36</sup>

### The Beaver River Expedition

As McLeod's second Nahanni journey came to an end, Edward Smith dispatched another exploratory party westward toward the mountains. Commanding this enterprise was Murdock McPherson, the clerk in charge of the Company's post at Fort Liard. McPherson had been born some twenty-eight years before in Gairloch, Ross-shire, Scotland. In 1816, he joined the North West Company and a year later he was dispatched to the Athabasca District. After the union in 1821, he was appointed a clerk in the Hudson's Bay Company. In 1823, he was assigned to the Mackenzie District.<sup>37</sup> The young clerk was anxious for advancement and was not at Fort Liard long when he dispatched a band of Fort Liard Indians, seven in number, led by one Niltsitaibeta, to reconnoiter the upper Liard. Hopefully, the band would be able to discover "the source of the West Branch of this River."<sup>38</sup> This group must have been mainly a hunting party which, in a secondary capacity, was ordered to keep a sharp eye out for the lay of the land; in any event, after nearly two months of voyaging, the party broke through a range of mountains which

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Wallace, Documents Relating to the North West Company, p. 483.

<sup>38</sup>H.B.C.A., Mackenzie District Report, 1825, B. 200/e/4 fos. 4.

the river dissects and called a halt to their advance. Their farthest progress was probably the Liard Plain, far short of the river's source.<sup>39</sup>

McPherson's 1824 expedition was designed to explore the Liard River as far as the mouth of the Beaver River. While advancing up this stream, McPherson was to take note of its fur yielding potential and make contact with any of the area's inhabitants; this was supposed to be the main territory of the Nahanni Indians.

McPherson set out on the sixth of July, hiking overland along the Liard River. The Liard was in flood and moving fast; McPherson, who had never thought it practical for upstream travel anyway, figured that he would move faster by foot. Although he does not mention it, he also may have had difficulty in procuring good canoe men as most of the local Indians shunned water transport. Accompanying the clerk was an interpreter and the necessary Indian hunters. The weather was terrible, as it rained for several days. The streams and rivulets that normally meandered into the Liard were all rushing torrents which made crossing tricky, cold, and inevitably wet. The more difficult of these could only be forded by cutting down trees and bridging the bed of the stream.

Considering these conditions, they made good time, marching all the way to "Rivere de la Biche," almost halfway to the Beaver, on the second day. Fortunately, the men were traveling light, the majority of the outfit had been sent ahead with an advance party by North canoe; the two parties were to rendezvous at the mouth of the Beaver River. Still, McPherson was setting a hard pace, "We had our bundles on our

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

backs at 5 a.m. and travelled along the River in Mud and Weather, Hills and Branches."<sup>40</sup> The pace was too hard for some of the men, "the Interpreter and Indians complained of fatigue."<sup>41</sup>

The hard marching continued the next day, July ninth. But at least the men could be consoled with the thought that by evening they would reach the Beaver River and that their comrades there would have a hot meal waiting for them. Their "comrades," however, were not that considerate; in a very imprudent manner they had squandered all of the provisions. With empty stomachs and hearts no doubt filled with black thoughts, McPherson's party went to sleep.

Having arrived at the Beaver, the clerk began taking note of its character:

The Beaver Rivere is at this place about 150 yards wide with a strong and steady current, the water being at present very high. The country in this viccinity, in looking toward the south and west appears to be fine and well wooded in the Contrary directions it looks barrean and Mountious.<sup>42</sup>

The Beaver is one of the six major rivers which drain the Mackenzie Mountains. The Keele (the Gravel River of the fur traders) and North Nahanni rivers send their waters to the east, into the Mackenzie River, while the Hyland, South Nahanni, Coal, and Beaver rivers drain into the mountain's water southwest, into the Liard River.<sup>43</sup> The Beaver River itself drains a broad area, although it is basically a

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<sup>40</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1824, B. 200/a/5 fos. 25d.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>Alan E. Cameron, "South Nahanni River," Canadian Geographic Journal (May, 1930), pp. 48-55.

shallow and swift river, not very great in length. Even in high water the Beaver was not navigable for a North canoe for much more than one hundred miles.<sup>44</sup>

Saturday, the tenth of July, saw the united party set off at an early hour. Hunters were sent overland to join up with the canoe in the evening at a selected rendezvous location. The canoe's progress was slow: "The current was extremely strong all day but with the continued setting poles, line and Paddles **alternately and all sometimes** together we got to the appointed place **about** an hour after sunset."<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately, the hunters were unsuccessful in their efforts; no game was brought down.

McPherson stayed in camp the next day; he knew it would be foolhardy to advance further into the unknown with the larder barren. Those nearby hills seemed just the place for mountain sheep and so he dispatched his hunters up the slopes with every hope of success. He was not disappointed as one of the hunters returned to camp "with a fat Goat on his back, & with which we very soon regalled ourselves."<sup>46</sup> More hunting resumed the following day, but the hunters returned empty handed.

On July thirteenth they hit the river again. The canoe had been gummed the day before, which was fortunate, for the current picked

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<sup>44</sup>E. D. Kindle, "Geogological Reconnaissance Along Fort Nelson, Liard, and Beaver Rivers, Northeastern British Columbia, and South-western **Yukon**." Canadian Geological Survey, Paper 44-16 (Ottawa: Department of Mines and Geology Branch, 1944), p. 1.

<sup>45</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1824, B. 200/a/5 fos. 26.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

up and they were forced to ascend a number of rapids. McPherson had traveled about forty-five miles up the Beaver River, and the river was beginning to force its way through a series of mountains. Some of the ridges which shadowed the voyageurs rose to heights of over 4,500 feet above sea level. While traveling, McPherson closely observed the surrounding terrain: "The Country in the vicinity of this place, especially the South side of the River looks fine, the Hills, However, are heights but well wooded with Pine, Birch, and Liard, on the North side of the Hills are snow baren."<sup>47</sup> Along the river's banks beaver cuttings abounded.

Signs of that animal continued to reveal a heavy population in the Beaver River. The hunters also noted his presence and beaver began to make their appearance at the evening mess. At about 1:00 p.m. on the fifteenth of July, McPherson came upon a small river falling into the Beaver from the north. He landed at the forks of the two rivers, and on a tree "I engraved my initials as acting for the H. Bay Company."<sup>48</sup> The course was "north-northwest" up river the next day as the party continued to push into rough terrain. The evening camp was made at about 7:00 p.m., "and at half past 8 all our party was assembled round a blazing fire with four beavers and some pieces of Moose meat."<sup>49</sup> But good cheer did not abound at this camp fire, "The Indians complained of fatigue, and I must confess with reason, not being accustom to so

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<sup>47</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1824, B. 200/a/5 fos. 27.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1824, B. 200/a/5 fos. 28.

regular duty."<sup>50</sup>

They set off as usual the next morning but the idea of turning back, the seed so to speak, had been planted; all that was needed now was a sprinkling of adversity and a healthy dose of discomfort to make the plant thrive. This the river soon seemed willing to provide. During the next two days' travel, the river left the heavily timbered topography that had marked the abundant beaver hunting; in fact, signs of the creature gradually disappeared. The river bed itself narrowed and the current quickened; progress was slow. Mountainous country made tracking upstream doubly difficult. On the eighteenth of July, the interpreter, the Indians, the entire crew, all with one voice, called for going back.

McPherson agreed, his instructions, vague to begin with, had been fulfilled. The Beaver River was becoming difficult, and it seemed that they might be near the end of the practical navigation. Furthermore, they had found no Nahanni Indians; the encampments they did stumble on were old, even the scaffolds were barren and weathered. The Nahanni Indians had long ago deserted this area in fear of the Fort Liard Indians.

The best beaver country they had visited lay behind them and it was resolved to divide the party, half to return to Fort Liard, half to trap for beaver. The downstream trip was surprisingly quick, by the twenty-second of July, McPherson was back at Fort Liard.

The accomplishments of the voyage were few, the Beaver had only been ascended for about one hundred miles. They had encountered no new

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<sup>50</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1824, B. 200/a/5 fos. 28.



tribes; indeed, they made no strong effort to make contact with the Nahannis. For instance, no signal fires were lit as McLeod had done. Part of McPherson's problems were of his own making; he seems to have picked a poor group of traveling companions, they were improvident, in ill-shape, and unambitious. McPherson does not seem to have been able to discipline these chaps. To complain of fatigue after less than a week of travel is incredible! McPherson may have been a good Indian trader, but he was not a leader of men; the Indians seemed to know that they could have their way with him.

On the plus side, new beaver country had been opened. McPherson was correct in perceiving it as "a long time a treasure," for both the Indians and the Company. Furthermore, the frontiers of the district had been broadened "to the westward." McPherson completed his journal and compiled a map of the Liard area, incorporating his explorations with those of the Indian hunters he had dispatched the summer before. He sent this report to the district headquarters, giving the impression that he had accomplished more than he actually had. If Murdock McPherson did not know how to handle men, he did know how to handle his superiors.<sup>51</sup>

The explorations of McLeod and McPherson were the first steps of the Hudson's Bay Company's exploration of the far northwest. These expeditions were not impressive endeavors, either in their design, what they were intended to accomplish, or in their execution. The South Nahanni and Beaver rivers did not become routes to the interior and their exploration did not directly aid the search for the rich fur

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<sup>51</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1824, B. 200/a/5 fos. 28d.

country the Company hoped to find west of the Mackenzie Mountains.

Nevertheless, the efforts of John McLeod and Murdock McPherson did lay the groundwork for future, more fruitful exploration. Although the South Nahanni and Beaver rivers did not turn out to be the main hunting grounds of the Nahanni Indians, the Company did find that the majority of these Indians were to be found further up the Liard River. In this way the explorations of 1823-1824 pointed the direction for the future expansion of the fur trade.

The English also discovered that the tribes west of the mountains were in contact with white traders on the Pacific Coast. This meant that the Hudson's Bay Company was nearing one of the sources of the Russian-American Company's trade. But the Hudson's Bay Company was not in a position to take advantage of that information because the most important thing these early explorations revealed was the difficulty of penetrating the interior. Exploration up the Liard River would be a prolonged endeavor, one whose rewards were as yet many years in the future.

## CHAPTER IV

### "THE STRANGEST MAN I EVER KNEW": SAMUEL BLACK AND THE HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY'S EXPLORATION OF NORTHERN NEW CALEDONIA

#### The Origin of the Finlay River Expedition

The Hudson's Bay Company directed a third probe westward in the summer of 1824. This expedition, however, was not dispatched from the Mackenzie District; rather it began in that section of northern British Columbia where the Hudson's Bay Company's Peace River District bordered on the unknown reaches of New Caledonia.

New Caledonia was the fur trader's name for the vast territory which now embraces the northern and central interior of British Columbia. It had been pioneered in the early nineteenth century by Simon Fraser, who had followed Alexander Mackenzie's footsteps over the Rocky Mountains. These Nor'Westers had pushed up the Peace River over five hundred miles to where that river divides into two branches. One branch, the Parsnip River, flows from the south. This was the river which led to Summit Lake and the pass between the Peace River system and the Fraser River Valley. Like the Mackenzie District, New Caledonia had until the Union in 1821 remained the sole domain of the North West Company. Therefore, the land had been spared the ruinous effects of competition and it was among the Hudson's Bay Company's most valued treasures.

Because of New Caledonia's removed position, west of the Rockies, and the rough topography of its landscape, its true extent was unknown. Great rivers, lakes, and mountain valleys rich with fur bearing animals could be hidden over the next mountain range. The unmapped geography of the region held infinite promise.

Particularly inviting was the northern branch of the Peace River, the Finlay River. The Finlay had only been explored a short distance in 1797 by John Finlay of the North West Company. His report of the river was not encouraging enough for the North West Company to take a further interest in the river. Occasionally, bands of roving Iroquois trappers would move up the Finlay, but for practical purposes the fur trade ignored the area. Governor Simpson changed that indifferent attitude. He saw the Finlay as a possible avenue to the large river he expected to find west of the northern Rocky Mountains.<sup>1</sup> After all, the Peace's southern branch, the Parsnip River, led to the Fraser River. Perhaps the northern branch, the Finlay, might also lead to a major river valley.

In January of 1823, the Governor assigned Peter Warren Dease, another former Nor'Wester, the job of exploring the Finlay River. He was to follow the river to its source in the mountains, then strike out overland until he fell upon either the great transmountain river of Cook and Mackenzie's reports or the sources of the Liard River. It was a tall order, one which Peter Warren Dease did not appear too anxious

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<sup>1</sup>Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba. Fort Simpson Journal, 1823, B. 200/a/5 fos. 28d. Hereafter, this collection will be cited as H.B.C.A.

to execute. He produced a number of delays and excuses; first, he complained that he had received his orders too late in the season to prepare properly, then, it was a problem of adequate transport upriver. The end result was the expedition's postponement until 1824. Whether Dease's tarrying was legitimate, or whether he just did not want the mission, does not really matter. In disappointment, Simpson wrote to his superiors in London that the exploration of northern New Caledonia "has occupied my attention for these two years but [I] could not succeed in procuring anyone to undertake it . . . ." <sup>2</sup>

George Simpson wasted no time in replacing Dease with a more active man, Samuel Black. Black was yet another Scottish born Nor'Wester. Baptized in May of 1870, an illegitimate child, young Black grew to manhood in County Aberdeen. At the age of twenty-two, having acquired a solid education, he left his home for Canada. <sup>3</sup> Entering the North West Company in 1804, he was dispatched to the far-northwest. Black quickly showed a talent for bullying and harassing the rival traders of the Hudson's Bay Company. Aided by a kindred spirit, Peter Skene Ogden, another young Nor'Wester, Black kept the Honorable Company's clerks terrorized; behind every misadventure they saw his tall thin frame. Like a true swashbuckler, he went into every fray ready for anything, armed with dagger, sabre, and pistol--even his superiors

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<sup>2</sup>George Simpson, Fur Trade and Empire: George Simpson's Journal, 1824-1825, ed. Frederick Merk, revised edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 203.

<sup>3</sup>E. E. Rich, ed., Black's Rocky Mountain Journal, 1824, Intro. R. M. Patterson (London: The Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1955), pp. xxvii-xxviii.

granted that "Black is certainly a desperate character."<sup>4</sup> But he was not just a mere brawler; he learned the fur business as well as any man, was a natural leader, and was fiercely loyal to the North West Company.

In 1820, when the North West Company's fortunes were fast sinking, Black's fiery reputation still burned bright. Young George Simpson, his first year on the frontier, and on his way to Lake Athabasca, Black's home ground, was warned to be wary. Simpson put up a bold front and kept on his guard, "I am however armed to the Teeth, will sell my Life in danger as dear as possible and never allow a North Wester [to] come within reach of my Rifle if Flint Steel & bullet can keep him off."<sup>5</sup>

However, the 1820-21 campaign fell short of such rhetoric. The trade war was heated, but violence was minimal. Even so, Simpson spent the winter apprehensive of what Black might attempt. When a party of Hudson's Bay Company trappers was overdue, Simpson speculated: ". . . suspicion points to the Villain Black . . . this outlaw is so callous to every honorable or manly feeling that it is not unreasonable to suspect him of the blackest acts."<sup>6</sup>

Three years later Simpson was cocky enough to write that Black "will never forget the terrors in which he was kept that winter."<sup>7</sup> Yet

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. xxxv.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. xxxvii-xxxviii.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. xli.

<sup>7</sup>Simpson, Fur Trade and Empire, p. 203.

from Simpson's own journal, Samuel Black does not appear to have been in "terrors," rather it was Simpson who was constantly on the "qui-vive," ever wary of what Black might try. Black was like an evil spectre, which hovered over Simpson's operations the entire winter; it **wreaked** no havoc, only its share of "terrors."<sup>8</sup>

The spring of 1821 brought disastrous news for Samuel Black. The North West Company, the concern to which he was devoted, was to be taken over by the despised Hudson's Bay Company. George Simpson, his former foe and his junior in experience, was to command the Northern Department, while Black, Peter Skene Ogden, and another irreconcilable, Cuthbert Grant, were not even afforded a place in the new company. As he retired from the northwest at the age of forty-one, his old comrades presented him with a ring engraved with the sentiment: "To the most worthy of the Northwesters."<sup>9</sup>

What he did for the next year is a mystery. Perhaps that is what concerned the Hudson's Bay Company, since men as experienced in the fur trade as Black and Ogden could be potential rivals in trade. As members of the Company, they could be controlled. With such a view in mind, Simpson recommended that Black and Ogden be admitted into the Hudson's Bay Company at the rank of Chief Trader.<sup>10</sup> It was one of the best moves that he ever made.

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<sup>8</sup>George Simpson, Simpson's Athabasca Journal, ed. E. E. Rich, intro. Chester Martin (London: The Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1838), p. 278.

<sup>9</sup>Rich, ed., Black's 1824 Journal, p. xlv.

<sup>10</sup>Grant was also admitted to the Company at this time, though at the lower rank of clerk.

It must have been quite a meeting when Simpson and Black again met in July of 1823 at York Factory on Hudson's Bay. The Governor saw before him "A Donquixote in appearance, ghastly, raw-boned and lanthorn jawed, yet strong vigorous and active."<sup>11</sup> But what fascinated Simpson was the inner man, the character of this **adventurer, who until recently, had been his foe:** He thought Black:

The strangest Man I ever knew . . . . A perfectly honest man and his generosity might be considered indicative of a warmth of heart if he was not to be known to be a cold blooded fellow who could be guilty of any cruelty and would be a perfect Tyrant if he had the power . . . his word when he can be brought to the point may be depended upon.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout their interview, Black never once looked Simpson in the eye. The Governor noted this, perhaps uneasily. In any event, Simpson elected to put some distance between him and Black, and the Finlay River expedition fit the bill perfectly.

Samuel Black could not have been more pleased. He was a student of the history of exploration, and familiar with the narratives of North America's great explorers. In his heart he had always harbored the ambition of contributing to geography some unknown part of the continent. By 1823 the possibilities were swiftly diminishing; for Black, also, the Finlay River expedition fit the bill perfectly.

Black set to the task with his characteristic energy. He spent the winter at Rocky Mountain Portage, on the Peace River, where he would have easy access to the "Finlay Branch" when the ice went out in

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<sup>11</sup>Glyndwr Williams, ed., "George Simpson's Character Book, 1832," Hudson's Bay Miscellany, 1670-1870, intro. Glyndwr Williams (Winnipeg: The Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1975), p. 193.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.



the spring. In addition to "shaking down" his outfit, he interviewed some of the Iroquois trappers who had traveled on the Finlay. He also enquired among the natives as to the lay of the land west of the mountains. These enquiries held him in good stead. For rather than looking for a river that would flow northwest into the Arctic Ocean, like the Mackenzie, he heard reports of a river that flowed westward, to the Pacific. This should have brought his quest into line with the realities of geography. He would be able to search out the headwaters of the Stikine instead of the Yukon or some imaginary stream.

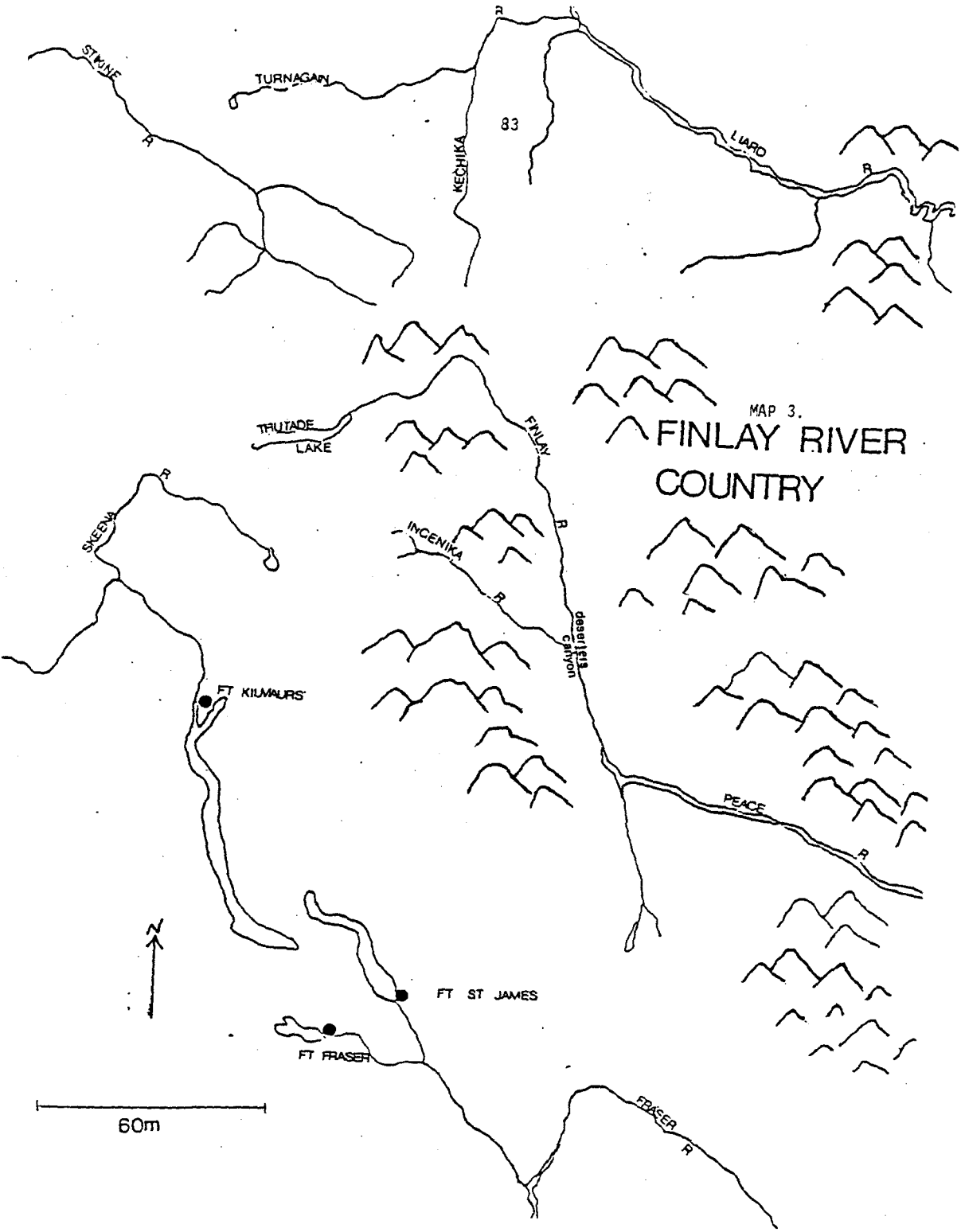
If Black was getting a clearer idea of what lay behind the mountainous frontier of knowledge, Simpson seemed to be hopelessly lost amid its box canyons and deadfalls of rumors and Indian reports. Here are his orders to Black: After Black had explored the upper Finlay he would hopefully discover the headwaters of the river which paralleled the Mackenzie. Having achieved this, he was to turn east, cross the divide, and fall upon the headwaters of the upper Liard. The Liard would be followed until he reached Fort Liard or Fort Simpson, where Black and his party were to winter. By this time, Black's party would have explored the entire length of one river, discovered the headwaters of a great inland waterway, and upon crossing the Arctic slope a second time, travel the entire length of a river whose upper reaches remained clothed in mystery. Total distance covered: about 750 miles! But this was not all! The next summer, Black, having wintered in the Mackenzie, would turn back, travel the entire length of the Liard River (against its considerable current), recross the Arctic slope, and explore the great transmountain river (which existed only in rumor) to its mouth,

presumably to the Arctic, "the Frozen Ocean will be the boundary of your researches to the North West."<sup>13</sup> Total distance: at least 1500 miles, not a bad summer's work.

All this was quite preposterous, perhaps even Simpson realized this in a less **exuberant** mood. It does, however, give notice of the tendency of men to imagine water courses in the unknown, map out terrain in lands yet undiscovered, and give detailed advice to explorers venturing into areas beyond the ken of even the wisest. In addition to Sir Alexander Mackenzie's report of a rumored river to the west, and a few subsequent garbled translations confirming this by the mountain Indians, Simpson was basing nearly all of his perceptions upon pure conjecture. But this can be very persuasive reasoning, one merely has to form the image of the unknown to the proportions of what has already been explored; for example, the quest for the Northwest Passage was sustained by the knowledge that a pathway was open to the south (the Strait of Magellan); hence, there must be a similar route to the north, or the way in which geographers and explorers were certain that a great river of the west existed, an open trail to the interior from the Pacific, a sister to the east's St. Lawrence River. Imaginary geography was based upon proportion and a balanced view of physiography. Simpson ignored Sir Alexander Mackenzie's belief that the transmountain river flowed to the Pacific. In the Governor's mind, the Mackenzie, the great river of the north, flowed into the Arctic Ocean, its valley spread out on a north-south axis; if a great waterway lay across the

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<sup>13</sup>Rich, ed., Black's 1824 Journal, p. liii.



MAP 3.  
FINLAY RIVER  
COUNTRY

83

60m

mountains, it would drain those mountains's waters north, like the Mackenzie, to the "Hyperborean Sea."

As the expedition prepared to set out in the spring of 1824, Samuel Black and George Simpson had two completely different visions of what would be found north of the Finlay River. Black thought that he would come upon the sources of a Pacific bound stream, while Simpson hoped that the expedition would discover a great Arctic bound waterway. Perhaps because of the personal differences between them, or merely because of slow communications, the explorer and the sponsor never straightened out this confusion. With Simpson's orders in hand, Black set off up the Finlay.

### The Finlay River Expedition

His crew consisted of six voyageurs, an interpreter, who brought along his wife, and a clerk, Donald Manson. From when they first entered the Finlay, their North canoe felt the river's strong, steady current nudging the birchbark with its silty water. Gathered at the mouths of its feeders, or at the heads of dry channels, were congested collections of driftwood, weathered logs, and uprooted trees. Contributing to the Finlay's depressing impression was the dense and tangled undergrowth, which pressed in on the explorers from the forest, confining them to the stream.

The first major hurdle came at a difficult canyon, where the Finlay, constrained by sandstone cliffs, creates a white water hazard which renders further upstream progress all but impossible. To an old Nor'Wester like Black, the word portage had the hateful sound of surrender, so he had to look over the eddies and whirlpools a couple of

times before he could bring himself to allowing a portage trail to be cut. Camp was made at the entrance to the **canyon** and it being late, Black assigned two men to the night watch. When morning came, the exploring party was minus two canoemen; Louis Ossin and Jean Bouche, the night watch, had deserted. Black was in a rage; not only did the deserters rob him of two strong backs, but they had plundered the expedition's food supplies. Black called together the remainder of his men and told them

. . . that I expected better things from those that remained; but if any plot to put a stop to the Voyage, they ought now to declare themselves, for that my determination was to get a sight of the Country pointed out by the Concern, alone with the natives should I be reduced to such an alternative.<sup>14</sup>

The men responded heartily to Black's determination, and the party crossed the portage. This spot has ever since been known as Deserter's Canyon.<sup>15</sup>

To both the east and west of the explorers, as they inched up the river, could be seen the dark-hued images of distant mountains. To the east lay the Rocky Mountains, while to the west were the auxiliary ranges of the Coastal Mountains. The Finlay, for close to one hundred and fifty miles, is flanked by these dominating shadows and flows through a deep trough between them. This amazing geographic feature is

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., pp. 19-20.

<sup>15</sup>The deserters, Ossin and Bouche, tried to flee Rupert's Land via canoe. They got as far as Ile-a-la-Crosse on the Churchill River. They were unsure of the route after this point, and this uncertainty no doubt inclined them to reconsider their action. Surrendering to the post commander, they threw themselves on the Company's mercy. Called before the Council of the Northern Department at York Factory, Ossin and Bouche were ordered to

". . . be immediately Handcuffed and in that situation that they

known as the Rocky Mountain Trench; from Montana to the Liard River, this great valley stretches nine hundred miles.<sup>16</sup> While the Finlay flowed through the Trench, passage upstream, although by no means easy, was just a matter of persistent effort. As Black put it, "by the united efforts of all hands," they managed to push up the unknown river, averaging about twelve miles a day.<sup>17</sup>

However, by the first of June, about fifty miles above Deserter's Canyon, the Finlay veered to the westward and was thus forced to cut a passage through the mountains. Black could see the river pouring through a gap surrounded by "high broken cliffs completely covered with snow."<sup>18</sup> The voyageurs knew that meant rapids ahead.

To make matters worse for the explorers, they were suffering from unseasonably bitter weather. Snow, freezing rain, and frigid temperatures are considered horrible spring weather, even in the northwest. This would mean hardship to any party crossing the wilderness and sleeping out in the open, but it was felt all the more acutely because the voyageurs spent so much of their time in and out of the water. As they

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be publickly exposed during one full day on the roof of the Factory, afterwards that they be imprisoned during one week, fed on bread and water, and in winter that one of each be sent to winter among the Europeans at Churchill & Severn Forts" (Ibid., p. 242).

Hardly a severe punishment, but it does have a quaint, almost medieval ring to it.

<sup>16</sup>R. M. Patterson, Finlay's River (New York: William Morrow & Col., 1968), p. 4.

<sup>17</sup>Rich, ed., Black's 1824 Journal, p. 21.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

arose each morning, their buckskin trousers would still be damp, and in the frigid air, muscles, stiff and tired from weeks of work, would painfully protest the start of another day. Shivering, they were eager to push off, for at least paddling would stir some warmth into their bones. Then they would begin the frequently rehearsed ordeal of jumping into the Arctic water, perhaps waist deep, to prevent the canoe from being dashed against the rocks at a landing, or laboring along the bank with a towline, dodging the overhanging branches of alder bushes, stumbling over submerged rocks, pulling the canoe upstream. It is not surprising then that Black heard his "men complain of numbness in their Arms their hands & wrists swelled & Galled by the Snow Water."<sup>19</sup>

Fourteen days and forty-five miles of such pain brought them to calm water. After the roar of the rapids, the uneasy calm, the heavy, silent soundless air which hung over the river must have seemed eerie. The Finlay was, at least temporarily, out of the mountains and flowing through a spacious valley. The landscape was much more open than on the lower river, though low and swampy. Meadows of tall wild grasses stretched along the river, broken by small duck ponds or larger, yet shallow reed choked lakes.<sup>20</sup> By Iroquois report, Black knew this to be that section of the river known as "the Fishing Lakes," and true to its name, the explorers came upon some Sikanni Indians netting fish along the river.

The Sikanni Indians were a miserable group who spent their lives

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>20</sup>Patterson, Finlay River, pp. 197-198.

in the quest for fish, game, and roots, always on the cutting edge of survival. Black, who lacked any real sensitivity to the rugged conditions of these native Americans, referred to the Sikanni as "these phlegmatic sheepish looking Gentlemen." Their poverty, in Black's eyes, was their own fault; the Sikanni "cares little about tomorrow & so lazie & indolent he will not move a step when once his actual necessities are acquired."<sup>21</sup> At the same time, Black sized up the fur potential of the region; it was not flattering. The Sikanni's hunting grounds "can by no means come under the denomination of a Beaver Country in the common acceptance of the word on the Waters of Hudsons Bay & Mackenzies River."<sup>22</sup>

However, the discouraging fur prospects of the upper Finlay area did not in any way stem Black's determination to proceed, as ordered, to the river's source and beyond. He arranged with the chief of the Sikannis, an old red man Black called Methodiates, to rendezvous with the explorers at the source of the Finlay, from where Methodiates would guide them overland to the "North West Ward." As they again began to push their canoe upstream, the explorers were only about fifty miles from the source of the river, Thutade Lake.

But between Black and the lake were some of the worst rapids on the river. The captain of the North canoe when it was in rapids was the Iroquois foreman, or bowman, Joseph La Garde. It was his duty to map out the craft's route through white water. La Garde, although

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<sup>21</sup>Rich, ed., Black's 1824 Journal, p. 36.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 53.



very skillful in a rapid, was a cautious man by nature, who not only once made a vow not to drown in a rapid, but also felt severely a responsibility for the canoe's safety. Black, of a much more daring nature, had begun by this time in the voyage to lose patience with his contentious canoemen. Upon coming to a rather treacherous rapid, where the Finlay is divided in midstream by a wooded island and is forced into two very small channels, La Garde called a halt in order to investigate a safe passage. Black looked over the rapid, and no doubt slightly piqued at La Garde's action, remarked in his journal, "the lofty brakers dancing majestically in the Sun beams before us have begun to dance in La Guards brain."<sup>23</sup>

Matters between Black and La Garde came to a head four days later. By this time, the expedition was within reach of the Finlay's source, with only one obstacle in the way. Black describes it thus:

. . . the River which falls 80 feet heavily over the smooth extended Bank with a hollow noise like distant Thunder . . . looks like a thin white sheet . . . the shelf part of the water fall is precipitated, oozing through the mass by small perforations & the whole body thus precipitated slowly recovering takes a second tumble into the Basin, at one part the water having freer Scope boils up furiously giving the Idea of the D\_\_\_ls cauldrons.<sup>24</sup>

Black marked out a short portage past only the very worst of the rapid, figuring that his voyageurs could work the canoe up the rest of the whitewater. Unknown to Black, La Garde also went ahead and blazed his own portage route, over three miles long, avoiding all dangerous water.

That night at camp, Black did not press the matter, perhaps hoping that La Garde would give up his planned portage. However, the

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 66.

next morning he found his "foreman being a little perverse & still talking about his Portage . . . having had a little too much his own way which may not answer in the future, I took this occasion to tell him some truths."<sup>25</sup> Few men could stand eyeball to eyeball with Samuel Black and remain defiant; La Garde was no exception. He abandoned his portage and asked for a new towline for the canoe. Black had made his point; he was boss. La Garde soothed his wounded pride by muttering, "he was afraid of nothing living or or anyone, which if designed for me Black I was pleased to take no notice of."<sup>26</sup>

The next day, June 23, was one of celebration. As the canoe slipped into Thutade Lake, the explorers "bade adieu to all the currents rapids shallow shelves Cascades & Falls in Finlays Branch."<sup>27</sup> Before them stretched a beautiful mountain lake, sixteen miles in length, yet only a mile in width. They had reached the source of the Finlay River, which also happened to be the source of the Peace River; in fact, Thutade Lake is the ultimate source for the entire Mackenzie River system. From that mountain sanctuary, the lake's waters had a 2,362 mile journey to the Arctic Ocean.

The expedition had achieved its first goal, navigation of the Finlay River. Before them the explorers still had their secondary mission, their nebulous orders to proceed northwestward toward the Arctic. But before embarking on so arduous a journey, Black elected to rest his crew and restock their provisions. This would also allow the June sun a chance to melt the snow that the Sikanni claimed would block the

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 69.

mountain passes.

The expedition rested until the eighth of July. Much of their time was spent fishing and hunting. They had particular luck hunting caribou. On one occasion, Black spotted "5 young Rein deer frisking in the Lake near shore." This was too good an opportunity to pass up, and the traders plotted to get all five. Black dispatched two of his men to circle through the woods and prevent the caribou from escaping to land. Then with their hatchets ready, the voyageurs in the canoe descended upon the unsuspecting beasts. The men on shore with rifles dispatched those who fled up the beach, while the men in the canoe had quite a chase before they could catch the caribou in the water. In fact, two of the caribou, panic-stricken and swimming like dolphins, nearly reached the other side of the lake, a mile away, before the hungry traders sunk their hatchets into the necks of the helpless stags.<sup>28</sup> Meat aplenty, and Black ordered scaffolds erected to dry it over low fires. He also supervised the construction of two very strong caches; he wanted supplies to be laid up for their return journey, safe even from the wily wolverine, "the Most destructive animal in the Country."<sup>29</sup>

Black was in high spirits when they finally set out overland. Almost two months of hard travel had gone by since they had initially set out, but the Scotsman, who had read so much of the exploits of great explorers, was still keyed up by the idea of leading his own party into "the Bonny Glens of the Rocky Mountains." As Black looked over his brigade, a cosmopolitan crew composed of English, Iroquois,

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

French-Canadian half-breeds, Sikanni men and women, and heard the babble of a half dozen different dialects and languages, it brought to mind "a set of itinerant Gipsies squabbling in their drunken fates."<sup>30</sup> But what Black labels "squabbling" may actually have been muttered oaths or groans, for the men labored with packs of one-hundred-and-twenty pounds, not to mention their personal gear. Black and Donald Manson did not feel the leather straps biting into their shoulders, or the tumpline burrowing into their foreheads, for their packs weighed a mere fifty pounds. There were certain advantages to being a "commissioned gentleman" in Rupert's Land.

The first two days on the trail were marred by rain. The explorers made a difficult crossing of a small rapid-choked river by building rafts. From before dawn, until dusk, they marched on; the Sikanni lagged behind and griped about their burdens, while the sturdy voyageurs, with "patient indurance," shouldered "the hated Loads," and set the pace. One can only admire the steady, methodical way the voyageurs went about their duties, even on land. On a particularly mild morning, Black had "involuntary indulged an hour longer than usual in morpheus chains"; in other words, he overslept. Looking about him, he found only Donald Manson, the rest of the camp was gone.<sup>31</sup> Had they deserted him? Not at all; the voyageurs had merely wakened at the usual time, packed up camp, and continued forward, carefully marking their trail so that their leaders could catch up, when they chose to awake. What more could Black ask for?

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 92.

After a week of travel, the Hudson's Bay men reached a small mountain lake. Here they met up with Methodiates, who had gone ahead to make contact with a neighboring tribe, the Thloadennis, into whose lands the explorers were soon to enter. A council was arranged. On the fifteenth of July, in the twilight of a subarctic evening, a group of fifteen Thloadenni braves approached the lakeshore encampment. The strange tribe "arrived slowly singing harmoniously . . . dressed in their best apparel for the occasion." Resplendent in white leggings, embroidered with "Porcupine quill work," their stout chests and strong shoulders bare, save for long strands of their black hair, crowned by an array of feathers, they looked the embodiment of the natural man. Their first stop was at Methodiates' tent; he was "also in state to receive them with his War Cap on." The old chief joined the savage entourage as it moved toward Black's camp.<sup>32</sup>

The explorers had prepared the council grounds, above which flew the scarlet Hudson's Bay Company ensign, the standard of the British Empire in the Rocky Mountains. Black greeted the Thloadennis like proper gentlemen, "by shaking Hands & this mode of salutation they returned very awkwardly after giving the left hand in a Bear like manner."<sup>33</sup> With the introductions aside, Black gave each of the red men a plug of tobacco, and the council began.

Black made the first speech, giving the Thloadennis a history lesson, as he spoke of how the fur trade had expanded into New Caledonia, and how two great warring parties, the Hudson's Bay Company and

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., pp. 108-109.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 109.

North West Company were now "formed into one & one & the same People & that we were now come to see if there were any of their relations hereabouts, pitiful & in want of a Kettle and a Gun a Hatchet a Knife or Fine Steel." All the good traders wanted in return were animal furs, beaver and marten, and information as to the lay of the land and the course of rivers. But he also gave them a warning "to tell no lies, for the White People hated Liars."<sup>34</sup>

The Thloadennis marked what Black said and told the truth, but their words meant discouragement for the explorer. In spite of their noble appearance, much more impressive than the Sikanni, the Thloadenni lived a precarious existence. Their homeland was the upper slopes of the rugged Stikine Plateau. They lived in fear of a strong, populous tribe they called the "Trading Nahannies." These Indians had a fat life on the banks of a large westward flowing river, amply supplied with migratory salmon. They were all the more powerful because of secure trade contacts with white men along the ocean, men whom Black took to be Russian traders. These "Trading Nahanni," armed with rifles and an abundance of ammunition, harried the Thloadenni, keeping them from the salmon waters, forcing them into a wretched state.<sup>35</sup>

So fearful were the Thloadenni of these "Trading Nahanni" that they refused to guide Black further into the interior. They told Black that they were at war with the "Trading Nahanni" and would not risk venturing into their grasp. The fur trader tried to explain to "these wild men of the Mountains" something of the way that the Hudson's Bay

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 112.

Company viewed the world:

War amongst Indians did not stop our Business from going on & would not in the present case stop me, that we had never done anything to the Nahannies, that if I saw them I would be kind to them & give them some of our Goods if pitiful & in want. In other words, a three point trade blanket was a powerful enough charm to disarm the most bellicose of foes. But Black also told the as-yet-unconvinced Thloadenni something about himself: if I found them the "Trading Nahanni" bad Dogs & wished to quarrel with us; we would kill them, that we had Guns & Pistols Powder & Ball as well as the Nahannies & never all slept at one time in the Night, that we had come here to see the Lands & would not turn back on conjecture that the Nahannies would kill us.<sup>36</sup>

The Thloadenni were stirred by this bravado, but not enough to change their minds.

The expedition spent nine days among the Thloadenni, resting and restoring both their bodies and spirits. For the former there was caribou meat, rabbit, and ground squirrels, while for the latter lovely "Thloadenni Sylvan Nymphs," fine "in shape & appearance, light and tripping, a soft melodious voice with a timerous kind of underside look that says much without intending it."<sup>37</sup> Black also managed to secure information concerning a westward flowing river, the "Schadzue," a mighty stream which led to the ocean, and a white man's fort.

By the twenty-fourth of July, the explorers were again on the trail, though they had failed to secure Thloadenni guides. Methodiates and his Sikanni braves remained with the party. They followed a winding trail through the mountains which Black called the "Thloadenni Road." That flattering description hardly matches what he had to endure. Even Black, whose colorful pen was usually ready for any detail,

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 121.

could only note wearily at the end of a day, "[we] came through Roads passing description often to the knees in moss & water entangled in under Wood &c."<sup>38</sup>

That day had been too much for La Prise, Black's half-breed interpreter and chief hunter. At one point he begged Black to turn back, complaining "that he did not expect such a country," and that after the many hardships of the journey, "he was knocked up & not able to walk & impossible to go any farther."<sup>39</sup> Black agreed to slow down the pace for the limping La Prise, but refused to turn back. Much more disabling for La Prise than a swollen ankle, was his wife, who was "very much alarmed" with the reports of the "Trading Nahanni." It seems that she kept "plaguing him" to turn back.<sup>40</sup> Finally, on the twenty-seventh of July, La Prise capitulated to his wife and deserted the party, beginning the long trail home. Black's expedition had the dubious distinction of being the first in history to lose a man to the rigors of a woman's tongue.<sup>41</sup>

On the heels of La Prise's departure, Methodiates and his Indian packers also opted to head for home. They were far from their usual haunts and had no taste for the arduous service that Black was exacting. Black was able to induce one of the Sakanni, "the Old Slave,"

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>41</sup>The Company was not able to take any disciplinary measures against La Prise for his desertion because he was not a contracted "servant" of the Company.



to remain with the explorers for another ten days. Their line of march was serpentine, first up along the tundra-topped slopes of high mountains, then down the tree-covered hills into the alder-choked valleys and swampy morasses. Black was trying to steer clear of the Liard River drainage to the northeast, and the Pacific flowing streams which were blocking his passage, searching plaintively for the water communication that Governor Simpson said would lead north.

It was unfortunate that Black and Simpson had not been in closer communication prior to the start of the voyage, for Black kept running into branches of feeders of the "Schadzue." This was the large Pacific-bound river that he had heard of prior to the voyage; it was the river by which the Russians, through the "Trading Nahanni," were draining furs from British North America. Had Black, who had already surmounted epic hurdles, been free to explore this river, he might have opened a great trade area to the British and dealt a death blow to the Russian-American Company. In fact, the name of Samuel Black would now stand with those of David Thompson, Simon Fraser, and Jedidiah Smith. But this was not to be; Samuel Black was a sheep only recently let back into the fold of the Hudson's Bay Company. His relationship with the man in charge was strained, and he was bound by clear orders and was in no position to risk violating them. So Black ignored the "Schadzue" and continued "to the Northwestward." By doing so, the Hudson's Bay Company was denied for ten years the key to the fur trade of the Pacific Northwest. The "Schadzue" and Stikine Rivers were one in the same, and though the Stikine may be only a thin blue line on a modern map, it held the balance of empires in the nineteenth century.

Though Black's journey missed its chance at geographic greatness, it must be recognized as a triumph of human strength. They kept pushing deeper into country which even today defies the builders of rails and roads. Their hardest problem was crossing the rivers and streams bound for the Pacific, which dissected their line of march. The voyageurs rose to these challenges admirably, one of them, "Perreault swims like a Duck & dashes in at the first place come to hand & the others not wishing to appear less adventurous follow the example & may some day drown some of us."<sup>42</sup> On another occasion, Black resourcefully led his men across a swiftly flowing stream by forming a human chain, arm in arm. This kind of zeal was too much for "the Old Slave," who after his ten days were up was quick to head for home.

Now it was just the bourgeois and his voyageurs. On August thirteenth, they crossed the Pacific-Arctic Divide, and came upon an Indian hunter. He was bold enough to enter the explorer's camp, but when he went back to fetch the rest of his band, his courage left him and the whole group panicked into headlong flight, fearful of contact with strangers. In the Indian's camp Black found a few signs of white contact: a button, a file, and a scalping knife, all of English manufacture. They waited a day, hoping the Indians would return. Although he was near the end of his strength, Black's pen was as lively as ever,

We are here camped on a sandy eminence or mount rising in the Valley covered with dwarfish Pines and moss & one of the most romantic sequestrations imaginable, the evening is fine calm & serene & clear moon light & the solitude of this Nocturnal scene is only interrupted by the lonely howl of the Indian Dogs

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 151.

prowling about the mountain sides in anxiety for their masters.<sup>43</sup> But "romantic" scenery was not what the Company wanted to find, it was not as valuable to trade as a major river valley, nor as important as new beaver territory.

The entire area that Black traversed, from the source of the Finlay River, to his camp in the Cassiar Mountains, was poor beaver country. It lacked the extensive meadows, or stretches of flat land, that are conducive to large populations of the furry dam builders. Furthermore, this massive stretch of country was very thinly inhabited by people. Black came across few signs of Indian encampments and met even fewer Indian hunters. Each day they marched, Black was hit harder by the realization that this country, no matter how wild or how beautiful, was of limited value to the fur trade.

The seventeenth of August found Black and his companions on the banks of a large eastward flowing river. Black was perplexed; he had taken care to keep his line of march out of the Liard River drainage, yet here before him was an eastward flowing stream. From his projected longitude, however, and the river's direction, he was forced to accept the fact that he had fallen upon a feeder of the Liard River. The river was a tributary of the Kechika River, which enters the Liard near the turbulent "Grand Canyon." This discovery slammed the door of further progress on his face. If the Liard River was to his north, he was not within reach of any great Arctic-bound waterway. Either the great transmountain river did not exist, or its sources were north of the Liard's.

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 164.

After a short conference, the explorers agreed to turn back and retrace their steps toward the Finlay River, rather than descend the as-yet-unexplored Liard River to the Company's posts in the Mackenzie District. The short summer season was swiftly winding down, autumn would soon be upon them. Black bitterly dubbed the river which marked his farthest progress, the "Turnagain River."<sup>44</sup> The return journey was dispatched with efficiency by the explorers, who after months on the trail, were able to handle the rigors of travel almost mechanically. By the end of September, Samuel Black was in the civilized world (only relatively) of the Hudson's Bay Company's Peace River posts. Behind him was the hazardous and exciting existence of the explorer's life, while before him stretched the mundane existence of a fur trader.

#### Results of the Finlay River Expedition

Black's findings were soon before Governor Simpson. The expedition's primary goal had been geographic discovery, "to promote science," to discover west of the Rocky Mountains a river running parallel to the Mackenzie. But all that Black had seen tended to discount this possibility. Simpson did not appreciate the significance of Black's discovery of the Schadzue, or Stikine River. This large river valley, which would have done much to geographically explain the river systems of the interior, and open to the Hudson's Bay Company the exposed flank

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<sup>44</sup>Modern maps retain Black's name. In calling the river "Turnagain," Black may have been making a play on words. Captain James Cook dubbed the inlet near his supposed great western river the "Turnagain." Black, who was familiar with Cook's voyage, may have named the stream at the end of his search for a great western river after the geographic feature which helped initiate the search almost fifty years earlier. Rich, ed., Black's 1824 Journal, p. 175.

of their Russian rivals, was largely ignored. Simpson had his mind set on finding a western sister of the Mackenzie, and in 1824 he failed to appreciate what the Stikine River meant. The expedition's secondary purpose had been to "encourage mercantile speculation," to open new frontiers to the fur trade. In this, too, the Company was faced with disappointment. Black's journal revealed that the northern march of New Caledonia was a poor country inhabited by only a small group of stone-age tribesmen. As noted, "A few active trappers might make tolerable hunts . . . ," but the area held no great promise.<sup>45</sup>

In fact, Samuel Black's whole journey was an exercise in negative discovery. He had traveled hard and far, with the only result being that the Company could eliminate the country north of the Peace River from its expansion policies. Governor Simpson granted that Black and his voyageurs had blazed their trail through "perhaps as rugged a country as ever was passed."<sup>46</sup> But that was all that Simpson granted; after over five months of exploration, Black and his men did not earn the Company's approbation or the Governor's appreciation.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>H.B.C.A., George Simpson--London Committee, April 1, 1825, D. 4/88 fos. 90d-91.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>Black spent the remainder of his years as a fur trader in the Columbia River and Thompson River areas. George Simpson once criticized Black for his suspicious nature,

"offensive and defensive preparation seem to be the study of his Life having Dirks Knives & loaded Pistols concealed about his person and in all directions about his Establishment even under his Table cloth at Meals and in his Bed." (G. Williams, ed., "George Simpson's Character Book, 1832," Hudson's Bay Miscellany, p. 193).

Simpson obviously thought Black's behavior was eccentric. But Black

The Failure of Further Exploration  
from New Caledonia

Governor's Simpson's plans to expand the trade of New Caledonia into the far northwest entailed more than Samuel Black's Finlay River venture. These ventures, like Black's exploration, met with frustration and disappointment. It seemed, in 1824, that all the Governor's plans for New Caledonia were doomed to failure.

South and west of the Finlay River country was a large, yet narrow, mountain lake. This clear body of water, not unlike the Lochs of Scotland, was known as Babine Lake. In 1822, the Company dispatched Chief Trader William Brown, an officer in the Honorable Company since the Union of 1821, to extend the fur trade to Babine's shores. Near the north end of the lake, Brown erected Fort Kilmaurs, named after the parish in which he was christened in Ayrshire, Scotland.<sup>48</sup>

Fort Kilmaurs' location was superb. Unlike so many of the posts in New Caledonia, it was well provided with foodstuffs. Large sockeye salmon, with their firm pink flesh, ascended to Babine Lake annually. Well placed nets yielded catches which more than met the needs of the fur traders stationed there, who often exported the surplus to their less fortunate brothers at nearby Fort St. James and Fort George. The welcome presence of salmon alerted the fur traders that Babine Lake was connected to the sea. Flowing northward from the lake

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knew his own turbulent nature; danger and violence were facts of his life. In the winter of 1841, Black was murdered, shot in the back of the head by an Indian smarting from an imaginary insult.

<sup>48</sup>R. Harvey Fleming, ed., Minutes of Council Northern Department of Rupert Land, 1821-31 (London: The Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1940), p. 17.

was the Babine River, a clear stream with a swift current and, to the fur traders, an intriguing destination. From Indian reports, they learned that the Babine River continued to flow northwest until it was joined by several other rivers and that it emptied its waters into the Pacific Ocean. These same Indians rendezvoused with the coastal tribes, who every year journeyed up the river, exchanging Russian or American guns and hatchets for beaver pelts.

Chief Trader Brown mulled over these reports, and together with Governor Simpson, tried to speculate on the significance of what the Indians had described. There was some thought that the Babine River flowed far to the northwest and was in fact the false "Cook's River." Samuel Black suggested this possibility in spite of the fact that his own discoveries militated against its likelihood, and that Captain George Vancouver had in 1794 proved that "Cook's River" did not exist, and that it was a mere inlet of the sea.<sup>49</sup> John Stuart, a veteran of New Caledonia since Simon Fraser's days, thought that the Babine River eventually flowed into the Pacific Ocean at the Portland Canal, the present boundary between British Columbia and the Alaskan panhandle.<sup>50</sup> In other words, the Hudson's Bay Company was confused by the Babine country.

The most obvious way to clear up the question mark would have been to outfit an expedition to descend the river to its mouth. In fact, in 1824, the Council for the Northern Department (Simpson and his

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<sup>49</sup>Rich, ed., Black's 1824 Journal, p. 175.

<sup>50</sup>G. P. De T. Glazebrook, ed., The Hargrave Correspondence, 1821-1843 (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1938), p. 68.

Chief Factors) ordered Brown to embark downstream, to settle the geographic question and to crush the trade system of the coastal Indians.<sup>51</sup> Though the Council proposed, God disposed, an idea which Simpson sometimes found hard to accept, and the Northern New Caledonia and Peace River areas were beset by a series of setbacks, some petty and others tragic, which prevented the exploration from taking place.

In the summer of 1823, two of the Company's servants attached to Fort George were killed in a scuffle with the local Indians. This caused a brief panic at several of New Caledonia's posts, and Fort George was temporarily abandoned in retaliation.<sup>52</sup> Fort St. John on the Peace River was even harder hit. **The aggressive Beaver Indians murdered five of the Company's servants before rifling the fort.** Here again the fur traders were forced to abandon the post and strengthen their remaining establishments. Even Samuel Black's Finlay River voyage was nearly postponed, as some of the fur traders thought it too risky to send a small party into the hinterland, and that if there was going to be any more Indian trouble, Black would be a good man to have around.<sup>53</sup> These blows, coming as they did in the same year, were a severe blow to the Company whose very existence depended upon amicable Indian relations.

The Indian disasters rekindled a number of other smoldering problems. New Caledonia had never been a popular posting among the fur

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<sup>51</sup>Rich, ed., Black's 1824 Journal, p. 137.

<sup>52</sup>Fleming, ed., Minutes of Council Northern Department, p. 107.

<sup>53</sup>Rich, ed., Black's 1824 Journal, pp. lxxix-lxxx.



traders. It was a hard, rough country to travel through, and once located in a post, the situation was seldom comfortable. The main diet consisted of dried salmon, which after a year or two, became tiresome, Big game animals, such as moose or caribou, which might have provided fresh meat, were seldom found in the area. Even the salmon were erratic in their migrations, and when they failed to ascend the Fraser River as far as the trading posts, starvation became a real threat. One historian referred to New Caledonia as the "Siberia of the fur trade," a place where misbehaving employees could improve their character in the hard conditions of the country.<sup>54</sup> When Indian attack was added to their hardships, the traders let their dissatisfaction be known.

Exploration was also handicapped by New Caledonia's chronic personnel shortages. In 1822, the entire District could boast no more than thirty-six **servants** and eight "gentlemen."<sup>55</sup> Governor Simpson wanted expansion and exploration, but a critical part of his strategy was also "Oeconomy," a frugal hand on the Company's expenditures. So although he eagerly ordered his men to push forward, he often, in the same breath, would curtail the very means which would enable them to do so; not a situation calculated to improve morale. So Indian trouble, employee dissatisfaction, supply difficulties, and personnel shortages all stalled further expansion from New Caledonia.

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<sup>54</sup>W. N. Sage, "New Caledonia: The Siberia of the Fur Trade," The Beaver (Autumn, 1956), p. 24.

<sup>55</sup>John S. Galbraith, The Hudson's Bay Company As an Imperial Factor, 1821-1869 (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1957), p. 125.

As the winter of 1824-25 descended on the northwest, the fur traders had a chance to assess the accomplishments of the first two years of the Company's expansion program. In the Mackenzie District, John McLeod and Murdock McPherson had begun to unroll the map of the Liard River area. It was the Liard River, which carves a passage through the northern Rocky Mountains, which seemed to offer the most promising prospects for westward expansion. Contact had also been established with the Nahanni Indians, the majority of whom were reported to dwell along the upper Liard River. Prospects, therefore, for expanding the trade of the Liard region were very bright.

Samuel Black's expedition, which if it were not for the strained relations between Governor Simpson and the explorer, might have opened the trade of the Stikine River to the Company, in the end accomplished very little. The tangled terrain that Black traversed, the poor tribes that he met, and the difficult access that the area presented, all persuaded the Company to close the book on the Finlay River region. Black's survey of the region between the Finlay and Liard rivers failed to uncover any trace of the great transmountain river the fur traders from Sir Alexander Mackenzie to George Simpson had expected to find west of the Rocky Mountains. If this great river did indeed exist it had to be north of the Liard River. Black's expedition further increased the importance the Liard River would enjoy in the Company's future plans.

The explorations of 1823 and 1824 amounted to little more than a glimpse of the vast tracts of wilderness which lay beyond the white-man's ken. The fur traders realized this and with the restlessness of

of energetic men they shared Samuel Black's frustration, as his eyes searched over the distant hills, and his imagination wondered what lay beyond: "I wish I had wings to go & see."<sup>56</sup> But that was for the hawks and eagles, whose feathered dexterity lifted them above the peaks and ridges, and as they gently floated upon the wind's kind currents, before them stretched the rivers, lakes, and trails that would have led the Hudson's Bay Company into the Yukon and Alaska, the vast fur empire of the far northwest. The Hudson's Bay Company had to struggle through the deadfalls and defiles of a long and treacherous path before it would reach the threshold of that empire, but at least by 1825, it had begun to blaze the way.

Though exploration promised lucrative prospects for the future, it also provided an ominous warning. For as the Hudson's Bay Company reached into the northwest, it was entering the domain of the Russian Bear. Both John McLeod and Samuel Black had heard reports of Russian settlements, and from some distant tribesmen the Company could see the material evidence, carried inland via the services of middlemen. As the fur trade pushed at the geographic frontiers, it was crossing an international frontier and entering a diplomatic rivalry.

#### The Hudson's Bay Company and the Coastal Trade

The Hudson's Bay Company did not learn the importance of the Stikine River to the fur trade of the far northwest until nearly ten years after Samuel Black's Finlay River expedition. In 1824 Governor

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<sup>56</sup>Rich, ed., Black's 1824 Journal, p. 175.

Simpson did not have a detailed knowledge of the pattern of trade along the Northwest Coast. He suspected that the Russians and the Americans were draining furs from the interior of British America, but he was not well informed as to the methods used by his rivals.<sup>57</sup> The Governor had an incomplete picture of the fur trade west of the Rocky Mountains because the Hudson's Bay Company's operations were restricted to the interior of the continent. The Company was ignorant of the geographic and commercial realities of the coastal region.

This situation was changed by the Anglo-Russian convention of 1825. The negotiations with the Russians had excited the Company's interest in maritime operations. George Simpson had begun to plot this reorientation even prior to the signing of the treaty. In his 1824 journal, Simpson noted that the expansion of New Caledonia would be matched by an advance up the coast, "the Coasting trade must be carried on in conjunction with the inland business."<sup>58</sup> It was this unified policy between the explorations of the interior, and the trade rivalry on the coast, which steered the Hudson's Bay Company from 1825-1839.

It was not Governor Simpson's intention to compete with the **Russians**, at least not initially. His plan was to first drive the American merchants from the coast, and then let the two monopolies slug it out--Simpson had no doubts as to who would win that struggle. The Hudson's Bay Company began to outfit ships, joining the maritime trade.

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<sup>57</sup>H.B.C.A., George Simpson--A. R. McLeod, January 2, 1823, D. 4/2 fos. 34.

<sup>58</sup>Simpson, Fur Trade and Empire, p. 72.

Their purpose was to hound the Yankee ships, follow them wherever they went and undersell them at every opportunity. Not content with merely ruining the American's fur trade, Simpson made plans to try and take over their profitable supply trade with the Russian settlements.<sup>59</sup>

The program began in 1826 when Aemilius Simpson, a Royal Navy Lieutenant on half-pay, was hired as Superintendent of the Hudson's Bay Company's maritime operations. He was a distant relative of Governor Simpson, and the two had been "School fellows" in England. The Governor dismissed any sneers of nepotism by writing, "I should not have introduced Aemilius Simpson to the Fur Trade, had I not known him to be a man of high character and respectable abilities."<sup>60</sup>

Lieutenant Simpson proved himself to be worthy of the Governor's trust. He was given command of a small schooner, the Cadboro, and he set about the "dirty work of cuffing & thunking" the collection of "Vagabonds" aboard into something resembling a crew.<sup>61</sup> In 1827, Lieutenant Simpson and his men helped erect Fort Langley at the mouth of the Fraser River. This was the first of a chain of posts that the Company planned for the coastline south of the Russian territory.

Though operations on the coast were progressing according to plan, the Governor was vexed by the troubles that his inland efforts were meeting. In 1827, he complained to the London office, "A succession of dissappointments and misfortunes have year after year prevented

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 86

<sup>60</sup>Williams, ed., "George Simpson's Character Book," Hudson's Bay Miscellany, 1670-1870, p. 199.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

our extending the trade of New Caledonia."<sup>62</sup> In 1825, Chief Trader William Brown was ordered to descend the Babine River to the ocean. Unfortunately, Indian problems in the district prevented the journey. A year later the Governor dispatched ten additional men to Babine Lake and Brown was again ordered to explore the river. But the expedition never embarked; William Brown had taken ill, and the voyageurs spent the summer loafing about the lake. Simpson was incensed. If Brown was not up to the task, Simpson complained,

. . . some other Gentlemen attached to the Expedition were surely capable of that duty otherwise they can have no pretensions to the rank and standing they have in the service; indeed we consider that a Trading Clerk . . . is greatly overpaid for his services if not qualified to undertake and accomplish any duty connected with voyaging. . . .<sup>63</sup>

The Governor censured William Connolly, who shared control of the district with Brown, and the latter gentleman was granted a leave of absence for his illness.<sup>64</sup>

The Babine Lake area never achieved the importance that Governor Simpson had hoped for it. After the establishment of Fort Connolly in 1827, the Babine post shrunk in significance. Fifty miles northeast of Babine Lake, Fort Connolly was located at the source of the Skeena River, Bear Lake. The Babine River turned out to be just one tributary

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<sup>62</sup>H.B.C.A., Governor Simpson--London Committee, July 25, 1827, D. 4/14 fos. 30d-31.

<sup>63</sup>H.B.C.A., Governor Simpson--William Connolly, July 5, 1826, D. 4/6 fos. 15-15d.

<sup>64</sup>Chief Trader William Brown, who was seriously ill, went to Europe. He died there in March of 1827. E. E. Rich, ed., Simpson's Athabasca Journal (London: The Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1938), p. 431.

of the Skeena , a large stream which entered the Pacific just south of the Russian lisiere.

The failure of the inland traders to explore the Babine, or Skeena River, to the sea, was to cause a great deal of confusion for Lieutenant Simpson. In 1827, while cruising the coast for furs, he learned from a pair of Yankee shipmasters of a valuable estuary where the Americans had always enjoyed a healthy trade. The river mouth mentioned by the Americans was the Nass River. The Nass River drains a considerable portion of north central British Columbia, but is not now, or was then, an important route to the interior. When Lieutenant Simpson learned of the Nass River, he mistakenly assumed that it actually was not a completely new river but instead the mouth of the Skeena or, as the traders called it, Babine River.<sup>65</sup> Lieutenant Simpson felt that a post located at the mouth of the Nass River would draw furs from deep within the interior, furs which until recently had been going to the Americans. Investigation by the Company confirmed that "more Land Furs are traded at Nass than at any other place along the Coast."<sup>66</sup> There was even hope that this might be the source of Russia's land furs, for although the river's mouth was in British territory, it was within a few miles of the Russian zone.

The company was particularly interested in the Nass River for another reason. Of the major rivers flowing into the Pacific from the Company's territories, only the Columbia was practical for commercial

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<sup>65</sup>Simpson, Fur Trade and Empire, p. 269.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

navigation. The Company's operations on the Columbia were compromised by American claims to the river valley. Simpson would have liked to have had a route to the interior undisputedly in English territory. In 1828, on one of his transcontinental tours, he even investigated the Fraser River as a possible avenue. The old Nor'Westers assured him that it was too wild a stream to be worth consideration, but Simpson wanted to see for himself. The rapids, canyons, and whirlpools encountered by Simpson during his descent would have driven a sane man mad, but the Governor's perfect composure allowed no outward show of alarm. However, the Governor might have made a mental note, that when a Nor'Wester says a river is unnavigable, believe him!<sup>67</sup> In any event, the Governor reported to the London Committee, "from my own knowledge of Frasers River, I can positively say, that it never can be made a communication adapted for the purposes of inland transport."<sup>68</sup> Simpson's disappointment over the Fraser was mollified by the promise of what the Nass River might hold.

In July of 1830, the Council of the Northern Department ordered Chief Factor John McLoughlin, head of the Columbia District, to establish a trading post at Nass River.<sup>69</sup> Charge of the proposed post was to be given to Peter Skene Ogden, Samuel Black's old companion in

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<sup>67</sup>Malcolm McLeod, ed., Peace River, A Canoe Voyage from Hudson's Bay to the Pacific, by the late Sir George Simpson; in 1828. Journal of the Late Chief Factor Archibald McDonald, Who Accompanied Him. Reprint edition (Edmonton: M. G. Hurtig, 1971), p. 117.

<sup>68</sup>E. E. Rich, History of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1670-1870 (London: The Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1958), p. 615.

<sup>69</sup>Fleming, ed., Minutes of Council Northern Department Rupert's Land, p. 263.



devilry. Since he had been readmitted into the Company, Ogden had been leading brigades of trappers through the mountains and deserts of present day Idaho, Utah, and Oregon, stripping the Snake River Valley of furs and exploring the Great Basin. Like Samuel Black, Ogden was at his best when left to his own devices, at least semi-independent of his superiors. This was Simpson's reason for assigning him to the Snake Country Brigades and now trusting him with the far-removed post at Nass River.

Aemilius Simpson was able to scout out what seemed to be a good location for the post during a voyage up the coast that summer. But Ogden and his men were delayed a year from moving up to Nass River by a vicious malaria epidemic which swept the Columbia River Valley. Over fifty men at Fort Vancouver alone were struck down with the sickness, Ogden among them. Even John McLoughlin, who had studied medicine for four years in Quebec, was pressed into service, tending to the ill.<sup>70</sup> Not until April of 1831, were Aemilius Simpson and Peter Skene Ogden able to embark. It was an impressive expedition that they headed, over fifty men and three schooners, the Dryad, the Vancouver, and the trusty Cadboro.<sup>71</sup>

It took the three little ships more than a month to work their way up the five hundred odd miles of coast to the Nass River. Simpson helped Ogden begin construction on the post before setting sail for additional exploration to the north. Lieutenant Simpson was ordered to

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<sup>70</sup>Gloria Griffin Cline, Peter Skene Ogden and the Hudson's Bay Company (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1974), pp. 102-103.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., p. 104.

sail into Russian waters and "to examine Stikine and ascertain if as reported a large River falls into the ocean at that place."<sup>72</sup> Upon reaching the Stikine harbor, one hundred and forty miles to the north, he found an estuary stained brown with silt, and the mouth of a river, spread out into uncountable channels and clogged with piles of drift-wood. Lieutenant Simpson could tell from a glance that this was a river which drained a large section of the interior. Ignorant of the geography of the interior, Simpson guessed that this estuary, not the Nass River, must be the mouth of the Babine or Skeena River.

When Simpson returned to Nass, he found the post near completion, but the Lieutenant was unable to appreciate what had been accomplished. Bothered by back pains for a couple of days, he barely had time to tell Ogden of his findings on the Stikine before he lapsed into a serious illness. It turned out that the energetic sailor was suffering from an inflammation of the liver. With no medical help available, Simpson suffered for a few days, and then died. He was only thirty-eight years old.<sup>73</sup> In his honor, the traders named the post he helped found Port Simpson.

Ogden was now weighed down with the dual responsibilities of administering Port Simpson, as well as supervising the maritime trade. Chief Factor McLoughlin dispatched Donald Manson, who had been Samuel Black's second in command on the Finlay River, to assist Ogden at Port Simpson. In 1832, Manson made a valuable survey of the lower Nass

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<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

<sup>73</sup>Williams, ed., "Simpson's Character Book," Hudson's Bay Miscellany, 1670-1870, p. 199.

river. After ascending the stream for four days, he found it an impractical route for the fur trade.<sup>74</sup> The Nass River, like the Fraser, would not be the Company's route to the interior. Again, the Hudson's Bay men turned their eyes further north. Perhaps the river that Lieutenant Simpson had discovered on his last voyage was the stream they sought? American shipmasters told the Company that they annually collected between three and four thousand beaver furs at that river's mouth.<sup>75</sup> This river, which Black had fallen upon eight years earlier and called the "Schadzue," but which we know as the Stikine River, was still unknown by the English traders. But it was to become the directing goal of the Company's policy, both on the coast and in the interior, throughout the 1830's.

Aemilius Simpson's death put a brake, at least briefly, on the Company's campaign along the northwest coast. That campaign had been proceeding quite well. Although the Yankee merchants proved tougher to drive out of business than Simpson had first thought, inroads were being made. Whereas in the early nineteenth century, fifteen or so American ships would trade along the coast each season, that number had dropped to five or six in the 1830's.<sup>76</sup> The Hudson's Bay Company's competition was too much for the Americans. Governor Simpson felt that it was time to begin the second phase of his attack, and capture the Yankee's provision trade with the Russian settlements. Aemilius Simpson had made a preliminary visit to Sitka in 1829, and delivered the

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<sup>75</sup>Galbraith, The Hudson's Bay Company as an Imperial Factor, p. 143.

<sup>76</sup>James R. Gibson, Imperial Russia in Frontier America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 167.

Company's bid for the provision trade. But the Russian Governor merely said that he would pass the note on to St. Petersburg, and the Hudson's Bay Company never did receive a satisfactory answer.

Peter Skene Ogden followed up this initiative in the spring of 1832. Upon sailing the Cadboro into Sitka harbor, Ogden was met by Russian-America's new Governor, Baron Ferdinand von Wrangell. A short, active man, Wrangell boasted considerable acumen as demonstrated in his scientific and commercial accomplishments. He was also a tough man to bargain with. Wrangell said that the Russians were willing to contract supplies from the Hudson's Bay Company, but he wanted the goods at "prime cost," and would only pay for them with notes redeemable in St. Petersburg. Neither Ogden nor McLoughlin was impressed with Wrangell's counterproposal. It did not appear to them that the crafty Russian was negotiating seriously. It was now the Hudson's Bay Company's turn to smile politely, and defer to Europe, in this case the London Committee, for approval.<sup>77</sup>

Wrangell, the most astute Governor of Russian-America between Baranov and the Alaskan sale, had no intention of working with the Hudson's Bay Company in 1832. The American traders remained a nuisance to the Russian-American Company, but as the Hudson's Bay men stepped up their pressure on the Yankees, they also succeeded in putting a dent in Russia's trade. Furthermore, Ogden mentioned the Hudson's Bay Company's interest in the Stikine River area, which greatly alarmed Wrangell. He warned the Company's directors in St. Petersburg:

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<sup>77</sup>Cline, Peter Skene Ogden and the Hudson's Bay Company, p. 110.

Although Mr. Aemilius Simpson's sudden death temporarily put a stop to this intention, it is probable that it will not be for long and in a year or two the English will occupy a post there also undoubtedly in prejudice of our own commercial relations with the Kolosh. For the excellent quality and abundance of the merchandise of the English constitute an attraction to the Kolosh which we have no means to compete with, and there is no doubt whatever that if the Board of Directors does not find means to supply the colonies with merchandise of such quality and in such quantity as to be able to hold out against the Hudson Bay Company this company will be in possession of the whole fur trade in northwestern America from Cross Sound or even from a more northern point south as far as the coast of California.<sup>78</sup>

The Hudson's Bay Company was a greater threat than the Yankee skippers had ever been. Wrangell was not about to enter into an agreement which would only increase that Company's power on the coast. In 1832, the Russian-American Company did not want to replace the scavenging American eagle with the voracious British lion.

Governor Simpson, however, was not going to be so easily put off. Rupert's Land had been under his firm control for over a decade. In that time the man known as "the Little Emperor" had molded the Company into a tight, efficient organization. He had laid the ground work for territorial expansion and forged the successful maritime branch of operations. If the Russians would not cooperate with his plans willingly, then Simpson would use the Company's muscle to force them into line. The maritime branch would carry on its offensive on the coast, directing operations toward the Stikine, while in the interior his traders were ordered to redouble their explorations westward toward Russian territory. The British lion was showing its claws.

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<sup>78</sup>Alaskan Boundary Tribunal, "Report of the Governor to the Board of Directors of the Russian-American Company, May 6, 1832," Proceedings of the Alaskan Boundary Tribunal, convened at London . . . under the Treaty concluded at Washington, January 24, 1903, Vol. II (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1903), pp. 264-265.

## CHAPTER V

### UP THE LIARD RIVER TRAIL

Chief Factor Edward Smith, commander of the Mackenzie District, needed no encouragement in regards to exploration. Since John McLeod's return from the South Nahanni River Country in 1824, the district had been the scene of a continuing effort to expand the frontiers of the fur trade. These explorations were directed to the southwest, up the alluring Liard.

The Hudson's Bay Company followed up John McLeod's efforts among the Nahanni during the very next season. John Bell, a young clerk recently assigned to the Mackenzie District, was dispatched with two men in the summer of 1825 to set up a post among the Nahanni.<sup>1</sup> The establishment was not a notable affair, a bark shack or perhaps a tent cabin, and was probably located somewhere near the junction of the South Nahanni and Liard Rivers, under the shadow of Nahanni Butte. White Eyes, the head of the Nahanni band, visited the post a couple of times, but the trade accrued was minimal. In September, Bell closed up shop and advised White Eyes and his band to henceforth take their furs to Fort Simpson. Smith informed Governor Simpson of the disappointing trade and advised him not to expect much more from that group of

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<sup>1</sup>Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Edward Smith--George Simpson, September 8, 1825, D. 5/1 fos. 161. Hereafter this source will be referred to as H.B.C.A. Spelling errors have not been corrected.

Nahanni, "altho' they inhabit a rich country, their wants few once completed they will not exert themselves."<sup>2</sup>

From 1829 to 1839, the Hudson's Bay Company traders in the Mackenzie District extended their explorations and trade along the entire length of the Liard River. These explorations were a continuation of the advance begun in 1824. But they should also be seen as part of the Hudson's Bay Company campaign to capture the trade of the northwest coast. As the Russian-American Company gradually revealed its unwillingness to cooperate with George Simpson's plans to drive the petty Yankee merchants off the coast, the Hudson's Bay Company stepped up its pressure on the Russians. A major part of that effort was to cut off, in the interior, furs which heretofore had made their way to the Russian lisiere. The center of this struggle was the Stikine River Valley, toward which Peter Skene Ogden was driving from the coast, and which soon was to be the goal of the Mackenzie District traders.

Throughout the spring of 1828, Murdock McPherson, the clerk commanding Fort Liard, was visited by a distant tribe of Indians, whom he called the Thekannie. By June, these hunters had brought in over four hundred beaver, and had requested that the Company open up a trading post in their hunting grounds, "on the West Branch of the Liard River below the Falls--and in the Mountains."<sup>3</sup> The Thekannie were probably a branch of the Sekanni Indians, whom Samuel Black had encountered

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., fos. 162.

<sup>3</sup>H.B.C.A., Edward Smith--Governor George Simpson and the Council of the Northern Department, November 28, 1828, D. 5/3 fos. 274d.

along the headwaters of the Finlay River.<sup>4</sup> Chief Factor Smith felt that granting their wish for a post would not only bring the Company a greater portion of the Thekannie's trade, but it would also serve as:

. . . a beginning to open communication to the Westward of the Mountains--where there is such attractive Proofs of finding a rich Country--the Natives still unacquainted with the whites--and know not to use of European manufacture.<sup>5</sup>

Governor Simpson, always interested in schemes to expand the trade, promptly gave his seal of approval for the operation.<sup>6</sup>

#### The Establishment of Fort Halkett

The job of establishing the new post was given to Clerk John Hutchison. This thirty-one year old Scotsman was probably not the best choice that Chief Factor Smith could have made. Governor Simpson, notorious for his harsh judgments, thought him "weak delicate and not adapted for severe or active Service."<sup>7</sup> In 1823, Simpson suspected Hutchison of "becoming addicted to private tippling." The Governor said nothing to the man, "but appointed him to Mackenzies River where it is impossible to be otherwise than sober as no intoxicating liquor of

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<sup>4</sup>Emile Petitot, The Amerindians of the Canadian North-West in the 19th Century, as seen by Emile Petitot, Vol. II, The Loucheux Indians, ed. Donat Savoie (Ottawa: Mackenzie Delta Research Project, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 1970), p. 33.

<sup>5</sup>H.B.C.A., Edward Smith--Governor George Simpson and the Council of the Northern Department, November 28, 1828, D. 5/3 fos. 274d.

<sup>6</sup>R. Harvey Fleming, ed., Minutes of Council Northern Department of Rupert Land, 1821-1831 (London: The Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1940), p. 235.

<sup>7</sup>George Simpson, "George Simpson's Character Book, 1832," Hudson's Bay Miscellany, 1670-1870, ed. Glyndwr Williams (Winnipeg: The Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1975), p. 213.



any description has been admitted into that District since the Year 1824."<sup>8</sup> Perhaps Edward Smith felt that the young man, who had been manipulated in such a petty manner by the Governor, deserved a chance to prove himself.

Hutchison left Fort Simpson on the twenty-seventh of June, 1829. With four men, an outfit of trading goods, and a North canoe, he headed up the Liard River. The original plan of building the post west of the Rocky Mountains had been modified. The Thekannies portrayed the upper Liard as unnavigable, and devoid of the big game needed to provision a trading post. At their request, Hutchison was directed to build a post on the East Branch of the Liard River.<sup>9</sup>

Hutchison traveled up the Liard, most of the time tracking the canoe against the current, until three wooded buttes came into view. These hills marked the junction of the East Branch of the Liard River with the West Branch. Today, the East Branch is known as the Fort Nelson River, while what the voyageurs called the West Branch, or the Courant Fort, the strong current, is the Liard River proper. From the forks, Hutchison could look up the Liard River, and through the clear northern air, see the distant uplifted shadows of the Rocky Mountains.<sup>10</sup> But his course lay to the south and the North canoe turned up the Fort Nelson River. Although the river's current was not as strong as the

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Fleming, ed., Minutes of Northern Department Council, p. 235.

<sup>10</sup>R. M. Patterson, The Dangerous River (Sidney, British Columbia: Gray's Publishing Ltd., 1966), p. 92.

Liard's, travel continued to be tedious. The East Branch wound its way into the interior in broad-looped bends, each meander increasing the frustration of the voyageurs. A half day's paddle brought the Hudson's Bay men to great sandstone cliffs, rising precipitously from the river bed, a pleasant change from the dense banks of forest which bound the river's lower stretches. The voyageurs would later call the spot, Roche qui Trempe a l' Eau.<sup>11</sup> Further still up river, they passed the location of old Fort Nelson, abandoned since the Indian massacre of 1812. Hidden by thick shrubbery and trees were the ruins of the North West Company's former post, where lay the all but forgotten remains of the first attempt to open up the trade of the East Branch.<sup>12</sup>

The Hudson's Bay traders traveled up the East Branch for two days after passing old Fort Nelson; they then turned to the west up a stream that the Thekannies called the "Buffalo River." Following two more days of travel up the "Buffalo River," Hutchison began building his post.<sup>13</sup> His site was probably in the general vicinity of the present settlement of Fort Nelson, on the banks of the Muskwa, or Prophet River. The new post was named Fort Halkett, after John Halkett, a member of the Hudson's Bay Company's Governing Committee.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 94.

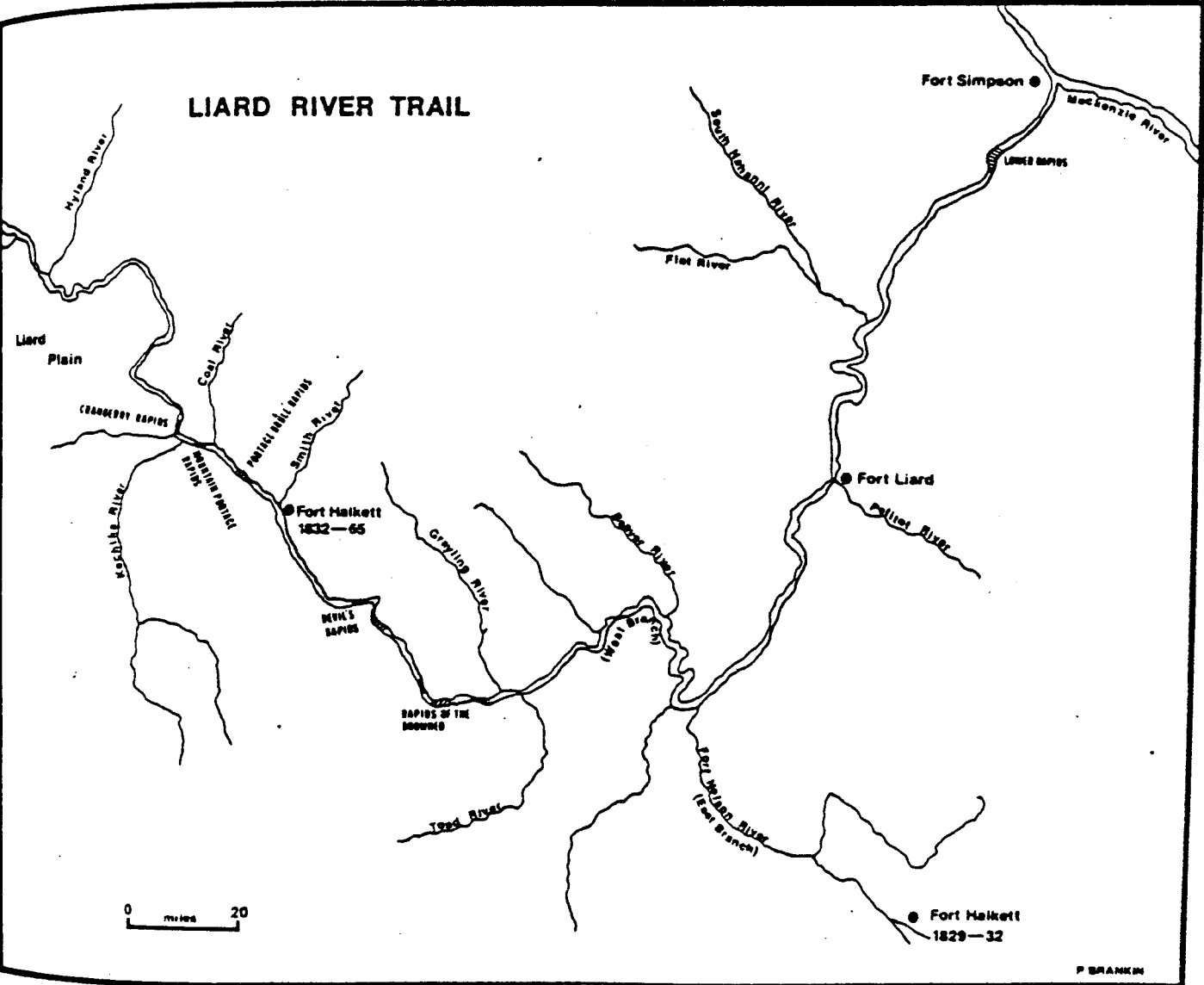
<sup>12</sup>Pierre Duchaussois, O.M.I., Mid Snow and Ice: The Apostles of the North-West (Buffalo, New York: Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, 1937), p. 285.

<sup>13</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Halkett Journal, B. 85/a/1 fos. 1.

<sup>14</sup>John Halkett was one of the more active directors of the Hudson's Bay Company. He was the executor of Lord Selkirk's will and a trustee for the Red River Colony. In 1821, he journeyed to Rupert's Land and in 1822 he aided Governor Simpson in the reorganization of the

MAP 4. The Liard River Trail

# LIARD RIVER TRAIL



The trade of Fort Halkett never lived up to expectations. The first winter "was severe in the extreme," which diverted many of the Indians from trapping to the painful necessity of trying to find enough food to survive the season.<sup>15</sup> In 1830, Chief Factor Smith sent Charles Forester, an enterprising servant of the Company, to winter with the Thekannie Indians in their hunting grounds in the Rocky Mountains. Forester was to "insite them to industry," to try and increase their fur harvest, and collect additional information about the trans-mountain region.<sup>16</sup> The Company was heartened by reports that the Indian tribes of the mountain area were planning to visit Fort Halkett. One of these tribes were the "Touchtochoctinne" Indians, who lived west of the Rockies along the upper Liard River.<sup>17</sup>

But Chief Factor Smith was becoming impatient with the vague and often contradictory information which was filtering down to the fur traders from Indian trappers. It was time that the Hudson's Bay Company had a look at its position on the upper Liard River. Edward Smith and John McLeod had spent much time in the passing years discussing what manner of country might lay hidden west of the Rockies. Smith was a man of broad interests, always with an eye to advance his knowledge.

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Hudson's Bay Company (E. E. Rich, *The History of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1660-1870* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1967), p. 423).

<sup>15</sup>H.B.C.A., Edward Smith--Governor George Simpson and Northern Department Council, July 28, 1830, D. 5/3 fos. 475d.

<sup>16</sup>H.B.C.A., Edward Smith--Governor George Simpson and Northern Department Council, November 28, 1830, D. 5/3 fos. 481d-482.

<sup>17</sup>H.B.C.A., Edward Smith--Governor George Simpson and Council of the Northern Department, November 29, 1829, D. 5/3 fos. 420d.

At Fort Simpson, he tried to begin a small natural history collection, only to be confounded by the lack of means to preserve his specimens.<sup>18</sup> Even though, as he confided to a friend, that all he knew of the upper Liard was "what we can glean from Indian report," he felt sure that in the hunting grounds of the western tribes, "the curious traveller would find among them an inexhaustible store of still unknown plants, flowers, Birds, and quadrupeds etc. etc. . . ."<sup>19</sup> Smith's interest in the Liard frontier was matched by John McLeod's, and following his superior and friend's lead, McLeod volunteered to lead an expedition to the source of the Liard River.<sup>20</sup>

Before the expedition was official, Smith had to communicate with Governor Simpson, not only to secure his permission for McLeod's exploration, but to clear up a number of problems which had hamstrung the Mackenzie District's expansion efforts.

Although the Hudson's Bay Company had given its formal approval to the long-term expansion of the Mackenzie District, the means necessary to complete the task were seldom at hand. District commanders such as Edward Smith were left with tall orders and limited means to execute them. This tendency crippled the Company's expansion efforts because the small resources available to each department seldom allowed the District commanders to immediately follow up any success.

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<sup>18</sup>G. P. de T. Glazebrook, ed., The Hargrave Correspondence, 1821-1843 (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1938), p. 38.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>H.B.C.A., Edward Smith--Governor George Simpson and Council of the Northern Department, November 28, 1830, D. 5/3 fos. 481d-482.

One of Smith's major complaints was the quality of men that he was being sent. In the Mackenzie District, strong, tough men were needed, but too many of Smith's servants complained when active service was assigned.<sup>21</sup> To complicate matters, those good men the district had seldom wanted to renew their engagements. The annual outfit of goods sent north to the Mackenzie was so slim that there was little for the Indians, not to mention the annual needs of the Company's servants.<sup>22</sup> To aggravate this situation, the severe winters often led to ration shortages and hardships. The Mackenzie District was not the most popular place in Rupert's Land.

That was something that George Simpson found hard to understand. In fact, he thought, "MacKenzies River is the most advantagous wintering ground in the Indian Country."<sup>23</sup> But Simpson was not disposed to argue with Edward Smith, one of his most efficient assistants; instead he informed him that "all the assistance you may require in men or goods will be forwarded."<sup>24</sup> When it came to McLeod's proposed exploration, Smith and Simpson were like-minded men. Edward Smith thought, "this voyage may open to the Company a Second Caledonia."<sup>25</sup> Simpson viewed it from not only the vantage point of the interior trade, but

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<sup>21</sup>H.B.C.A., Governor Simpson--Edward Smith, June 16, 1830, D. 4/17 fos. 15d.-16d.

<sup>22</sup>Glazebrook, ed., The Hargrave Correspondence, p. 38.

<sup>23</sup>H.B.C.A., Governor Simpson--Edward Smith, June 16, 1830, D. 4/17 fos. 15d.-16d.

<sup>24</sup>H.B.C.A., Governor Simpson--Edward Smith, December 5, 1830, D. 4/18 fos. 6d.-7.

<sup>25</sup>Glazebrook, ed., The Hargrave Correspondence, p. 75.

what it might mean to the struggle on the coast:

This would be the first step towards establishing a communication between the Settlement of Nass, which is now about being formed and the interior, and would be the commencement of a District which in due time would deprive the Russian Fur Cop., our rivals in trade on the North West Coast, a valuable branch of their business, to which they have no claim as the greater part of their Land Skins are drawn from British Territory in that quarter.<sup>26</sup>

Simpson gave the expedition his full backing.

Just when all factors seemed to assure the prospect of exploring the upper Liard, plans for the expedition were threatened from an unexpected quarter. The winter of 1830-31 began calmly, and from all evidence promised to be a mild one. But though the thermometer did not reveal any threat to the fur traders, the fur returns did. Inexplicably, there were very few lynx furs that winter, whereas the year before they had been plentiful. This was bad, not just for the Company's profits, but because the lynx population was closely dependent upon the population of its main prey, the rabbit, and the rabbit was also one of the main foodstuffs of the Hudson's Bay men and their Indian trappers. The disappearance of the lynx was a tip-off to the absence of rabbits and to a winter of hunger and suffering. Austerity became the watchword at Fort Simpson, and food supplies were closely rationed as the traders tried "to scrape every thing together that we could catch to oust famine."<sup>27</sup> For the Indians, the situation was even worse. Although Smith tried to help them by "dividing our little pittance with the needy

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<sup>26</sup>H.B.C.A., Governor Simpson--Edward Smith, June 1, 1831, D. 4/18 fos. 47-47d.

<sup>27</sup>Glazebrook, ed., The Hargrave Correspondence, p. 75.

and unfortunate," eleven Indians attached to Fort Simpson "perished from want of Provisions."<sup>28</sup> Spring brought no relief, only redoubled troubles. Its warmer weather turned every small stream and creek into rushing torrents. The rotting ice on the Mackenzie River could not give way fast enough for this flood and the water charged over the banks, inundating the countryside. Fort Norman was destroyed and its inhabitants nearly went with it, while John Bell and the men at Fort Good Hope escaped into the flooded woods in a boat.<sup>29</sup>

As the summer began, there was more than enough work in the district merely trying to recoup from the spring's disasters; the district did not need an expansion program at so inopportune a time. But Smith was determined to have the upper Liard investigated, regardless of other pressing concerns. Even so, an expedition such as those of Captain John Franklin would have been impossible, the privation of the winter had prevented any stockpiling of pemmican supplies. For John McLeod and his voyageurs, however, this was no serious matter. They would travel light, a handful of provisions, a collection of trade goods, for any Indians which might be encountered, and their rifles; they would live off the land for much of the voyage. Because of this, the Hudson's Bay Company's explorations seem much less impressive than the elaborate government sponsored efforts of Franklin, Back, and Richardson. But the Company's expeditions reflected its orientation; it was, after all, a commercial concern, not a geographic society. Its explorers were interested primarily in the fur trade and in geography

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.



only so far as it affected business. Further, the unpretentious outfit of McLeod's expedition was admirably suited for the rough terrain to be traversed, where the distance a man could travel was determined by the weight of his burden.

### The Exploration of the Upper Liard River

McLeod was given permission to personally select his crew from the district's employment rolls, and he drafted "six of the Company's Engages and two Indians as Hunters."<sup>30</sup> Also joining the expedition was John McLeod's "faithful dog," Spring. On June 28, 1831, they pushed off from Fort Simpson, turning the nose of their durable North canoe into the swirling brown current of the Liard River. By July third, McLeod reached Fort Liard, where his old friend Murdock McPherson was no doubt happy to see him. McPherson advised McLeod that the Liard was running high, still swollen from the spring thaw, and that if he waited a few days, the river would drop and upstream travel would be much more practical.<sup>31</sup> In the week spent at Fort Liard, John McLeod had an opportunity to hear for himself what the Indians of the area said about the upper river. In an animated style, the Indians told him of the Liard's terrors, how it was "Dangerous and insurmountable navigation."<sup>32</sup> McLeod expected that the Liard would be dangerous, but as for the idea of it being "insurmountable," this he shrugged off as one of "the palliating measures adopted, many from interested motives . . ." by the

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<sup>30</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1831, B. 200/a/14 fos. 3.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

Fort Liard Indians, who were not anxious to see the trade extended to their neighbors.<sup>33</sup>

By July tenth McLeod was again on his way. Before him rolled the Liard River, from the south and the west, spilling from unknown country, a vast terrae incognitae. McLeod, in spite of the Indian reports he received, and what he knew of the lower Liard River, was probably not prepared for what awaited him ahead. Today, we know the Liard River as one of the great, if more dangerous, rivers in western North America. Its headwaters lie well west of the Rocky Mountains, some eight hundred miles from Fort Simpson. The Liard has managed, like the Peace River, to force its way through those mountains; the struggle, however, has left the face of the river scarred by scores of rapids and canyons.<sup>34</sup> Father Emile Petitot, missionary to the northern Athabasca Indians, and a noted anthropologist, in the late nineteenth century, wrote of the Liard:

All the travellers who have navigated it agree in giving a terrifying description of its peaks, gulfs, and whirlpools which the velocity of a current constrained by the rocks makes in its water. To come down this dizzying river safely metis helmsmen tie themselves to the deck of their craft so as not to be hurled into the frightful waves.<sup>35</sup>

The Mackenzie River has often been called the "Mississippi of the North"; if this is so, then the Liard should be regarded as the North's equivalent to the Missouri River.<sup>36</sup> Physically the Liard and Missouri rivers

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Warburton Pike, Through the Sub-Arctic Forest (London: Edward Arnold, 1896), p. 69.

<sup>35</sup>Ferdi Wenger, "Canoeing the Wild Liard River Canyon," Canadian Geological Journal (Winter, 1976), p. 3.

<sup>36</sup>Eric Morse, Fur Trade Canoe Routes of Canada/Then and Now

share many characteristics, principal among them being their driving current; even when free of canyons and rapids, their currents seldom slacken, they push relentlessly on, sweeping up fallen trees, ripping away sections of river banks, frustrating the voyageur. The Liard, in its descent to the Mackenzie, drops more than 1,700 feet, thus enlisting even gravity as a weapon in fighting upstream progress.<sup>37</sup> The Liard, like the Missouri, became an avenue of western exploration, a fur trade route, and the road to the Rocky Mountains.

McLeod's first week on the river was marred by poor weather. Headwinds, which can be quite substantial on the half mile wide river, whipped up heavy waves, which allied with the current in slowing travel. Lead-colored clouds laden with moisture periodically unleashed rainstorms, damping the explorers' spirits and raising the river's volume. The wet weather was made all the more uncomfortable by the constant presence of mosquitoes. The dreadful drone and the pesky stings of the insects were only a nuisance during the day, but at night they made sleep nearly impossible.<sup>38</sup>

On the sixteenth of June, McLeod met Baptiste Contret, an engage from Fort Liard who, together with a party of Indians, had been sent ahead of the explorers by McPherson to hunt for, and otherwise aid, the expedition. Contret's presence was welcome; John McLeod's

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(Ottawa: National and Historic Parks Branch, 1969), p. 112.

<sup>37</sup>R. G. McConnell, "Report on an Exploration in the Yukon and Mackenzie Basins, N.W.T.," Geological Survey of Canada, Annual Report 1891 (Montreal: William Foster Brown & Co., 1891), Part D, p. 34.

<sup>38</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1831, B. 200/a/14 fos. 3d.

provisions were just about exhausted, but with the addition of more hunters, the larder soon boasted two hundred pounds of meat.<sup>39</sup> As their hunting fortunes changed, so too did the conditions of the river travel turn to the better, or so it seemed. The current slackened and the explorers were able to make their way upstream by their paddles, the voyageurs welcoming relief from the difficulties of towing the canoe from shore. The Liard was occasionally split into two or more channels and frequent sandy beaches, shadowed by forests of spruce and aspen gave the river a serene countenance. In the distance, drawing ever closer, were the rounded heads of the northern-most ranges of the Rocky Mountains.

Taking advantage of the favorable conditions, McLeod had his party moving early. By 4:00 a.m., the North canoe would be pushing its way through morning mists which hung heavily over the river. On one such day, after two hours of travel, McLeod encountered

some difficulty in doubling a point of rock about 200 yards high and so perpendicular that the men could make no use of the towing line, the current too strong for the Paddle, and too great a depth of water to make use of the pole.<sup>40</sup>

McLeod, however, was equal to this challenge. After "some time and difficulty," the voyageurs made it through the canyon by resourcefully pulling the canoe upstream, handhold by handhold, along the rocky walls. They named the spot "Slate Point," based on "the color of the Rock and number of the pieces resembling slate. . . ." <sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1831, B. 200/a/14 fos. 4.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

The next day's march was delayed as McLeod sent out his hunters to restock their provisions. The voyageurs, who always seemed to have energy to spare, spent the time by erecting a "temporary chimney." Presumably, the rude structure of mud and rock was designed to speed the process of drying meat. In any event, before pushing off McLeod named the spot, near the mouth of a small river, "Chimney River."<sup>42</sup> Travel conditions on the Liard continued to improve; the river now a mile wide in some places seemed to be losing its strength. On the nineteenth of July, the explorers traveled the entire day by paddles alone, the first time since leaving Fort Liard that they had not been forced to use the towline.<sup>43</sup> To the south, McLeod noted the mouth of the Toad River, an important tributary of the Liard, flowing into the larger river from what one explorer called "a deep gloomy valley."<sup>44</sup> McLeod noted in his journal, "Toad River is the boundry line of the Fort de Leard and Sandy Indians, the former (altho' seldom) come across land for the purpose of making provisions about the entrance of this river."<sup>45</sup> The Toad River was also the boundary between the navigable regions of the Liard River and the dangerous canyon country ahead.

At first there was no noticeable difference. The explorers passed by several high cliffs, their steep rock faces reaching down to the river's bank, but they came across none of the deep canyons that

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1831, B. 200/a/14 fos. 4d.

<sup>44</sup>McConnell, "Report on the Yukon and Mackenzie Basins," Geological Survey of Canada, 1891, p. 50.

<sup>45</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1831, B. 200/a/14 fos. 4d.

they had been warned about. After passing up one minor riffle, they entered a large, deep lake-like section of river. High hills ringed the water, creating the impression that the Liard had disappeared; it was quiet and peaceful, hardly the cauldron of foaming water that the Indians had described.<sup>46</sup> The North canoe glided across the peaceful pool, the only sound, the methodical movements of the voyageurs' paddles. Then suddenly, as the canoe rounded a point, before them was Hell Gate. Three hundred feet of weathered limestone, its sheer face resembling aged bronze doors, the golden stone streaked and disfigured by black and green patches of lichen. It was the gateway to the worst rapids in Rupert's Land, and the future grave of many a voyageur.

The canyon was a mile long, and the water, constrained by the walls of the Gate, a mere hundred and fifty feet apart, boiled and twisted until its fury was spent in the calm pool below. McLeod and his voyageurs, after some difficulty, made it through the canyon. The first hurdle was behind them, but what lay ahead?

The real battle with the Liard had begun. McLeod, realizing this, decided to strip his expedition of the unessentials, and prepare for action. On the twenty-second of July, he built a cache in which, among other things, he put away a store of moose meat; these provisions would serve as an emergency backup, in case the expedition met disaster in the rapids ahead. The explorers would later have reason to appreciate this prudence.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>R. M. Patterson, "Liard River Voyage," The Beaver (Spring, 1956), p. 23.

<sup>47</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1831, B. 200/a/14 fos. 4d.

After passing through Hell Gate, McLeod was forced to push his way up a series of strong riffles. These gave way to even more dangerous duty at Rapids of the Drowned. The Liard at this point veers sharply to the north, but the massive flow of the river has difficulty changing direction so suddenly, with the violent result that the full force of the current collides with the high cut sandstone banks. The river, furious and foamy white from its unexpected collision, then spills over the rapid's second feature, a bold ledge of rock extending from the north shore. The Rapids of the Drowned is among the most lethal hazards on the Liard.<sup>48</sup> Its macabre name dates from a tragic mishap in 1840 when five voyageurs and a Hudson's Bay Company clerk perished in the rapid. McLeod led his party up the south bank of the rapid, where there was room to track their canoe.

After such an alarming stretch of river, the explorers needed a break and unexpectedly the Liard gave it to them. The river valley widened and the stream spread itself out again, flowing among tree-covered islands and sandy beaches. The current, still unrelenting but less constrained, was much easier to manage. Since passing the Toad River four days before, McLeod's men had been tested severely; ascending the Rapids of the Drowned had required every skill that the voyageurs had acquired in their years of canoe work. From their constant jumping in and out of the canoe, tracking through shallows, and pushing up rapids, the explorers were constantly wet, and by nightfall, bone weary. When they laid down to sleep, the clouds of mosquitoes about

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<sup>48</sup>McConnell, "Report on the Yukon and Mackenzie Basins," Geological Survey of Canada, 1891, p. 480.

their heads were barely noticed. On the evening of July twenty-fourth their much needed sleep was startlingly disturbed.

. . . shortly after we retired to rest that night my faithful dog (Spring) gave us notice by his frequent ranging into the woods and occasionally barking that there were some strangers lurking not far from our camp, in which opinion we were soon convinced by being assailed with a shower of stones thrown from an imminence a short distance from our fire, but could plainly perceive with no intention to injure any of the party, as every stone fell some distance in front of our camp, my Interpreter hailed several times both in Slave and the Kenzie language, but no answer returned.<sup>49</sup>

This was indeed an alarming situation, but rather than push recklessly into the dark of the forest, McLeod kept his men in camp. He set up a watch to guard the others as they tried to sleep.<sup>50</sup> McLeod elected to let the Indians open contact with him when they felt that the time was right. It was a difficult plan to adopt for whatever the men did throughout a day's march, they would know that the eyes of a strange tribe were following their every movement; they would look into the brush and see only trees, but know that the Indians were there.

Fortunately, the waiting game did not last long. The explorers continued their river voyage at the usual early hour. Good progress was made until the afternoon they came to a strong riffle; it proved impossible to overcome with the fully loaded canoe. The explorers then adopted the expedient of what was called a de charge. Their provisions, guns, ammunition, the entire cargo of the canoe was portaged while a couple of the voyageurs then pulled the empty canoe up the riffle. McLeod blazed the portage trail, up "a high precipice." He

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<sup>49</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1831, B. 200/a/14 fos. 5.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.



reached the top ahead of the others and was proceeding across a small clearing when he was "surprised to perceive an Elderly Indian coming towards me armed with a gun and spear."<sup>51</sup> The Indian had not yet spotted McLeod, but rather than drop out of sight until the voyageurs came up the trail, the explorer advanced toward the Indian. McLeod was to within "10 or 15 paces" of the Indian before he was seen. The Indian was startled and raised his gun. Coolly, McLeod put down his gun and continued walking toward the Indian. This gesture allayed the red man's suspicions and he also put aside his weapons, "and stepped forward with both arms extended."<sup>52</sup>

The old Indian was of the Sandy tribe, probably a branch of the Kasca nation. He spoke a version of the Slave Indian language and had been staying near the banks of the Liard, hoping that those Indians would come upriver to trade. The Indians never used the Liard for travel, preferring instead to travel overland. He was plainly impressed that the Hudson's Bay men had fared so well on the river.

He never harbored the least idea, that the whites could have surmounted the many dangerous parts of the River now behind us, but was highly gratified to perceive we had so far succeeded in coming up a stream which until now appeared to him impossible.<sup>53</sup>

Upon ascertaining the peaceful intentions of the whitemen, the old Indian called his family out of their hiding places and a general council ensued. From their appearance McLeod could tell that they had only recently been in contact with whites, for they still bore the outward appearance of a stone-age people,

like all other Indians inhabiting the Mountains, smart and active

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

in their motions, they make hardly any use of wearing apparel, further than a pair of Leather Stockings, and a Moose or Badger Skin Robe, hanging loose over the shoulders, and tied with a leather tong under the chin; the females are smart and good looking and wear a similar garment with the men, with the addition of a piece of leather of about 10 or 12 inches broad, the end of which is formed in below a Girdle round the Waist and extends loose in front to about half the thigh and only when in an erect posture serves partially to cover their nakedness.<sup>54</sup>

The rest of the Sandy tribe was spread out along the upper Liard in small parties. They were particularly apprehensive that year because they had heard from the Mackenzie Indians that the feared Cree were going to launch a raid against them. It was the hope of the Sandy Indians to lie low through the summer, and then rendezvous "by the falling of the leaves" when the Cree danger had passed.<sup>55</sup>

When the interview focused on the Sandy Indians' trade connections, McLeod made an interesting discovery. The Indians had recently visited Fort Halkett, where they had bartered for three guns. But the Indians complained that they were "destitute of ammunition, save a small quantity of cannon powder which they had got from the "Nahany, a tribe West of the Mountains who traded at or near some of the Russian Establishments."<sup>56</sup> McLeod gave a small quantity of powder and some other gifts to the Sandy Indians. To his amazement, the old Indian countered by giving to McLeod a brand new cotton sail. This was further proof that the explorers were now entering the Russian zone. The sail, which was rather useless to the Indians, had been gotten from the

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<sup>54</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1824, B. 200/a/14 fos. 6.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

"Nahany's", who, as McLeod surmised, probably had "pillaged or stolen it near some Russian Establishment."<sup>57</sup> The interesting interview lasted the remainder of the day, after which both parties went their separate ways.

The Hudson's Bay men were now entering the impressive Grand Canyon of the Liard. This stretch of river is thirty to forty miles long and is in reality a series of short canyons. But throughout the length of this section, the river maintains an extremely fast current. Two men actually claim to have run the entire Grand Canyon in two hours. If they are to be believed, their average speed was a remarkable eighteen miles an hour.<sup>58</sup> The most difficult navigation that McLeod experienced in the Grand Canyon came in a dark, narrow gorge, with steep black walls. Passage was complicated by a series of small rocky islands which divided the current and increased the intensity of the riffles.<sup>59</sup> Fortunately, the voyageurs' skill was equal to the gorge and the explorers were able to press on, forcing their way through the canyon.

Successful navigation on the Liard only means fresh challenges; with the Grand Canyon behind him, John McLeod was immediately faced with the Devil's Rapids. This hellish cauldron is created when the river makes a large U-shaped bend to the northeast to avoid a high mountain ridge, but in its impatience to reach the Arctic Sea, the Liard tires of the detour and turns southward, tearing a passage through

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<sup>57</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1824, B. 200/a/14 fos. 7.

<sup>58</sup>McConnell, "Report on the Yukon and Mackenzie Basins," Geological Survey of Canada, 1891, p. 470.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

the mountains.<sup>60</sup> The battle between the river and the rock has been going on for centuries with the Liard deepening its path, as the sheer canyon walls indicate, but the mountain holds on doggedly, restricting the river in places to a mere one hundred and fifty foot defile. John McLeod struggled for two days through rain and mud, making long portages, before he was able to circumvent the rapids.<sup>61</sup> Later the fur traders would hack out a four mile trail, up a thousand foot mountain ridge, to avoid this hazard.

After what he had just come through, McLeod thought that the river above Devil's Rapids was much calmer and even flowing. The terrain also took on a more pleasing appearance as the high canyon walls gradually receded, giving way to tree-covered shores, with long gravel beaches. It was the end of July, and the headwaters of the Liard did not appear to be very near. At this point McLeod decided that it was best to send back Baptiste Contret and the Fort Liard Indians, who were, after all, temporarily assigned to the expedition. He had an Indian guide with him, and it appeared that the major rapids were behind.<sup>62</sup>

The explorers were now in the midst of the mountains. To the south was the Muskwa Range of the Rocky Mountains; prominent peaks like Mount Prudence and Mount Rothenberg dominated the wooded, rounded heads of the neighboring hills. The Liard River marks the northern-most extension of the Rocky Mountains, from here southward for over one

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<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

<sup>61</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1831, B. 200/a/14 fos. 7d.

<sup>62</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1831, B. 200/a/14 fos. 8.

thousand miles, the great range stretches out. The Continent's backbone is continued north by the Mackenzie Mountains, but they are not a proper branch of the Rockies and they begin their march to the Arctic Sea eighty miles east of the Rockies, in the vicinity of Hell Gate. This separation, however, is a mere technicality as the entire upper Liard region is extremely mountainous and it is difficult to determine where one range begins and another ends.

On August first, continuing up the Liard, McLeod reached the Smith River. Heretofore, the old Nor'Wester had named the various notable places he passed as their appearance warranted or according to some incident on the journey, Slate Point and Chimney River being good examples of this practice. But beginning with the Smith River, (which he named after his superior and friend, Chief Factor Edward Smith) John McLeod began to adopt the practice of his acquaintance, Sir John Franklin, and dotted the landscape with the names of personal friends and prominent people who might advance his career. McLeod was attracted to the area about the Smith River. It had every appearance of being an excellent location for a trading **post**. His Indian guide, who left the expedition at this point to visit relatives, reported that the upper section of the Smith River abounded in beaver and that the river drained a lake which was an excellent source of fish. McLeod himself ascended the river a short distance, until he encountered some rapids. Turning back to the Liard, he made a mental note on this promising location.<sup>63</sup>

The already dangerous voyage now became spiced by an added

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<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

element of destruction, a forest fire. The banks of the Liard on both sides of the explorers were ablaze. Hundreds of miles of magnificent spruce and poplar forest were transformed into smoke and ash. Even on the river, away from the flaring fires of the forest, the explorers were beset by the conflagration's side effects. Thick heavy clouds of smoke embraced the river, darkening the sun, and choking off all fresh air, save for the sultry drafts escaping from the fire. McLeod could see no more than three hundred yards ahead of his canoe. To make matters worse, he had been informed by his guide to expect three miles of cascades in this section of the river. Fortunately, when the bowman spotted the rapids ahead, they had already gone past the heart of the fire. The banks adjacent to the rapid were covered with smoking grey ash and tangled charred trees, while the rapid itself was a difficult two mile canyon, strewn with hazards. McLeod elected to play it safe and portage around the canyon. It was an easy carry over level ground, except for the head of the trail, which was directly up a sharply rising rock of one hundred feet. The voyageurs were forced to unlimber their towline, rig a sling for the canoe, and haul it up the slope after them. The carrying place has appropriately been known ever since as Portage Brule, or the Burntwood Portage.<sup>64</sup>

Embarking again, McLeod passed the mouth of a clear flowing river, about three hundred yards wide. The explorer dubbed the stream, Charles River, after Chief Factor John Charles, who commanded the Athabasca District.<sup>65</sup> This river is known today as the Coal River, because

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<sup>64</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1831, B. 200/a/14 fos. 9.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

of the scattered deposits of lignite coal found near its junction with the Liard River. But McLeod had no time to muse on geological features; he soon found himself battling up Whirlpool Canyon. Here a series of treacherous cross currents, roused by the restraining limestone walls of the canyon, combine to create a series of swirling whirlpools, which alternate between sucking the water into its deep vortex and throwing it up, with a sound which a later voyageur described as "resembling the rumbling of distant thunder."<sup>66</sup>

The party continued to inch its way upriver, by tracking, and sometimes by poling, taking each hazard as it came. Near nightfall, on the fourth of August, they came to the foot of yet another rapid, Mountain Portage Rapids. They set up camp near the portage, everyone dead-tired after a long day of toil. But when one of the men discovered porcupine tracks along the muddy bank, the whole company was roused. Suddenly, a supper of grilled porcupine, rather than fried moose meat, seemed in the offing. There was another good reason for ridding the area of porcupines. Under the cover of darkness, the quilled prowlers would often sneak into a voyageurs' camp, and gnaw at the canoe paddles or tump-line straps, anything that might have a salty taste from human sweat. There was, however, no chance of that happening to McLeod's men; armed with cudgels, and with "Spring" barking furiously, they hunted down five of the slow moving creatures.<sup>67</sup> The porcupines were placed whole in the white hot coals of the campfire, and

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<sup>66</sup>McConnell, "Report on the Yukon and Mackenzie Basins," Geological Survey of Canada, 1891, p. 410.

<sup>67</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1831, B. 200/a/14 fos. 9.

broiled in their own fat, providing a rich, tender, if greasy, feast for the explorers.

The next morning McLeod spurned the portage trail, risking the dangers of the rapid. Emerging from the whitewater, McLeod noticed a large river flowing into the Liard from the south. Its waters were dark and silty, but the stream was a broad three hundred yards wide. McLeod correctly surmised that this was the river whose upper reaches marked Samuel Black's farthest progress during his 1824 expedition. This was confirmed by the "written inscription nailed to a tree, and other marks left of which the Indians make particular mention."<sup>68</sup> McLeod named the waterway "Black's River" in honor of his fellow explorer.<sup>69</sup> The rest of the day was spent in the usual upstream struggle; the voyageurs, wading through the shallows with the tracking line over their shoulders, pulling the canoe up the nameless riffles created by every bend in the river, wet and battered from stumbling over sunken rocks, weary of the Liard's unending obstacles.

McLeod's voyageurs were nearing the end of their rope. Since passing through Hell Gate, they had ascended a series of rapids, the like of which would be found on no canoe trail in Canada. This whitewater ladder, by which the Liard climbs over the mountains, had sapped their usual buoyant spirits. That evening McLeod noted in his journal that "The danger in many places, and hard duty of the day began to form some discontent in the bosoms of some part of our crew." Most of the

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<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>The modern name for this river is the Kechika.



men kept their complaints to themselves; "one however more daring than the others could resist no longer" and he proceeded to tell McLeod what he thought of canoeing on the Liard and the expedition in general. John McLeod knew this man as a barracks lawyer, and west of the Rocky Mountains, in unknown country, was no place to let him stir up emotions. In order "to check a future repetition" of insubordination, McLeod thought a prescription of "a little corporal chastisement was the best medicine that could be applied." This was dealt out quickly and dispassionately so as to leave no future platform for complaint. McLeod closed the incident by noting in his journal, "I must however do them [the voyageurs] the justice to say, that since we left Fort Simpson, today was the first instance of discontent."<sup>70</sup>

They awoke the next day to a cold, gray, rainy morning. After the incident of the preceding evening, John McLeod realized that it was best not to push his men. Rather than send them out into the dreary weather, he kept the weary canoemen "snug to our encampment." Later in the day the hunters shot a moose, and around the evening fire the whole party feasted on tender moose tongue and deer heart. The schedule was kept light the next day as well, as they dried and packed the bulk of the moose meat. John McLeod knew the character of the voyageur; after a day and a half of light duties, and a full stomach had transformed their outlook on the world, they were ready to proceed with the journey.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1831, B. 200/a/14 fos. 9d.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid.

On the eighth of August, McLeod had his men back at their usual pace, breaking camp at 4:00 a.m. Fog obscured the Liard that morning, but through its veil they could hear the rumble of rapids ahead. These were the Cranberry Rapids, the last major obstacle that the Liard would hurl at its explorers. Directing the canoe up the south shore of the river, McLeod was able to ascend the hazard by poling the canoe through the eddies and by tracking up the riffles.<sup>72</sup> In 1968, two Russians, expert slalom canoeists who had heard that no one had "shot" the Liard from its headwaters to Fort Simpson, decided to show the North Americans how it was done. Cranberry Rapids was their first major challenge --one drowned and the other returned to Russia.<sup>73</sup>

Above Cranberry Rapids, the Liard Valley stretches out, mountains and defiles are replaced by gently rolling hills. The river itself relaxes, foregoing the foaming whitewater of rapids and falls, it slips smoothly between wooded islands. The multiple channels formed confused McLeod, who thought that the Liard was two miles broad at this point. One thing that was for certain was that it was a superb hunting country. On the morning of the tenth of August, McLeod shot five beaver, all from the very door of his tent. The beaver were so abundant, and unfamiliar with human predators, that throughout the day the explorers were able to chase them in their canoe. It was a fur trapper's paradise.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1831, B. 200/a/14 fos. 10.

<sup>73</sup>Richard Finne, The Headless Valley (New York: Macmillan, 1970), p. 111.

<sup>74</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1831, B. 200/a/14 fos. 10d.

On the fourteenth of August, McLeod came upon a major tributary of the Liard. McLeod left the Liard and pushed up this new river for a couple of miles, when his progress was blocked by a rapid flowing through a canyon "with high perpendicular rocks on both sides." This rapid and the diminished size of the river, convinced McLeod that it was not one of the main branches of the Liard. He named the river after a friend, Peter Warren Dease, a Chief Factor in the Company.<sup>75</sup> As he turned back to the Liard, McLeod made mental note of the Dease River; it was a promising road to the interior.

For another week, the Hudson's Bay Company's explorers continued upstream. Daily, the current of the Liard was diminishing in strength, and the river bed in size. The men in the canoe were aware of the significance of these signs, "such sudden changes and other circumstances induces me to suppose that we are now drawing near the termination of our voyage."<sup>76</sup> This did create one navigation problem, as it became increasingly difficult to differentiate between the main body of the Liard and its tributaries. The result was a mistake of not unimportant significance. While passing through an island-crowded section of river, John McLeod directed the canoe up what he thought was the main branch of the Liard, as it veered sharply to the north. In reality he had entered the Frances River, the last major tributary of the Liard. Had the explorers continued on the Liard, they would have discovered only an ever shrinking river, fed by insignificant creeks. The Frances

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<sup>75</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1831, B. 200/a/14 fos. 11d.

<sup>76</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1831, B. 200/a/14 fos. 12d.

river and the earlier discovered Dease River, were the only commercially important affluents of the Liard; both would figure prominently in later exploration and exploitation of the region.

McLeod ascended the Frances for about thirty-five miles, breaching a rapid-filled canyon, a maneuver the voyageurs now did as a matter of course. The river's thickly timbered banks restricted the explorers from any general view of the country ahead, something McLeod wanted so that he could hopefully ascertain the Liard's main sources. On the evening of August twenty-first, the party camped near the base of a low range of mountains. Early the next morning, McLeod decided to climb the closest peak to steal a view of what lay ahead.

At 4 AM we began to ascend the Mountain and after several rests we obtained the summit at 1pm. from which I had a good prospect of the country on both sides of the River, a short distance ahead the Country is level, in which is situated a pretty large lake from which a River flows into the West Branch, at the north end of the Lake is another much higher Range of Mountains, extending in a NE direction, and as far as the eye could extend, distant summits appeared towering much higher, and all covered with snow, from the different cuts and Valleys, I had a fair view of the number of small Rivulets, which form such a body of water as the West Branch, all combining on the NE side of the Lake in sight; being now satisfied that the object of the Voyage was fairly accomplished, I dispatched one of the Hunters back to where I had left the men, with orders to the Bowsmen to leave all our luggage, in order to lighten the canoe, as I intended to visit the Lake in sight in expectation of finding some natives.<sup>77</sup>

They set out for the lake at noon the next day. Pushing a short way up the Frances, the explorers noted that the current was slack, "bordering on stillwater, the men with cheerful countenances threw aside their Setting Poles, and with a lively song plyed their paddles, with some Spirit."<sup>78</sup> With the words of La Claire Fontaine or some other chanson

<sup>77</sup>Ibid.

<sup>78</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1831, B. 200/a/14 fos. 13.

still on their lips, the voyageurs steered the canoe up the small stream which connected the Frances River with the large lake ahead. But the character of the stream took all the joy out of their song. Fallen trees blocked its channels and McLeod continually had to send men ahead with hatchets to clear a path. As darkness spread out of the forest, they were forced to camp short of the lake. It was not until late the next morning that the explorers finally pushed their canoe into the smooth waters of the lake. As the voyageurs rested their paddles on the gunnels of the canoe, they saw before them a beautiful lake about twelve miles long and two miles broad, "and in honor of our worthy Governor called it Simpson's Lake, on each side of the Lake is a high mountain, and in honor of two respectable Gentlemen called them Garry's and McTavish's Mountains."<sup>79</sup>

As far as John McLeod was concerned, they had reached the end of their voyage, "Simpson's Lake I consider one of the principal feeders of the West Branch, where along it's margin lay dormant the fortunes of many."<sup>80</sup> McLeod proceeded across the lake, hoping to come across some of the local Indians. All he was able to find was an abandoned fishing camp, on one of the lake's islands, and a not too carefully hidden cache. McLeod, "being anxious to know if they had any European manufacture," ordered his men to break into the cache, "but found nothing that could convince me they had ever seen whites."<sup>81</sup> The fur traders

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<sup>79</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1831, B. 200/a/14 fos. 13d. McLeod named the mountains after Nicholas Garry, Deputy Governor of the Company, and John George McTavish, Chief Factor.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid.

took three beaver skins from the Indian cache, leaving behind knives, fire steel, and other goods to inform the Indians that the nineteenth century had reached Simpson Lake. Before leaving the island,

the interpreter lopped off the branches of a high Pine Tree, on which I cut my initials, Day and Date, number of my crew and date of my departure from fort Simpson H.B. Co and by request of my crew named the spot McLeod's Island, after thanking my crew for their uniform good conduct and eagerness in bring the voyage to a satisfactory close, which I now considered fully accomplished, and I hope to the satisfaction of my Honorable Employers, we embarked with 3 cheers and began to retrace our steps.<sup>82</sup>

It was late August; they were a long way from Fort Simpson, and the cold season was swiftly approaching. But at least the homeward journey would be downstream all the way, after an entire summer of bucking the current, it would be, they thought, a relief to have it on their side. Back on the Liard River, they made good progress; by August twenty-eighth they were at the mouth of the Kechika River. Here they met a group of Indians. After trading for twenty beaver skins, and holding a brief council, the explorers were again on their way. Perhaps they were too much in a hurry. Arriving at the brink of Mountain Portage Rapids, McLeod made a hasty decision to run the cataract. This, as he later admitted, was a mistake: "We for our impudence nearly paid our folly, with our lives, we ran aground on a sunk rock, the blow breaking about 2 feet square of the bottom of our canoe."<sup>83</sup> It was touch and go as the waters of the rapid poured into the fractured canoe, and the voyageurs, paddling quite literally for their lives, struggled to maneuver the canoe toward shore. They made it, but just barely, as

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<sup>82</sup>Ibid.

<sup>83</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1831, B. 200/a/14 fos. 13d.-14.

the canoe was loaded to the gunnels with water.<sup>84</sup>

This was merely a prelude to the tragedy which beset the explorers at the Portage Brule Rapids. The voyageurs thought that they could run the rapid. To lighten the canoe, so as to increase its maneuverability, McLeod and four other gentlemen would take the portage trail around the rapids. This left the bowman, the sternman, and two middlemen to pilot the North canoe. They started down the rapid in fine style; with McLeod and the voyageurs shouting encouragement from shore. The canoe slipped between the small islands and rocky outcroppings which obstructed the channel; all seemed to be going well. Suddenly, as they neared the end of the rapid, the voyageurs found their path blocked by a limestone ledge reaching out into the river. The water spilled over the rock, creating a foaming cascade. The bowman had no choice but to point the canoe down the chute. The waves broke over the birchbark hull, first filling the canoe, and then tearing it into three pieces. Two of the men, Thomas Corin and Antoine Brilliant, were immediately sucked beneath the swirling waters, dashed against the sunken ledge, and probably killed instantly--their bodies never reappeared. Louis Briant and Pierre Paul were more fortunate. They had managed to hang on to a section of the canoe; using it as a life preserver, they had floated safely through the rest of the riffles. Their problems, however, were not over; the Liard's current was flowing at about ten miles per hour toward another, smaller rapid two miles further downstream. Briant and Paul struggled with all their might to push the ruined canoe

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<sup>84</sup>Ibid.

toward shore, while McLeod and the rest of the crew scrambled along the bank trying to lend assistance. At the very brink of the second rapid, the two voyageurs, fighting panic and the cold water which was sapping their strength, mustered a final effort and were able to reach shore, "completely exhausted."<sup>85</sup>

The expedition was now in critical straits, "entirely destitute of means of getting back to any hospitable quarter, every party was now quite discouraged, and sorely lamenting the loss of our companions."<sup>86</sup> Their very survival now rested on McLeod's abilities as a leader. The Scotsman was equal to the occasion, "seeing that no time was to be lost to ensure our future preservation we gathered up the remaining part of our canoe, and making as shifts to patch the pieces together."<sup>87</sup> The task of rebuilding their canoe was confounded by their lack of an axe. In fact, their only tool was a crooked knife. McLeod would have considered abandoning the canoe entirely and proceeding to Fort Simpson overland, but most of his men lacked shoes.<sup>88</sup> The voyageurs, calling upon their great skill with the crooked knife, were able to fashion a canoe of sorts. John McLeod dubbed the vessel, "our crazy craft," but on it they again headed downstream, hugging the shore, for obvious reasons.

The rest of the voyage held no further adventures. They made it out of the canyon country, carefully navigating the river, and

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<sup>85</sup>Ibid.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid.

<sup>87</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1831, B. 200/a/14 fos. 14d.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid.



subsisting on provisions that McLeod had prudently cached on the upstream voyage. Upon reaching Fort Simpson on the ninth of September, John McLeod had completed his seventy-four day exploratory survey.<sup>89</sup>

Edward Smith was enthused by the success of McLeod's expedition. He boasted to a fellow fur trader that "since the coalition such a field has not yet been opened for commercial undertakings."<sup>90</sup> Smith had been at Fort Simpson for nearly ten years, and he had always been interested in expanding the fur trade up the Liard River; now he finally had some results. The "old spirit of the Northwest" shone in his eyes when he penned:

I am now pleased in having something more substantial than indian report to lay before Council of this long talked of Country--and my ambition now ceases--and when the day comes that I turn my back to McKenzie River not to return--it will be one of those trying moments when the mind is neither cloudy with sorrow or cheered with joy--I have done my duty let those that follow me--keep to the path that is now open--and extend it right and left and I now pronounce the District to be still on the progressive and will continue so for many years to come, sometimes I would wish to possess younger days to finish what is begun. . . .<sup>91</sup>

Old "Daddy Smith," as the Chief Factor was affectionately known, made an additional contribution to the advance up the Liard in 1832. He ordered Fort Halkett to be moved from its unsuccessful location on the East Branch to the heart of the mountainous upper Liard near the Smith River. This, however, was a parting gesture, for in 1832 Governor Simpson granted Edward Smith a year's leave, "to visit the civilized

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<sup>89</sup>Ibid.

<sup>90</sup>Glazebrook, ed., The Hargrave Correspondence, p. 84

<sup>91</sup>Ibid.

world, from which he has been absent for upwards of 30 years."<sup>92</sup> With Smith's exit, the expansion up the West Branch lost its guiding hand.

### The Dryad Affair

Governor George Simpson did not fully appreciate the significance of the new area of operations opened up by John McLeod's exploration. Instead, he was preoccupied with the myriad of personal problems which close in around a newly married man. The Governor had returned to Rupert's Land in the summer of 1830, after a furlough, with a demure, young **English** bride. When he was again free to concentrate on the great Company's business, his particular interest centered on the northwest coast fur trade. Here, the Hudson's Bay Company had successfully crippled the American maritime trade, but had failed to secure the Russian support necessary to complete the campaign. In retaliation, Simpson proposed to step up pressure on the Russians. The center of this program would be the Stikine River, the route by which Russian traders reaped huge harvests of land furs from British territory. John McLeod's 1831 journey had revealed that Russian influence had penetrated far up the Liard, to the doorstep of the Mackenzie District. Simpson hoped to disrupt the flow of furs to the Russian-American Company by seizing control of the Stikine River.

Responsibility for the new venture was given to the commander of Port Simpson, Peter Skene Ogden. According to Simpson's directions, Ogden fitted out the brig Dryad with **thirty-eight** men and a healthy

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<sup>92</sup>Simpson, "Simpson's Character Book," Hudson's Bay Miscellany, p. 93.

allotment of trade goods. The plan was for Ogden to sail the Dryad to the mouth of the Stikine River, then proceed upriver until he passed the limits of Russian territory. He was then to construct a new trading post, in British territory, which would intercept the inland furs before they reached the hands of the Russian-American Company.

Baron Ferdinand von Wrangell, however, was not going to let his operations be subverted so easily. He knew that the British had the right to navigate all rivers, such as the Stikine, which flowed through the Russian lisiere. That right had been secured by the Anglo-Russian Convention, which was due to expire in 1835. Although the free navigation privilege had been granted in perpetuity, Wrangell could hope for renegotiation. The problem was, as he explained to his St. Petersburg superiors, to delay the British thrust and:

The greatest trouble I have now is the Hudson Bay Company which is allowed by the convention to navigate freely on rivers falling into the sea in our possessions, for it is the region neighboring upon the rivers which furnished us with beavers and not the coast, and I beg of you that should any other convention be signed (the term of the old ones having expired) you should solicit that free navigation on the rivers should at least be limited by the condition that free navigation to the British from the interior to the sea should not be forbidden, while free navigation from the sea up the rivers should be prohibited. Of course it would be best not to allow any navigation whatever, though I think that it will not be possible to manage it. However, this circumstance will depend on diplomatic transactions and until further instructions I will hinder the British by force from sailing up the Stachin Stikine river.<sup>93</sup>

Wrangell still needed some legal justification for blocking the

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<sup>93</sup>Baron von Wrangell--Board of Directors, Russian-American Company, April 28, 1834, Proceedings of the Alaskan Boundary Tribunal, convened at London . . . under the Treaty concluded at Washington, January 24, 1903, Vol. II (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1903), pp. 266-267. Hereafter this collection will be referred to as A.B.T.

British. Studying the 1825 convention, the wily Russian came upon an article vague enough to suit his purpose. The provision stated, in part:

. . . Subjects of His Britannic Majesty shall not land at any place where there may be a Russian establishment, without permission of the Governor or Commandant; and, on the other hand, that Russian subjects shall not land, without permission, at any British establishment, of the Northwest coast.<sup>94</sup>

All he would have to do was **build** a post near the mouth of the Stikine River, and then forbid the British access to the waters about the establishment. This was, of course, confounding the original intent of the article, and was in itself convoluted reasoning at best, but it would serve the purpose.

In the fall of 1833, Wrangell dispatched Lieutenant Dionysius Zarembo with the fourteen gun brig Chichagoff to begin construction of the post, or redoubt. The site selected was ten miles south of the mouth of the Stikine River, off Etolin Island, and at the present location of the settlement of Wrangell. Unlike most Hudson's Bay Company posts, Fort Dionysius, as the new post was named, was fortified with cannon and well prepared for action.

On the fifteenth of June, Peter Skene Ogden set out with his Hudson's Bay Company expedition. Three days out of Port Simpson, he approached Point Highfield. Studying the coast, Ogden was surprised to spot the Russian fort. Although he did not think it a formidable installation, calling it a "shapeless mass of logs and planks," he knew it did not bode well for his operation. Ogden anchored the Dryad off

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<sup>94</sup>A.B.T., Anglo-Russian Convention of 1825, Vol. II, p. 15.

the Russian post and prepared to meet a whale boat that was beating toward his ship from the shore. Lieutenant Zarembo came on deck and presented Ogden with Baron von Wrangell's prohibition of British vessels from the vicinity. Ogden would have none of this; he quickly dashed off a short note, informing the Russians that he had the right to proceed upstream, and reaffirming his intention to do so. Zarembo took the note and returned to shore.<sup>95</sup>

Shortly thereafter, a second boat pulled alongside the Dryad. Out of this one stepped a "short thickset goodnatured vainlooking man"; he was Zarembo's interpreter. Ogden invited the gentlemen into his cabin, hoping to get some clarification as to what was going on. As the Russian belted down brandies, he tried to make clear to Ogden what would happen if he disregarded Wrangell's decree. Unfortunately, the interpreter knew only a few English words, and his use of these was not facilitated by the half pint of spirits that he had consumed. Ogden, who knew no Russian, tried to engage his guest in French, but to no avail. The two greatest empires in the world, Great Britain and Tsarist Russia, were on a collision course, and neither side could understand what the other was saying. Before it was over, Ogden had tried English, French, Spanish, and Latin on the Russian authorities. Still, the only detail that he **learned** was that the Russians insisted on preventing his ascent of the Stikine. If he attempted that, their orders were to "boxum," this enigmatic phrase Ogden took to mean, stop him

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<sup>95</sup>Gloria Griffen Cline, Peter Skene Ogden and the Hudson's Bay Company (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1974), p. 113.

"by violence."<sup>96</sup>

Eventually, Zarembo agreed to send Ogden's note to Sitka, and at the same time he appealed to Wrangell to confirm his previous orders. This meant at least an eight to ten day delay in Ogden's plans. Trying to make the best of a bad situation, Ogden moved his ship into Etolin harbor, where he was surprised to see the Chichagoff and her fourteen guns.<sup>97</sup> The Russians used the waiting time well. At every occasion, Zarembo lectured the local Tlingit Indians about how a successful British post upriver on the Stikine would destroy their middle-man trade with the interior tribes. This soon had its effect; on the nineteenth of June, Ogden received a visit from Seix, a powerful Tlingit chief. The chief represented a trade party as powerful on the frontier as the English and the Russians. The warriors had defeated the white merchants on previous occasions, and they were prepared to do so again. Seix told Ogden that he could build a post at the mouth of the Stikine, but he would not be allowed to establish a post upriver.<sup>98</sup>

The Russian courier finally returned from Sitka on the twenty-eighth of June. Wrangell was not able to respond to Ogden's assertion of British rights because he was absent from Sitka for the summer, a very diplomatic move. His second in command, Captain Adolf Etholine, merely reaffirmed Zarembo's opposition to the Stikine venture.<sup>99</sup> It

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<sup>96</sup>Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>97</sup>A.B.T., Report of Chief Trader Peter Skene Ogden of Transactions at Stikine, 1834, Vol. II, p. 266.

<sup>98</sup>Cline, Peter Skene Ogden, p. 115.

<sup>99</sup>A.B.T., Baron von Wrangell--Board of Directors, Russian-American Company, April 30, 1835, Vol. II, p. 276.

was now showdown time. Ogden had nearly forty men and an armed brig at his command. Governor Simpson had described him as "a very cool calculating fellow who is capable of doing anything to gain his ends."<sup>100</sup> He was not a man to shrink from violence--his career in the fur trade was checkered with incidents of over-aggressiveness and strong arm tactics. But on this occasion, it was Ogden who was forced to back down. Had it been a matter of facing the Russian brig, Ogden most likely would have pushed on, and damned the consequences. But the determined opposition of the Tlingit Indians was another thing. His job was to found a trading post, an impossible task if the local Indians were opposed. Ogden did not have to look far to see what the Tlingit would do if he persisted; the example of their 1802 massacre at Sitka was still well remembered on the coast. With this consideration on his mind, Ogden decided "it would be highly imprudent to persist in the undertaking."<sup>101</sup>

Returning to Port Simpson, Ogden decided to try and make good use of the abundant resources that had been allotted for the Stikine venture, and relocated the site of Port Simpson. The original post was at an overly exposed location, frequently assaulted by winds and gales blowing in from the North Pacific. While engaged in the rebuilding, Ogden needed wood for spars. The area about the post did not have the proper trees, so he sent a small party across the channel into Russian territory. The Hudson's Bay men had no sooner started gathering the

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<sup>100</sup>Simpson, "Simpson's Character Book," The Hudson's Bay Miscellany, p. 193.

<sup>101</sup>Cline, Peter Skene Ogden, p. 115.

wood than a group of Russian sortied out of a nearby settlement of Tongass, driving off the English.<sup>102</sup> This was too much for Ogden, who was in no mood for the petty harassments of a cold war. He expedited the rebuilding of Port Simpson and then re-embarked in the Dryad for Sitka; he was going to give Wrangell a piece of his mind.

When Ogden finally reached Sitka on September twenty-seventh, his anger had dissipated somewhat, and he was ready to play the role of diplomat. After entering Sitka harbor, Ogden ordered his men to fire a nine gun salute to Baron von Wrangell. The Russian shore batteries returned the tribute and Ogden proceeded to "Baranov's Castle," a large wooden building which served as the Governor's residence. In spite of dinner and vodka toasts, the interview had its unpleasant moments. Ogden officially protested Russia's obstruction of the Hudson's Bay Company's trade. Wrangell, who stuck to his obtuse interpretation of the convention, countered by accusing the English of plotting to destroy the Russian-American Company's trade. Ogden tried to obscure the fact by telling Wrangell that the Honorable Company's only purpose in advancing up the Stikine River was to provide a line of communication between the coast and the Company's posts at the headwaters of the Stikine. This was a barefaced lie, as the Company did not even have any posts at the headwaters of the Stikine in 1834. Wrangell knew this and felt justified in countering with falsehoods of his own. The Russian blockade of the Stikine, he claimed, not only rested on firm legal grounds, but it was also motivated by humanitarian considerations. A

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<sup>102</sup>Ibid.



Hudson's Bay post would strip the land of furs and ruin the livelihood of the poor Tlingit Indians. Piously, Baron von Wrangell claimed that the Hudson's Bay Company's strategy resembled "the robbery of a band of brigands who trample on the rights and property of the aborigines." In this tedious, superficial manner, Ogden's negotiations with Wrangell dragged on until the Chief Trader realized that he was not going to get any satisfaction from the Russian Governor.<sup>103</sup>

Ogden left Sitka and filed a detailed report with Columbia District Commander John McLoughlin. The Hudson's Bay Company then contacted the Foreign Office, protesting Baron von Wrangell's blockade and claiming damages of £22,150.10.11. Lord Palmerston, then Foreign Secretary, gave the Hudson's Bay Company his full support. The resulting diplomatic fracas became known as "The Dryad Affair." A charmingly nineteenth-century dispute, where conflict on the exotic fringes of empires, although treated seriously and with some dispatch, was not allowed to disrupt the general flow of foreign policy.

Lord Dunham, Britain's minister in St. Petersburg, put pressure on the Russian Government for "redress and compensation."<sup>104</sup> The Tsar's case was again represented by the urbane Count Nesselrode, who with suave ineptitude immediately destroyed Baron von Wrangell's defensive measures by admitting that the Russian-American Company was erroneous in its interpretation of the Anglo-Russian Convention.<sup>106</sup> The directors

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<sup>103</sup>A.B.T., Baron von Wrangell--Board of Directors, Russian-American Company, April 30, 1835, Vol. II, pp. 275-277.

<sup>104</sup>A.B.T., Lord Dunham--Count Nesselrode, November 29, 1835, Vol. II, p. 287.

<sup>105</sup>A.B.T., Count Nesselrode--Lord Dunham, December 21, 1835, Vol. II, p. 288.

of the Russian-American Company were shocked by Nesselrode's concession; they had never suspected that their position would be subverted by their own government.<sup>106</sup> The British then tried to obtain compensation for the Hudson's Bay Company, which even by Nesselrode's admission, had been wronged. However, the Russians balked on this issue, claiming that they had not threatened to forcibly prevent Ogden's passage. The British, of course, thought otherwise, and the negotiations broke down into a collection of counter claims asserting what Zarembo, who spoke no English, said to Ogden, who spoke no Russian. It was a low comic routine which would drag on for years.

#### The Discovery of the Inland Route to the Stikine River

The Hudson's Bay Company was not content to wait patiently for the diplomats in Europe to clear up the frontier crisis. Operations on the Pacific coast were cut back, in order to reduce tension with the Russians. But this should not be seen as acquiescence to Russian strength; rather, Governor Simpson was foregoing the obvious frontal assaults on the Russians for a campaign on his enemy's flanks. Inland operations were, for the first time, to be given priority over those on the coast. Simpson's sudden optimism concerning expansion from the interior was a direct result of a new exploratory survey by John McLeod, who in 1834 headed up the Liard again to extend the frontiers of the Company yet further.

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<sup>106</sup>A.B.T., Board of Directors of the Russian American Company to the Department of Trade and Manufacturers, January 3, 1836, Vol. II, pp. 289-290.

Exploration in the Mackenzie District had stalled, temporarily, after 1832 when its major patron, Chief Factor Edward Smith, left the Northwest for a year's furlough. His duties at Fort Simpson were assumed by Chief Factor John Stuart. Fur trader J. G. McTavish remarked:

McKenzie River made a very bad exchange a Smith for a Stuart--regularity & system for Confusion and Nonsense--It must be disgusting to the Young expectants in that quarter to see an old useless hunky good for nothing but waisting Tobacco sent as their leader.<sup>107</sup>

Governor Simpson was even harsher in his judgment of Stuart:

Is exceedingly vain, a great Egotist, swallows the grossest flattery, is easily cajoled, rarely speaks the truth, indeed I would not believe him upon Oath . . . fancies himself one of the leading & most valuable men in the Country, but his Day is gone by, and he is now worse than useless being a cloy upon the concern . . . (May be considered in his dotage and has of late become disgustingly indedent, in regard to women).<sup>108</sup>

It would, however, be unfair to History to dismiss John Stuart in so biting a manner. He had joined the North West Company in 1799, and spent most of his career in New Caledonia. He served as Simon Fraser's second in command on that notable descent of the Fraser River. As late as 1829, Simpson himself referred to Stuart as "the Father or founder of New Caledonia" and singled him out for his "unwearied industry and extraordinary perseverance."<sup>109</sup> John Stuart ran afoul with Simpson and McTavish in 1831. Both of these gentlemen had cast off their "country wives," or Indian brides, and married English girls. Stuart, who was commanding the Winnipeg District, was given the

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<sup>107</sup>Simpson, "Simpson's Character Book," Hudson's Bay Miscellany, p. 176.

<sup>108</sup>Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>109</sup>Ibid., p. 174.

responsibility of caring for the former wives. He assumed this uncomfortable task but gave both McTavish and Simpson a piece of his mind, censuring them for heartlessly discarding their former wives, leaving the poor women "stigmatized with ignominy."<sup>110</sup> It was under these circumstances that Stuart earned the sharp characterizations of McTavish and Simpson, quoted above. In fact, Stuart's transfer to the Mackenzie District may be regarded as a banishment, Simpson wanting the sharp-tongued Scotsman removed from earshot. This may have been convenient for the Governor personally, but it was not in the best interests of the District. Stuart was no longer at the height of his powers and he lacked the energy to continue the march up the Liard River.

The impetus for continuing the explorations came from the Council of the Northern Department. In 1833, they ordered

That John McLeod, Clerk, be employed Summer 1834 with 5 men employed in discovering the countries situated on the west side of the Rocky Mountains from the sources of the East Branch of the Liard.<sup>111</sup>

Governor Simpson, although the most influential member of the Council, did not initially agree with this decision. He had soured on the Liard as a trade route, perhaps because the initial fur returns from the first Fort Halkett were poor, or it may have been the hazardous navigation which marred John McLeod's 1831 journey. Writing to Edward Smith, who had returned to the Northwest as commander of the Athabasca Department and remained involved in the affairs of the Liard, Simpson made

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<sup>110</sup>Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>111</sup>E. H. Oliver, ed., The Canadian Northwest: Its Early Development and Legislative Records, Vol. II (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1915), p. 692.

his views quite clear:

Missions of this description are generally attended with heavy expense and inconvenience, and as it does not appear to us that much benefit is likely to be gained by following them up in that quarter, where their progress has been miserably slow for some years past, you need not keep up an establishment of people for that object, on the contrary we beg that you will reduce the complement of servants in the District.<sup>112</sup>

The Governor's opinion was to radically change following the return of John McLeod.

John McLeod had passed the winter of 1833-34 at Fort Halkett, deep in the Rocky Mountains at the mouth of the Smith River. In accordance with the Council's orders, he left the post on the twenty-fifth of June, with a North canoe, five voyageurs, and two Indian hunters. McLeod, however, had no intention of exploring up the East Branch--now known as the Fort Nelson River--as the Council had suggested; his goal would be the Dease River. Having discovered and ascended that river a short way in 1831, McLeod felt that it held real possibilities as an avenue to push even deeper into the interior.<sup>113</sup>

The Liard was running much higher than it had been in 1831. Pushing upriver from Fort Halkett proved rather difficult. Where, during his first journey, McLeod had made only a single portage between the Smith River and Cranberry Rapids, he was obliged on this occasion to engage in twelve separate portages.<sup>114</sup> Still, by July tenth he was at the mouth of the Dease River.

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<sup>112</sup>H.B.C.A., Governor Simpson--Edward Smith, July 5, 1834, D. 4/20 fos. 16d.

<sup>113</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Halkett Journal, 1834, B. 85/a/6 fos. 1.

<sup>114</sup>Ibid.

Two miles of smooth steady current on the Dease brought McLeod to his first rapid on the new river. Appropriately enough, it has become known as Two Mile Rapid. The river spills over a rocky ledge and through a narrow gap between a rocky bank and the steep wall of an overhanging cliff. After the Liard's rapids, it presented McLeod with no difficulties. The same was true a couple of miles further upstream, at a second cataract, called Four Mile Rapid. This rapid lacks the canyon-like appearance of Two Mile Rapid, but the innumerable boulders which congest the stream are formidable obstacles. McLeod would have proceeded up the west side of the rapid, where a relatively clear channel was afforded.

After this unfriendly beginning, the Dease settled down, flowing pleasantly between banks of poplar and willow. The current was steady, about three to four miles per hour, but the water was not deep and the voyageurs, using their poles, made excellent progress. Poling was a delicate art; the voyageur stood up in the canoe, carefully trying to position his eight to ten foot pole, or perche, yet at the same time keeping his balance.<sup>115</sup> It took a cool head to execute such a maneuver in the middle of a dangerous riffle. During the day, McLeod stopped several times to light tangled piles of driftwood, hoping to notify the local Indians of the trader's approach.<sup>116</sup>

The hunting along the Dease was excellent; on successive days, the Indian hunters brought down a moose and a caribou. On the sixteenth

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<sup>115</sup>Eric W. Morse, Fur Trade Canoe Routes of Canada/Then and Now (Ottawa: National and Historic Parks Branch of Ministry of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 1969), p. 5.

<sup>116</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Halkett Journal, B. 85/a/6 fos. 1d.

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MAP 5.  
DEASE RIVER AREA  
&  
THE PACIFIC SLOPE

N

25 m

DEASE LAKE POST

TO INDIAN  
TRADE  
RENDEZVOUS

STIKINE  
RIVER

TUNA  
R.

DEASE R.

LIARD RIVER

FRANCIS R.

HYLAND R.

of July, McLeod passed a smooth flowing river entering the Dease from the southwest; he named it after the hearty commander of Fort Simpson, John Stuart.<sup>117</sup> The river's course began to vary, weaving in great bends to the east, then to the west. Toward the end of the day they approached a high barren range of mountains, well back from the river, yet prominently dominating the landscape. This was the Horse Ranch Range, a twenty-five mile long crest of ancient granite, reaching to 7,300 feet at its high points.

John McLeod was **anxious** to open communication with the natives of the Dease River, and upon spying the Horse Ranch Range he supposed that they might be spending the summer in the high country, hunting wild mountain goats. Acting upon this hunch McLeod spent the next day climbing the slopes of the Horse Ranch Range. Unfortunately he was unable to locate any of the Dease area's inhabitants or gain any significant knowledge of the land ahead.

Continuing upriver the explorers encountered a serious set of rapids. This was Stoney Island Rapids, where the Dease flows through a narrow canyon-like constriction, framed by impressive outcroppings of granite. It is a picturesque spot, with rock cliffs speckled by moss and lichen, burnt orange and black by the sun; a spruce forest provides a somber crown for the canyon. It is also a dangerous spot for whirlpools, shifting from side to side about the rapid, with their yawning dark mouths suddenly appearing in what seemed to be calm water, and the boulders and rocky islets, which give the rapid its name, can all too

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<sup>117</sup>Robert Campbell later named the stream the "Caribou River," while modern maps refer to it as the Blue River.



quickly be translated into disaster. The voyageurs would have to track their canoe up this rapid, probably on the west bank of the river.<sup>118</sup>

One of the landmarks that McLeod passed on the Dease was McDame Creek. Years later, in 1874, gold would be discovered along the creek and a settlement would spring up at its junction with the Dease. McDame eventually became the center of the entire Cassiar mining district. Ironically, it was the Hudson's Bay Company, which had preceded the prospectors into the area, which probably made the most money out of the rush, bartering the miner's gold for beans and bacon, the necessities of life. After McDame Creek, the Dease begins to weave, in long looping bends, meandering with a slack current.

On the nineteenth of July, McLeod came upon another set of rapids. The voyageurs had no difficulty tracking up the boulder-strewn hazard. The Cottonwood River, entering the Dease at the head of the rapids, proved to be of more difficulty. At their junction, the Dease and the Cottonwood are both no more than a hundred feet wide, with steady smooth currents. McLeod camped at this spot for the night, and he tried to guess which river was the main branch of the Dease.<sup>119</sup>

The next morning the expedition embarked up the "west fork," or Cottonwood River. After a few miles, however, this river became progressively shallower and frequently interrupted by small rapids. McLeod called a halt; there had to be a better route to the interior. With his two Indian hunters and the interpreter, McLeod left the

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<sup>118</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Halkett Journal, 1834, B. 85/a/6 fos. 2d.

<sup>119</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Halkett Journal, 1834, B. 85/a/6 fos. 3.

Cottonwood, determined to climb one of the nearby mountains. Reaching the summit of one of a number of nameless peaks, the explorer was afforded a fine view of the surrounding country. To the east he could clearly make out the Dease River; clear of rapids--that was the route he wanted. McLeod and the interpreter headed back to the canoe on the Cottonwood, while the two hunters were left to search the treeless slopes for mountain goat. They would rendezvous with the main party the next morning on the Dease.<sup>120</sup>

McLeod had no difficulty shooting the North canoe down the Cottonwood and proceeding up the Dease. Approaching the selected rendezvous, the voyageurs noticed only one of the hunters was present.

I was sorry to learn that his Companion he left on the adjoining Mountain his left hand, from the bursting of his Gun in firing at Goats, mangled in a shocking manner, and from the loss of blood in too weak a condition to be able to proceed onto meet us, I made all possible expedition accompanied by the Hunter to the spot, and after dressing his wounds in the best manner possible reached back at the canoe at a late hour.<sup>121</sup>

When in unknown country, a Hudson's Bay Company officer had to be not only a fur trader and explorer, but it seems a doctor as well.

On the twenty-third of July, McLeod came upon an Indian camp, perhaps three days old. If these Indians were a hunting band, they still might have been in the area. McLeod, who was very anxious to open up trade relations with the Indians of Dease River, elected to follow their trail. Setting out with the two hunters, the interpreter, and a voyageur, McLeod had no trouble picking up the Indians' trail. But after a short time it became obvious that the Indians were quickening their march, fleeing, McLeod suspected, from the fur traders. The

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<sup>120</sup>Ibid.

<sup>121</sup>Ibid.

chase continued for the "remainder of the day and night" before McLeod finally gave up the effort. During the inland trek, McLeod could see in the distance a very large body of water, which he suspected must be the source of the Dease River.<sup>122</sup> The remaining few miles of river which separated McLeod from that lake are extremely beautiful. The Dease's current was again alive and the water clear, as the river, a mere **thirty** to forty feet wide, flowed through thick forests and passed gravel bars of shiny white rock. And because the river was only a few feet deep, the voyageurs placing their poles in the transparent stream made excellent progress.<sup>123</sup>

McLeod reached the source of the Dease River on a gray rainy day. In such weather, heavy clouds would rest upon the high hills which ringed the lake, presenting a scene dismal to any observer, save for a Scotsman like McLeod, who could not have but noticed the lake's striking resemblance to the lochs of his native land. The next day Dease Lake revealed a more pleasant face and the explorers were justifiably impressed with their discovery:

Deases Lake is a magnificent body of water 43 Miles in length and from  $1\frac{1}{2}$  to 3 Miles broad by compass SE & NW, and surprising that in such a body of water not an Island is to be found, the country on both sides the lake is hilly but well wooded, and running parallel on both sides is a mountain but not high.<sup>124</sup>

Today, the mountain on the west side of the lake is known as Mount McLeod. In his enthusiasm, the explorer did overestimate the length of

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<sup>122</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Halkett Journal, 1834, B. 85/a/6 fos. 3d.

<sup>123</sup>Ibid.

<sup>124</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Halkett Journal, 1834, B. 85/a/6 fos. 4.

Dease Lake, which is closer to half the forty odd miles he jotted down into his journal. But such a mistake is understandable as the long narrow lake presents distant vistas which seem like mirages when canoeing on a calm clear day, giving the traveler a static feeling where in spite of every exertion no progress seems to be being made.

Near the close of the day, McLeod's party reached the south end of Dease Lake. McLeod had now traveled over two hundred miles into a new country and he had seen rich beaver territory. He might have turned back; he had reached the source of the Dease, and could have spent his energies trying to open up contact with the Indians of the area. But his journal reveals that the explorer had something quite different on his mind:

A complete stop being now put to our further advance by water, my intention is to secure our canoe and baggage at this place, and proceed for some days in the same direction overland, and as no Mountains of any great Magnitude approach before us, I have every expectation some of the streams flowing to the Pacific can be no great distance, and before long anticipate the hope of drinking their waters.<sup>125</sup>

McLeod was not blundering in the dark; he had a clear idea of what he hoped to find. He was familiar with the Trading Nahanni of Samuel Black, and from the tribes of the upper Liard he had heard of a trail which led from a large lake to the Nahanni's homeland. Dease Lake, he surmised, was that large lake, and after making camp on the twenty-fifth of July, McLeod discovered a well beaten path leading into the interior. McLeod hoped that this would lead him to "the large River west of the Mountains," upon whose banks the "Trading Nahany's" dwelled. The explorers also found "a Wooden Canoe sufficiently large to carry

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<sup>125</sup>Ibid.

six Persons and made in much the same model as a Boat."<sup>126</sup>

The next morning, John McLeod put his men to work constructing a cache to secure their supplies and make safe the canoe. He then divided a five days' ration of food, and a small allotment of trading goods among his crew. With these small bundles on their backs, the explorers set out overland. The Indian trail took them through forested terrain, up and down small hills and ravines. That evening, they camped near a southward flowing stream, probably the Tanzilla River. The Mackenzie District explorers, after a decade of effort had finally breached the Pacific Slope,

. . . with satisfaction did the whole of the Party quench their thirst of the first Water on the West of that Barrier, through which we have been penetrating for such a length of time. . . ."<sup>127</sup>

The next day's march led them into difficult country. The trail began to drop down into lower elevations, eventually crossing a swampy stretch of muskeg. Every step sent them ankle deep into the cold water and sphagnum moss; not until sunset did they reach firm ground. Two more days of travel, marked by morning rains and "beautiful and hilly country," brought the explorers to a swiftly flowing river. So fierce was this stream's current, and so boulder-strewn its channels, that any attempt at fording or rafting to the opposite shore would have been suicide. The situation was further confounded by the river's steep banks, which McLeod described as "perpendicular precipices"; in short, the whole party was "put to a complete stand how to

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<sup>126</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Halkett Journal, 1834, B. 85/a/6 fos. 3d.

<sup>127</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Halkett Journal, 1834, B. 85/a/6 fos. 4.

cross."<sup>128</sup> Reconnoitering the river further downstream, the explorers came upon what promised to be a way across the torrent:

. . . we spied a bridge, erected by the natives for which we made the best of our way, it was constructed of Five Trees 22 ft in length resting on projecting points of rock on both sides of the River, and 15 feet from the surface of the Stream, which rolled in a white foam; with some difficulty we all succeeded in obtaining the opposite shore.<sup>129</sup>

This grim crossing proved to be just a prelude for what the Hudson's Bay men were faced with at the end of the day:

. . . at a late hour we reached the border of another River, but frightful to look at, a similar Bridge with the one of the morning was thrown across by the natives, but so very slender was its construction, that only one of the Men (John Norquoy) would venture across, it is 40 feet long and 4 feet broad, and from the surface of the foaming stream below 27 feet.<sup>130</sup>

The river before them was the Tuya River, a tributary of the Stikine River. The problem was to get across. The rickety log span perched precariously above a raging river must have looked doubly bad in the deep shadows of twilight. Rather than force the issue that evening, McLeod called a halt and the crew began to set up camp. McLeod hiked up the river bank, hoping to find a safer crossing. He came upon "a beautiful perpendicular Water Fall of upwards of 100 feet" which he named "Thomas' Falls" after Thomas Simpson, kinsman and secretary to Governor Simpson. With the roar of the falls in their ears, the explorers spent an uneasy night.

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<sup>128</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Halkett Journal, B. 85/a/6 fos. 4d.

<sup>129</sup>Ibid.

<sup>130</sup>Ibid. John Norquoy, a long time servant of the Company, was the father of the first premier of Manitoba (Clifford Wilson, Campbell of the Yukon /Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1970/, p. 12).

The following day they attempted to cross the bridge; Norquoy again nimbly made his way to the other side. McLeod, no doubt anxious to set a good example for the rest of the crew, followed him over the uncertain log span. Others in the crew tried to follow suit, but only one could bring himself to hazard the entire forty feet. The more the voyageurs saw of that bridge, the less they cared for it; orders or not, they were staying on terra firma. McLeod was forced to proceed with Norquoy and the other lightfooted engage; the rest of the crew followed as best they could from the opposite shore.<sup>131</sup> A few hours of such travel brought McLeod to an Indian camp, only recently abandoned. The fur trader poked about in the tents, trying to detect any signs of white contact. From a few scraps of cloth and other implements, McLeod deduced that these Indians had some contact, but no heavy exposure to white trade goods.<sup>132</sup>

Also found in the Indian camp were fishing spears which McLeod thought the Indians used to spear sturgeon. Actually, the Indians used them for salmon fishing. This is a delicate art which is still practiced today by some of the denizens of the Stikine River Valley. The fisherman stands poised at the riverbank, his spear resting in the rapid water until he feels the salmon. A quick turn of the spear secures the fish on a sharp gaff attached to the shaft. Twenty and thirty pound salmon, not uncommon in these waters, can provide a different ending to the story by pulling the off balance fisherman, spear and all, into

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<sup>131</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Halkett Journal, 1834, B. 85/a/6 fos. 5.

<sup>132</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Halkett Journal, 1834, B. 85/a/6 fos. 5d.

the river.<sup>133</sup> John McLeod avoided that indignity but neither he nor his men were "dexterous enough in being able to grapple" the salmon.<sup>134</sup>

Eventually, McLeod and his crew followed the Tuya River to a point where it was joined by two other streams, which together formed "a considerable River, equal in magnitude to the rocky parts of the West Branch Liard River."<sup>135</sup> This was the Stikine River, whose headwaters Samuel Black had discovered in 1824, and at whose mouth Peter Skene Ogden had been repulsed by the Russians only a month before. Now a third Hudson's Bay Company explorer had succeeded in reaching the river. McLeod realized the significance of the river stretched out before him; he wrote in his journal that he had found the stream "so much and so long spoken of by which the Coast Indians annually come up in boats on trading excursions with the Nahany and other Indians of the interior."<sup>136</sup>

Reaching the Stikine was the climax of McLeod's 1834 expedition; he had more than fulfilled his instructions, which merely were to explore the region west of the Rocky Mountains, and he also accomplished his personal goal of reaching Pacific waters,

being now fully convinced, that for these four days past, we have proceeded through the country West of the Main range of Rocky Mountains and on frequent occasions quenched our thirst of the waters flowing towards the Pacific: I have determined on now re-tracing our steps back to where we left our canoe, which intentions

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<sup>133</sup>R. M. Patterson, Trail to the Interior (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1966), p. 54.

<sup>134</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Halkett Journal, 1834, B. 85/a/6 fos. 5.

<sup>135</sup>Ibid.

<sup>136</sup>Ibid.



I communicated to my two Companions, and in the best possible manner to the remainder of my Party who had taken up their quarter for the night on the opposite shore.<sup>137</sup>

In a final attempt to discover something more about the Stikine Valley, they climbed a nearby hill, but saw nothing but the Stikine, rolling through its canyon walls toward the sea. McLeod turned his back on the great river and headed up the Tuya.

By the thirty-first of July, John McLeod was again faced with crossing the unstable Indian bridge. Luck and good balance were with him and his companions as they were reunited with the rest of the crew. Safely across the Tuya River, McLeod decided to name that stream the "Frances River in honor of the Governor's Lady."<sup>138</sup> The return march to Dease Lake had to be made on reduced rations. Their original allotment of five days' supplies had been exhausted. Hunting as they hiked, McLeod's men were unable to find even a trace of beaver nor a single moose or caribou track. Their sole success in hunting was limited to a partridge, which could have provided no more than a toothfull of meat for each of the eighteen men, and a wolverine, hardly a culinary favorite. Finally, on the fourth of August, McLeod was once again at the head of Dease Lake. They rested a day on the lake, eating their fill of "the best of Whitefish, and the richest Trout." This excellent fishing ground, McLeod noted, would recommend the south end of the lake as an excellent site for a trading post.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Halkett Journal, 1834, B. 85/a/6 fos. 5d.

<sup>138</sup>Ibid.

<sup>139</sup>Ibid.

Bad weather, heavy rain and dark skies, made their exit from Dease Lake unpleasant, but the voyageurs resourcefully took advantage of the gusting winds to put up a sail on the canoe and the explorers yachted across the lake in style. Entering the narrow upper reaches of the Dease River, the North canoe suffered a puncture from a sunken log and repairs had to be made. The bad weather continued to plague them and the larder, away from the whitefish waters of the lake, again began to run low. While delayed by a particularly violent storm near the Cottonwood River, the hungry voyageurs spotted a huge flock of Canadian Geese. Every weapon in camp was utilized as the explorers crept close to the great birds before opening fire and massacring the majority of the flock. Twenty-two geese were bagged in all, and the rich fatty flesh of the waterfowl kept them well fed for many a day.

The only note of significance struck during the return voyage came on the tenth day of August, when McLeod was finally able to make contact with the Indians of the Dease River area. McLeod's party were the first white men that these Indians had ever seen. They were regular customers of the "Trading Nahannies." McLeod described the Stikine River area to them, and they expressed their familiarity with it, claiming that four day's march from the mouth of the Tuya River, the Stikine was clear of rapids to the sea. After trading twenty-three beaver skins and persuading the Indians to visit Fort Halkett in the spring, McLeod continued on his way.<sup>140</sup> Fort Halkett was reached without further incident on the seventeenth of August.

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<sup>140</sup>Ibid.

McLeod was welcomed back to the Mackenzie District by a batch of good news. Edward Smith, McLeod's former bourgeois and old friend, had been given the dual command of the Mackenzie and Athabasca Districts. Another long time friend, Murdock McPherson of Fort Liard, was assigned to supervise affairs at Fort Simpson. And to top things off, both McPherson and John McLeod were granted promotions and brought into the Honorable Company as shareholders with the rank of Chief Trader.<sup>141</sup> Both of these promotions were the work of Edward Smith, who knew both men well and made use of his influence with Governor Simpson and his fellow Chief Factors. Of John McLeod he wrote:

To the Majority of the Council he is a stranger--with his actions during seven years residence with me you are better acquainted they have been conspicuous . . . you will pardon the freedom and last effort of one of your Honorable Council, in recommending him to your unanimous support for a speedy Promotion--you will not allow me to Plead in Vain for the man that has such strong claims in service and in merit--and who has in a modest and Gentlemanly manner conducted the Parties whose labours have extended the limits of your favourite McKenzies River District as far beyond its usual boundaries--introduced to our acquaintance seven tribes of Indians--with whom we had intercourse in 1824--and laid open a rich Country to the future pursuits of the Honorable Company.<sup>142</sup>

The promotion also brought with it a transfer. This John McLeod must have regarded as a mixed blessing. He had spent eleven years of his life in the Mackenzie District, extending its boundaries, enduring hardship, spending many a long, cold and hungry winter. He had done his duty and earned his reward; McLeod could leave the district with his head held high.

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<sup>141</sup>H.B.C.A., Governor Simpson--John McLeod and Murdock McPherson, July 4, 1834, D. 4/20 fos. 15.

<sup>142</sup>H.B.C.A., Edward Smith--Governor Simpson and Council of Northern Department, B. 200/b/7 fos. 49.

The success of the 1834 Dease River expedition was not only a notably fitting note of triumph for the new Chief Trader to exit the Mackenzie but proved to be a rallying call for a redoubled Hudson's Bay Company effort to expand up the Liard River. Governor Simpson, who only weeks before hearing of McLeod's accomplishments was planning to reduce the Mackenzie District in the interest of the economy, and had been complaining about the futility of such exploratory probes, was suddenly enthused. News of McLeod's success on the Stikine came on the heels of the Dryad Affair. Although the Russians had slammed the front door to the trade of the Stikine area right in the Hudson's Bay Company's face, John McLeod redeemed all by unexpectedly presenting Governor Simpson with the key to the back door.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE DRIVE TOWARD THE STIKINE RIVER

The man who would replace John McLeod in the van of the Hudson's Bay Company's explorations of the far northwest was a broad shouldered young Scotsman, Robert Campbell. Campbell was a religious man; fond of psalms and given to meditation, he carried a bible with him on all his explorations as a source of guidance and comfort. He was also a man of action, able to endure great physical privation, a hardy traveler whose epic marches have seldom been duplicated. Most of all, Robert Campbell was a Job-like figure in the annals of the northwest. His operations were stalked by an unlucky star. Each time he reached for the ultimate triumph, which through toil and danger he had so carefully planned for, some unforeseen disaster disrupted all his schemes. But in spite of all, he doggedly stuck to the path of duty and service.

Robert Campbell was born on the twenty-first of February, 1808, in Perthshire, Scotland. His father was a sheep farmer, and young Robert assisted him with the flocks and farm chores. At age twenty-two, when most of the other lads in his parish were casting about for wives and settling down in the timeless stream of rural life, Robert Campbell's life took an abrupt turn. Chief Factor James McMillan, a hardy old Nor'Wester, returned to Scotland in 1830. Making the rounds among friends and relatives he had not seen for decades, McMillan visited the home of his cousins, the Campbells. From him, Robert heard tall tales

of adventures in the Rocky Mountains, of thundering herds of buffalo, and of the exotic tribes of red men. These wild scenes went to the young man's head like the whiskey of the Highlands. In a few days he began to feel an "irresistible" urge to see for himself this Rupert's Land, the domain, he fancied, of romance and adventure. Chief Factor McMillan had been assigned the charge of an experimental farm that the Hudson's Bay Company was planning for the Red River Colony. Through his influence, Robert Campbell was taken into the service of the Company as a submanager of the farm.<sup>1</sup>

The most difficult moment for any recruit of the Hudson's Bay Company was the departure from home. Robert Campbell, then a young man of twenty-two, later wrote: "I faced the ordeal with what composure I could muster." A good many of those entering the service were of a much more tender age. Robert M. Ballantyne was sixteen when he left Scotland as an apprentice clerk, contracted to five years' work overseas.<sup>2</sup> Nor was this an exception as fifteen and sixteen year old apprentices were common in the Company throughout its history. Many of them would not again return to their homes, at least not as the lads that left.

Campbell embarked for North America from Stromness, in the Orkney Islands, on the **twenty-ninth** of June. With him aboard the Company supply ship Prince Rupert were his cousin, Chief Factor McMillan,

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Campbell, Two Journals of Robert Campbell, (Chief Factor Hudson's Bay Company, 1808-1857) Autobiographical Journal--1808-1851, Later Journal--1850 to Feb. 1853, ed. John W. Todd (Seattle: Privately Printed, 1958), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>Robert M. Ballantyne, Hudson's Bay, or Everyday Life in the Wilds of North America, During Six Years' Residence in the Territories of the Honourable Hudson's Bay Company, Reprint ed. (Edmonton: M. G. Hurtig, 1972), p. xii.

Chief Trader Donald Ross, and a group of apprentice clerks and other servants. The voyage was uneventful save for a delay in Hudson Strait due to heavy ice. The passengers beguiled this time away playing football, taking target practice, and hunting seal. On August fifteenth, the Prince Rupert reached York Factory, the Company's principal depot. Here all was bustle and business, the short shipping season had to be quickly taken advantage of before winter again froze the Bay. At York Factory, Campbell first met the motley population of the northwest: "Indians, Half-breeds & French Canadian Voyageurs, all different in appearance, a dress & language to anything we greenhorns had ever run across before."<sup>3</sup>

The second leg of Campbell's journey was by York boat to the Red River. A York boat was a broad, shallow craft capable of carrying very heavy loads and drawing no more than three feet in the water.<sup>4</sup> Governor Simpson had sponsored their adoption in favor of the old North canoe which, although lighter, was not capable of handling a burden anywhere near the size of a York boat's cargo. Further, the York boat, largely propelled by oars, required less expertise than a canoe--a strong back was sufficient. Though the York boat spread in use throughout the northwest, the traditions of the voyageurs, even without their canoes, lived on. Each day before dawn, the rousing wake-up call of the guide, "Leve! Leve! Leve!" still set the whole camp about its duties. Likewise, the daily voyage was divided up into "pipes," brief halts

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<sup>3</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup>Ballantyne, Hudson's Bay, pp. 72-73.

every ten or fifteen miles where the boatmen could rest their oars and indulge in a smoke. And the boatmen's supper was likely to be robbiboo, a boiled mixture of flour and pemmican, concocted by the voyageurs decades before. These were all rituals and traditions of the fur trade, inherited from almost two hundred years of traders, coureur de bois, and voyageurs--it was part of the world in which Campbell would spend the majority of his life.<sup>5</sup>

The Red River settlement was the heart of Rupert's Land. Located at the present site of Winnipeg, Manitoba, it was founded in 1811 by Lord Selkirk. The intention of the original colony was to provide prosperous farms for the destitute rural folk of the Highlands. Since the amalgamation of the two great fur companies, the settlement had also become the home base of the half-breeds, or metis. These hardy plainsmen would roam the frontier during the summer, hunting buffalo, and pounding the slaughtered flesh into pemmican for sale to the Company. Other metis served the Company as boatmen and voyageurs. In the period after 1821, Canada gradually ceased to be the main manpower pool of the fur trade, replaced by the Red River settlement.

The purpose of the experimental farm was to encourage the development of agriculture in the settlement by discovering the best grain seed and animal breeds for the area. Campbell ran the farm pretty much on his own, with daily visits from his cousin and an occasional appearance by George Simpson. The Governor took a liking to the young man, perhaps favorably influenced by Chief Factor McMillan and Chief

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid.



Trader Ross, Campbell's traveling companions on his voyage from Scotland. It was Simpson who suggested that Campbell join the fur trade when the agricultural effort was proving less than a success. So in the spring of 1834, Robert Campbell put away forever the tools of a farmer and headed for York Factory and the life of a fur trader.<sup>6</sup>

Simpson assigned Campbell the rank of Postmaster and dispatched him to the Mackenzie River District. The Governor's last words to him were: "Now, Campbell, don't you get married as we want you for active service."<sup>7</sup> Traveling with Campbell on the long York boat voyage up the Churchill River was Chief Factor Edward Smith, who no doubt gave the young man a full account of the Mackenzie area. Arriving at Portage La Loche, they spent a week at the great carrying place, while the heavy packs of trade goods were transferred from the Hudson's Bay to the Arctic drainage. Campbell, like so many travelers before him, was impressed by the wild beauty of the place, particularly the magnificent vistas afforded from a high hill near the end of the portage. It "reminded me of the Scottish Highlands," he wrote. Finally, on the sixteenth of October, Robert Campbell reached Fort Simpson.<sup>8</sup>

Chief Factor John Stuart was still commander of the district when Campbell arrived. The buoyant old veteran made the novice fur trader welcome and set him about his duties. During the winter, Murdock McPherson came downriver from Fort Liard to assume charge of Fort

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<sup>6</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, p. 10-11.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

Simpson, and with him came John McLeod, who marched the five hundred miles or so from Fort Halkett to Fort Simpson for a bit of company. McLeod was still brimming over with tales of his journey to the Stikine River the previous summer. Campbell listened attentively as McLeod described the canyons of the Liard, the serene beauty of Dease Lake and the climax of the adventure at "Terror Bridge." When he returned to Fort Halkett, Campbell was sorry to see him go, remembering him even years later as "a most genial man."<sup>9</sup>

Robert Campbell spent most of the summer of 1835 at Fort Liard. Chief Factor Stuart left the district for Scotland, and John McLeod left for the Columbia Department where he would continue his active service, leading the Hudson's Bay Company brigades to the Rocky Mountain Rendezvous. Other than this, the affairs of Mackenzie River continued at their usual pace, the summer crop of garden vegetables harvested, and the Indians visiting the fort for their winter outfit of supplies.

The Council for the Northern Department, however, was actively laying plans to follow-up John McLeod's 1834 discoveries. At their annual meeting, the Council ordered Murdock McPherson to prepare to open up communication with the northwest coast via Dease Lake. The first step would be to again move Fort Halkett further into the interior, this time to Dease Lake. This was to be a mere stepping stone to a new post called Fort Drew, which was to be established as soon as possible "at least 200 miles distant in a direct line from the height

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

of land towards the Pacific"; in other words, on the border between Russian and British territory.<sup>10</sup> McPherson was also promised an additional fifty "pieces" of trade goods (each "piece" weighed about ninety pounds), to help support the new endeavor.

However, McPherson was distracted from preparing for this venture by Indian trouble at Fort Norman, one of the district's posts on the lower Mackenzie River. Three of the Company's servants attached to Fort Norman were traveling to a winter fishery to secure provisions for the post. They came upon an Indian band. Two of the men, both metis, had had an altercation with these Indians before, caused by their designs upon the Indian women. McPherson described the atrocity to his friend James Hargrove:

The poor unfortunat /sic/ Indians were still in the vicinity of the Fishers and our Bucks paid them this hostile visit. They seized upon the arms of the poor unsuspecting Indians and then had them at discretion /sic/. /At this point the metis opened fire, killing/ 3 men, 1 women /sic/, and 7 children . . . the lives of two Women were spared to crown the villany of the atrocious murderers.<sup>11</sup>

News of this crime riled the Indians of the area; their support of the post in both the fur and provisions trade lagged. McPherson dispatched Robert Campbell with four men to Fort Norman to resupply the post, make a show of strength, and "to fetch up to discipline /sic/

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<sup>10</sup>E. H. Oliver, ed., The Canadian North-West: Its Early Development and Legislative Records, Vol. II, Minutes of the Northern Department Council (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1915), p. 712.

<sup>11</sup>G. P. De T. Glazebrook, ed., The Hargrave Correspondence, 1821-1843 (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1938), p. 233.

Cadieu the principal acter [sic]" in the massacre.<sup>12</sup> Campbell arrived at Fort Norman, and with the help of William Mowat, who was in charge of the post, did his best to restore normal relations, promising justice to the Indians. Campbell then made the nine day march back to Fort Simpson, surrendering Cadieu to McPherson. Although Fort Simpson did not have a jail, Cadieu was secured "in a manner that he will have no opportunity . . . to shed more blood."<sup>13</sup>

McPherson laid the blame for the grim affair on the unstable character of metis employees: "Some misfortune of this kind has been long since apprehended from the number of Indian & half Breed Servants that were sent to this District."<sup>14</sup> John Bell, at Fort Good Hope, echoed this sentiment when he wrote: "It was a very bad piece of policy to have introduced so many of these profligate and infamous characters into Mck. River, where they are with justice detested by the Natives and disliked by the Whites."<sup>15</sup> It may have been such complaints which prompted the Northern Department Council to resolve "That in future European servants only be sent into McKenzies River. . . ."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario, Fort Simpson Journal, March 20, 1836, MG. 19D6. Hereafter this collection will be referred to as P.A.C.

<sup>13</sup>P.A.C., Fort Simpson Journal, April 9, 1836, MG. 19D6.

<sup>14</sup>Glazebrook, ed., The Hargrave Correspondence, 1821-1843, p.243.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 254.

<sup>16</sup>Oliver, ed., The Canadian North-West: . . . Minutes of the Northern Department Council, p. 728. The Council made this resolution under the pretext of a matter of convenience; servants going out of the Mackenzie District to Europe via York Factory would have an easier journey than those trying to reach Canada.

In spite of this matter, plans for expansion to Dease Lake in the summer of 1836 continued. Originally, John Bell or John Hutchinson, both clerks, were to be given charge of the enterprise. But in a later correspondence, George Simpson seems to have changed his mind, "Mr. Hutchinson is inactive . . . the choice must therefore be between Mr. Bell and Mr. Campbell the latter only requires a little experience to become a very useful man."<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, this letter did not arrive in time for McPherson to effect the shift of responsibility; John Hutchinson was given the honor of expanding the Company's operations to Dease Lake. That gentlemen, however, was not particularly anxious to assume the duty. In February of 1836, he advised McPherson that he wished to retire from the service due to "the repeated and urgent solicitations of my friends at home." McPherson reminded Hutchinson that he would not be allowed to leave until the Council reviewed his application, which would take another year. A few months later, Hutchinson was again making noises about his inability to carry out the Dease Lake expansion. This time the problem was insufficient means, complicated by the supposed bellicosity of the Nahanni Indians, who threatened to destroy the English if they entered their lands.<sup>18</sup> Faced with such a mixed bag of excuses McPherson might have realized that Hutchinson was not the man for a task which required energy and determination. But Chief Trader McPherson did nothing to alter the existing situation when

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<sup>17</sup>Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Governor Simpson--Murdoch McPherson, June 30, 1836, D. 4/22 fos. 42. Hereafter, this collection will be referred to as H.B.C.A. Spelling errors are not corrected.

<sup>18</sup>H.B.C.A., Fort Simpson Journal, 1836, B. 200/c/1 fos. 2d.

he left Fort Simpson to deliver the year's fur returns to Portage La Loche; he felt confident that Hutchinson was on his way to Dease Lake.

Robert Campbell was left to supervise Fort Simpson during the summer of 1836. His routine was fairly leisurely. There was not much to do about the fort. Occasionally engages would have to be sent a short distance down the Mackenzie to a swampy section of the river where tall grass grew. These weeds would be cut and used to feed the few head of cattle at Fort Simpson. Sometimes one of the local Indians would "cast up" and trade a few fish or a beaver pelt for a small amount of powder and ball. On one particular early August morning, the peaceful rhythm of the summer was unexpectedly disrupted. John Hutchinson and a North canoe of voyageurs landed at the fort. Campbell was surprised by Hutchinson's appearance as the entire district expected he was at Dease Lake. By way of explanation, Hutchinson told a tale of near disaster.

According to Hutchinson's report, he had proceeded up the Liard from Fort Halkett to Portage Brule. Arriving at the portage in the latter part of the day, the men were only able to transport the outfit a short distance up the trail before dark. The next morning they discovered the footprints of someone who had circled their camp during the night. Fearful of a Nahanni ambush, Hutchinson sent two Indians to scout the trail ahead. At the end of the portage they spied a large Nahanni war party, with their faces fiercely painted black, and "attired in blue cloth capotes and red leggings." Each of the warriors was armed with a stout lance and a trade gun. After a bit, the warriors, over one hundred strong, left their hiding place and began to

move to the attack. Hutchinson's scouts reached the camp in time to warn the traders of the approaching enemy. The clerk tried to make an orderly retreat, but when the voyageurs saw the Indians, a panic ensued and all fled to the canoe, just before the attack commenced. So great was the danger that Hutchinson did not feel safe in maintaining Fort Halkett; he and his crew did not stop fleeing until they reached Fort Simpson.<sup>19</sup>

This incident became the main subject of discussion throughout the district, most agreeing that the traders had been lucky to escape with their lives. Hutchinson announced that he was through taking such risks and would quit both the district and the Company's service the next spring. Robert Campbell's reaction was completely different; he notified Murdock McPherson that he would like to volunteer his services to lead another attempt to settle Dease Lake.<sup>20</sup>

In the meantime, Governor Simpson had made a careful study of Hutchinson's retreat. He had never thought highly of Hutchinson's abilities, which in 1826 he described as "being rather beneath mediocrity."<sup>21</sup> As for the Indian war party, the Governor did not believe a word of it; "the whole is a tissue of misrepresentation arising from his own imbecility, the formidable and hostile array referred to being

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<sup>19</sup>H.B.C.A., Murdock McPherson--Governor Simpson and Northern Department Council, November 30, 1836, D. 5/4 fos. 211d.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>George Simpson, "George Simpson's Character Book, 1832," Hudson's Bay Miscellany, 1670-1870, ed. Glyndwr Williams (Winnipeg: The Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1976), p. 213.

nothing more or less than the production of a timid mind."<sup>22</sup> After Hutchinson left the Hudson's Bay territory the whole incident became clearer. As Murdock McPherson wrote,

there can be only one opinion of his unprecedented story regarding his shameful flight from the West Branch. He was affraid /sic/ of going to pass a winter in such Country and invented a story to avoid that.<sup>23</sup>

For whatever reasons, Hutchinson's retreat was extremely debilitating to the Hudson's Bay Company's trade war with the Russians. Not only was the expansion of the Dease Lake delayed, but the abandonment of Fort Halkett marked a step backward for the Company. It would take the Mackenzie District two years to redeem a setback that need never have occurred. What made this delay all the more galling to Simpson and the Northern Department Council was that each year that went by without an English establishment on the Stikine River, or at least on Dease Lake, meant a steady profitable trade for the Russians, a trade based on furs from English territory.

Robert Campbell was promoted to clerk for the "spirited tender" of his services for the Dease Lake extension. In March of 1837, Campbell left Fort Simpson on snowshoes, journeying to Fort Liard. This would be a convenient jump-off spot for the upper Liard. Further, the **abundance** of birchbark at Fort Liard made it a good location to construct the canoes necessary for the summer's voyage. The scarcity of good quality birchbark on the upper Liard and later in the Yukon was

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<sup>22</sup>H.B.C.A., Governor Simpson--Murdock McPherson, June 30, 1837, D. 4/23 fos. 49d-50.

<sup>23</sup>Glazebrook, ed., The Hargrave Correspondence, p. 272.



just one of the many difficulties which complicated the advance into those regions. The canoes were constructed and gummed before the ice broke up on the Liard. This gave Campbell plenty of time to select his crew. He would need all the time he could get. Hutchinson's graphic, if apocryphal, account of the Nahanni party had stymied the spirit of adventure in the Mackenzie District. Even if they managed to elude the Nahanni, the engages thought, the reward would still be the formidable natural barriers of the Liard's rapids, climaxed by the "Terror Bridge" over the Tuya.

In spite of this timidity, Campbell, by cajoling, playing on their pride, and no doubt pulling rank, was able by mid-May to form a crew of sorts. Campbell did not have much faith in the sixteen men he bullied into going: "I could see that they went into the enterprise in a half-hearted way & were animated with anything but the proper spirit."<sup>24</sup> At their third camp up the river, the Indian hunters deserted the enterprise. Nor were the engages who remained very enthusiastic. Still, Campbell roused them to their duty at an early hour and the canoes embarked. As was usual, the canoemen took a rest from their paddles for breakfast in the mid-morning. About half the crew took this opportunity to stand together and refused to continue upriver. Campbell must have been in a Highland rage, there "was no use waisting [sic] time espou-  
tulating [sic] with such a timid crowd"; he resolved to return to Fort Liard and find some stouter souls.<sup>25</sup>

Arriving at the fort, Robert Campbell called together all the men at the post. In a cool, determined manner the Scotsman explained

<sup>24</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, p. 32.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

that the trip had to be made; that the men who engaged would like myself have to go through to the end of the journey; that there was to be no turning back or flying from an enemy before he was seen; that when seen I would not ask any of my men to go before me to face the enemy; that I would be kind to, & do all I could for, my men; but that if any of them showed signs of insubordination, it would be at the peril of his life.<sup>26</sup>

Campbell's frank declaration won him the support of the voyageurs, and the next morning he again pushed up the Liard.

The return to Fort Liard had cost Campbell a week's time. During that delay, the Liard's waters continued to rise as the warmer weather melted the mountain snow, flooding the creeks and multiplying the strength of the already turbulent river. The difficulties of river navigation made Campbell apprehensive that his men might lose heart. He was constantly trying to calm their fears, "as the croak of a frog or the screech of a nightowl was immediately taken for an enemy signal."<sup>27</sup>

By the time the expedition reached Devil's Portage, some of the voyageurs were deeply regretting ever having volunteered for such risky service. They would have welcomed a panic similar to that which overcame Hutchinson's party. The night that they arrived at the three day portage, their campfire conversation was interrupted by the barking of the expedition's dogs. The voyageurs right away assumed the worst, crying "there must be enemies prowling round." Campbell assured them that it was merely a bear or some other animal ambling past the camp. In a short while, the dogs were again quiet and the party was able to get to sleep. Early the next morning, Campbell rose before the rest of the crew and, taking his gun, went ahead to scout the portage trail. A

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

short distance from camp, he passed some pieces of trade goods which had been brought up the evening before. Sometime later, while returning from his hike, Campbell passed those same bundles, noting as he did that they had been rearranged and one cut, as if by a knife, in a corner. Back at the camp, Campbell found the majority of the voyageurs crouched behind cover, guns ready, and cowering from an enemy that they claimed had surrounded them. Campbell scolded his men for their idleness and ordered them to get about their duties. But they claimed as proof of the Nahanni's dangerous presence the torn bale of trade goods. Campbell, however, had been up too early in the morning to buy that story:

I immediately answered that this had been done by one of themselves; that I had seen the bale that morning before they were out of their blankets, but had seen no enemy or trace of them; that I had noticed the altered position of the bale on my return & that it was not the work of enemies, as they were not in the habit of leaving clumsy marks of their presence to betray them; & that in short I was not to be taken in by such a transparent imposition.<sup>28</sup>

In this manner did the voyageurs realize that the man they were dealing with was no John Hutchinson, but a worthy successor to John McLeod. Perhaps they were shamed by their conduct, or just at a loss for further devices to defer the expedition, but the crew gave Campbell no more trouble.

Because of the delays encountered, Campbell decided it was too late in the year to risk establishing a new post. He therefore set up winter quarters at Fort Halkett, which the voyageurs were surprised to see was exactly as it was left by Hutchinson, undisturbed by the marauding hordes of Nahanni Indians. This prompted Campbell to make a

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 34.

visit to Portage Brule, where Hutchinson supposedly encountered the enemy. As he expected, the pieces of trade goods meant for Dease Lake were scattered about the portage landing, just where the men had left them; "of course everything was spoilt, except such articles as ball, shot, & sic, & the provisions eaten by wild animals." The sight had a sobering effect on Campbell's men who now realized the "folly of their fears."<sup>29</sup>

During the winter, the fur traders were able to make contact with the Indians of the region, who with the desertion of Fort Halkett, had been destitute of the white man's goods that they had just begun to depend upon. Campbell also received dispatches from Fort Simpson, including a personal note from Governor Simpson. The Governor was continuing to take an interest in Campbell's career. He exhorted him to try to open up operations on the Stikine River, closing the note with the overconfident assertion: "Robert Campbell is not the man I take him to be unless in due time he plants the H.B. Standard on the shores of the Pacific."<sup>30</sup>

In the spring of 1838, as Campbell prepared to set off for Dease Lake, he received reinforcements under the command of A. R. McLeod, Jr., an apprentice clerk. This was the metis son of Chief Trader Alexander R. McLeod, who had briefly commanded the Mackenzie District. The younger McLeod, although Canadian educated, was a dissatisfied man. In 1836 he had joined "General" James Dickson's Indian Liberating Army, which was supposed to conquer California and set up an

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 36.

Indian and half-breed state. McLeod served as a captain in this crusade before it died for lack of support. He was not the able second-in-command that Campbell needed.<sup>31</sup>

Campbell's journey from Fort Halkett to Dease Lake was accomplished without incident, though he was struck by the snow covered mountains along the Dease River. He climbed one of them, and named it "Ben Lawers" after a mountain in his native Perthshire, Scotland. Upon reaching Dease Lake, he put the majority of his men under the command of A. R. McLeod, Jr., with orders to construct a wintering post. Campbell wanted to explore the country along the Stikine. With him were three men who would be among his faithful retainers in the years ahead: Francis Hoole, the interpreter, Lapie and Kitza, two young Indian hunters.

In two sprucebark canoes, the four men crossed Dease Lake, and then headed across the trail that McLeod had discovered four years earlier. The trail took them uphill and then down. Due to the change in elevations Campbell experienced each of the four seasons in a single day: winter, with the snow on the top of the ridge; spring, with the young grass on the upper slopes; then the thick vegetation of summer; climaxed by a patch of strawberries as ripe as autumn. That same day they reached the native bridge that McLeod's men had aptly named "Terror Bridge." Approaching the bridge, they spotted the smoke of an Indian campfire on the opposite side. Hoole, the interpreter, "who though very handy, a splendid hunter & canoe maker, & most ingenious at all kinds of work, was exceedingly timid & afraid of strange Indians";

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<sup>31</sup>Jennifer Brown, "Ultimate Respectability: Fur Trade Children in the 'Civilized World'," The Beaver (Spring, 1978), p. 51.

only after some discussion would he agree to continue.<sup>32</sup>

"Terror Bridge" had not improved over the four years since the Hudson's Bay Company explorers had faced it last. It had developed, in addition to its normally flimsy appearance, a distinct list to one side. Hoole would have no part of it. While he waited on the opposite bank, Campbell, Kitza, and Lapie crossed the bridge, which swayed and bent under their weight, and proceeded to the Indian tent. Whoever dwelled there had made a hasty departure when the explorers drew near, for Campbell found the campfire burning brightly. In the tent they found three metal pots, a fingerprint of the fur trade, one of which contained some salmon. Campbell and his Indian companions were hungry so they helped themselves to the fish and left as payment a knife and some tobacco.<sup>33</sup> Recrossing the bridge, they joined Hoole, no doubt telling him about the fine fresh fish they had for supper. They then turned in for the night, leaving the interpreter perhaps munching a tired piece of pemmican, to muse on the old adage "Fortune Favors the Bold."

Very early the next morning Campbell was awakened as one of his young hunters cried out, "Indians!, Indians." Through the faint light of dawn they saw on the far side of the river a group of sixteen Indians making their way toward "Terror Bridge." Hoole's reaction was to throw off his blanket, grab his gun, saying, "Let us run for our lives," and only Campbell's own threat of violence kept him from turning tail. Campbell himself remained cool. He hoisted the Hudson's Bay Company

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<sup>32</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, p. 38.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

flag, a red ensign with a small union jack in the top corner and the initials H.B.C. prominently displayed. The Indians, after some hesitation, crossed the bridge and a council ensued. The chief of the band presented Campbell with a peace pipe, which was then passed around the fire. It soon became clear that these Indians were Nahanni; they had been informed of Campbell's presence by the resident of the tent that the explorers had visited the evening before. The Nahanni were at present taking part in a great Indian trade rendezvous on the Stikine. The Tlingit and many other tribes were present. The Nahanni had always been told that if they met white people from east of the mountains that they should kill them for they were enemies. Fortunately for Campbell, this chief was friendly and soon took a liking to the Scotsman.<sup>34</sup> However, the chief became alarmed when Campbell made it clear that he intended to visit the rendezvous site. The Nahanni claimed that a great Tlingit chief, "Shakes," lorded over the assembly of Indians and that if Campbell fell into his hands, "Shakes will kill you, & though I & my band would be willing to protect you, we could not do so as Shakes' men are as the sands of the beach."<sup>35</sup> This did not deter the explorer; he was determined to visit the rendezvous.

Campbell's little party and the Nahanni chief set off down the trail to the Stikine. These Nahanni Indians, the same ones that Samuel Black described as the "Trading Nahannies," were actually Talhtan Indians. They had in precontact times been enemies of the Tlingit,

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., pp. 39-40.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 40.

fighting many battles for control of the Stikine River.<sup>36</sup> But Tlingit trade with Russian and American traders on the coast had made them too formidable as foes and too valuable as trade contacts to risk hostility with. Trade goods, especially fire arms and steel knives acquired from the Tlingit allowed the Talhtan, or Nahanni, to in turn dominate the poor tribes of the interior such as the Sekanni and the Kasca. Anthropologist Catharine McClellan, who has studied the oral traditions of the southern Yukon Territory, has found a similar relationship existing between the Tlingit and the Tagish Indians.<sup>37</sup> The Talhtan and the Tagish are both Athabascan tribes of the cordillera region. Early anthropologists, as did the fur traders, grouped the two tribes into one large group, the Nahanni.<sup>38</sup>

The relationship of these tribes to the Tlingit was ambivalent. They suffered humiliations at the Tlingit's hands, for example, having their camps raided and their women kidnapped. But because of their close commercial relations, the Tagish and Talhtan often intermarried with the Tlingit, forming family alliances.<sup>39</sup> This ambivalent attitude was also illustrated in the Talhtan's or, as Campbell called them, the Nahanni's reaction to the fur traders' presence. It would seem that

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<sup>36</sup>For a colorful account of a legendary battle between the Tlingit and the Talhtan see Anton Money, This Was the North (New York: Crown Publishers, 1975), pp. 27-32.

<sup>37</sup>Catharine McClellan, My Old People Say: An Ethnographic Survey of Southern Yukon Territory (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1975), pp. 510-511.

<sup>38</sup>G. T. Emmons, "The Tahltan Indians," University of Pennsylvania Museum Publications in Anthropology 4,1 (1911):5-6.

<sup>39</sup>McClellan, My Old People Say, pp. 511-514.



some Nahanni welcomed him as a chance to throw off the Tlingit influence while others viewed him as a threat to their own dominance of the interior tribes.

The Hudson's Bay Company never fully grasped the significance of this complex intertribal trade system. George Simpson, Murdock McPherson, and even Robert Campbell thought only about the Russian competitors on the Northwest coast, not the Indian traders who actually transferred the furs of the British interior to the Russian coast.

As Robert Campbell neared the rendezvous, Nahanni in small groups of twos and threes would come up and try to dissuade him from continuing. Sometimes they would push at him or try to turn him around; always they said, "If you persist, you will never return, Shakes will kill you." Although this did not deter the explorer, it did alarm him. If he was slain, then McLeod and the men at Dease Lake would left open to surprise attack. To prevent this Campbell told Hoole and one of the young Indians to return to "Terror Bridge" and wait there for two days for him. If he did not appear by then, they were to assume that he was dead, cut the bridge down and return to Dease Lake. Hoole "was much pleased" by this new plan; he had not been too anxious to meet this Shakes fellow, who by all accounts was an unpleasant character. Sad to say for the timid interpreter, his feeling of deliverance was short-lived. Neither of the young Indian lads, Lapie and Kitza, would agree to leave Campbell's side, swearing that they would rather die with him than turn back. "Their fathers they said had told them that if they ever deserted me in danger they need never come back themselves." The tears in their eyes persuaded Campbell of their earnestness and he

scrapped the emergency plan. The Hudson's Bay men, therefore, pressed on together with poor Hoole unable to hide his disappointment and distress.<sup>40</sup>

Their first view of the rendezvous came from a high hill overlooking the Stikine River. Campbell later wrote: "Such a concourse of Indians I had never seen assembled. They were gathered from all parts of the Western slope of the Rockies & from along the Pacific Coast."<sup>41</sup> The rendezvous would last for weeks, with hundred of Indians living on the plentiful salmon of the Stikine. It was a time for trade, games, and an opportunity to exchange news.

Descending from the hill, Campbell was immediately immersed in a sea of curious red humanity, eager to see the audacious stranger. Escorting the Scotsman was an Indian named "Jack" who spoke a bit of English. As the Indians addressed question after question to Campbell, "Jack" would translate the fur trader's replies which in turn were "taken up & yelled by a hundred throats till the surrounding rocks & the valley re-echoed with the sound."<sup>42</sup> Suddenly the ranks of half-naked Indians opened, and through the lane came Shakes, the despotic overlord of the rendezvous. The tall, muscular Tlingit gravely shook hands with Campbell and led him to his tent. In the tent, much to Campbell's surprise, were four Russian-American Company officers. The leader of the group was a "Mr. Monrobe," who although polite, was

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<sup>40</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, p. 41.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

unable to hide his jealousy at Campbell's appearance.<sup>43</sup> Shakes served his guests a cup of whiskey, which Campbell, although a true son of the Highlands, only tasted. He wanted to keep his wits about him. Outside the tent there was a great deal of noise. All at once the cover of the tent was ripped off by the Nahanni, who suspected that Shakes was planning to murder Campbell. They warned the Tlingit that "If the White Chief is killed, there will be plenty of blood spilled here!"<sup>44</sup>

Campbell himself was well aware of the great danger that he was risking when he entered this great Indian concourse; he had surrendered hope of ever escaping, but armed with a double-barreled rifle, pistols, and a dagger, he intended to sell his life dearly. He thought his moment might have come when Shakes asked him to give a demonstration of his rifle, which was not only double-barreled but a new percussion gun, unlike the flintlocks of the Tlingit. Campbell thought this might be a trick on Shakes's part to have Campbell empty his rifle and thus disarm himself. The whole crowd of Indians loudly exclaimed each time Campbell fired, and between their screams and the gunfire it must have sounded like hell on earth. Shakes, however, was unable to take advantage of the situation, as Campbell always had a fresh charge ready in his hand each time he fired.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Glazebrook, ed., The Hargrave Correspondence, p. 271.

Campbell does not mention the presence of the Russians in his autobiographical journal. Our source is a letter from Murdock McPherson to James Hargrave, dated November 24, 1838. McPherson had interviewed Campbell about the incident only a few weeks after it occurred; in other respects, McPherson's brief account agrees with Campbell's detailed story.

<sup>44</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, p. 43.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

Among the Indians with Shakes were some who claimed to know Dr. John McLoughlin, Chief Factor of the Columbia Department. Campbell took this opportunity to dash off a short note to the doctor, and entrusted it to one of the Indians. Remarkably, this note, dated July twenty-second, reached the Hudson's Bay Company post at Port Simpson by the tenth of August. The Indians seemed to have a great deal of respect for the written word.

After a time, Campbell was able to break away from Shakes and the throng of Indians about him and return to the hill above the rendezvous site. Here he was reunited with Kitz, Lapie, and Hoole. Also present was a remarkable person, the Chieftainess of the Nahanni Indians:

she commanded the respect not only of her own people, but of the tribes they had intercourse with. She was a fine looking woman rather above the middle height & about 35 years old. In her actions & personal appearance she was more like the Whites than the pure Indian race. She had a pleasing face lit up with fine intelligent eyes, which when she was excited flashed like fire.<sup>46</sup>

With her was her husband, whom Campbell described as a "non-entity." The Chieftainess soon demonstrated her influence when she noticed that Campbell was vexed by the theft of "a gun, fire bag, small kettle & axe," all needed for the tramp back to Dease Lake. She climbed down to the great encampment and in a short while returned with the stolen objects.<sup>47</sup>

Before departing from the rendezvous, Campbell, with Shakes and the Russians looking up from the plain below, "hoisted the H.B.C. flag & cut H.B.C. & date on a tree, thus taking possession of the country for the Company."<sup>48</sup> There was no time for further ceremony as the

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

Nahanni Chieftainess informed him that his life depended upon a quick departure. She escorted the explorers for several miles, warning them not to stop until they crossed "Terror Bridge," for Shakes was sure to have stirred the young bloods to violence. As a parting gift Campbell gave the Chieftainess his handkerchief; in return she took from her wrists two silver bracelets and put them in the Scotsman's hand. It was the beginning of a friendship which would in the end save Campbell's life.

The four explorers made their way back to Dease Lake, brimming over with elation at their success, not to mention their safe exit from Shakes's camp. A. R. McLeod, Jr. had done a good job beginning construction of the fort. His work had been hampered by food shortages. The fish nets yielded only small catches while the Indian hunters had been unable to bring in any moose. If the larder was bare in summer, Campbell realized winter would be no better. He resolved to go to Fort Simpson; this would allow him to report what had transpired on the Stikine, as well as fetch up additional food supplies and trade goods.<sup>49</sup>

Campbell, together with Lapie, made the long journey down to Fort Simpson. The Dease Lake post could afford no provisions for them so they had to live off the land on the entire journey. With only a small bark canoe, Lapie and Campbell both must have been excellent voyageurs to navigate the Liard. They did run into some trouble near Hell Gate. They were in heavy rapids, surrounded by sheer canyon walls when the canoe inconveniently sprang a leak. It quickly began to fill

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 45.

with water, and it was obvious that they would swamp before passing through the Gate. Their lives were saved only by the fortunate discovery of a small landing at the bottom of one of the cliffs. They got the canoe ashore and, with luck again on their side, found a pine tree with pitch so that they could repair the rupture.<sup>50</sup>

Lapie and Campbell arrived at Fort Simpson on the twentieth of August. McPherson was pleased with Campbell's success. By encountering the Russians and the Tlingit Indians, Campbell conclusively proved that the river that McLeod had discovered in 1834, and which Governor Simpson insisted on calling the Pelly River, was indeed the Stikine. McPherson, however, was not sanguine about the trade prospects of the Dease Lake post. He thought of it as "a region of eternal snow & barren rocks, and I do believe, literally of nothing else."<sup>51</sup> He refused to grant Campbell any additional trade goods, and in spite of Campbell's every entreaty, only a small amount of provisions (not even enough for the return trip to Dease Lake). At risk of his life, Campbell had journeyed to the depot, only to return empty handed. He was beset by snow storms on the return voyage to Dease Lake, which he reached on the twelfth of October, completing a summer's travel of over two thousand miles.<sup>52</sup>

Campbell, however, was not going to be allowed a winter of rest. When he surveyed his situation he realized that there would be hardship

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>51</sup>Glazebrook, ed., The Hargrave Correspondence, p. 271.

<sup>52</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, p. 47.

ahead.

The buildings were ready for our use, but our prospects were very gloomy. The produce of our nets, on which we depended principally for subsistence, was inadequate to our daily wants, & the hunters were unable to add anything to our slender means. We were now thrown entirely on our own resources, a long dreary winter approaching, ten men, one family probably Hoole's, a clerk & myself to provide for, a distance of about 600 miles between us & the nearest Company's Post (Fort de Liard), shut in by barren mountains surrounded by a host of Indians rendered by Shakes' sic instigations & our high tariff, anything but amicably disposed towards us. We exerted ourselves to the utmost, trying every plan to increase our stock. Several fisheries were established along the Lake and our hunters searched far and near for game, but all in vain. It was not without reason that I looked forward to the winter with apprehension.<sup>53</sup>

To increase the possibilities of survival for all involved, Campbell dispersed his men, sending some to the south end of Dease Lake where Lapie and Kitza had found good rabbit hunting, and others down the Dease toward the Liard, where it was hoped that they might find some big game. The latter party was given the option of trying to make their way to Fort Liard, and Campbell gave them a message for McPherson if they decided upon that course.

Hunger and misery proved to be only one of a score of trials which the Hudson's Bay men had to endure that winter. The most trying of these were the harassments of the Nahanni Indians. During their first visit to the post they were on their best behavior due to the presence of the Chieftainess. When she saw the pitiful condition of the fur traders, she ordered her slaves "to cook the best they had for our use, & it was served under her directions." The feast placed before Campbell consisted of salmon steaks and caribou meat, "a sumptuous

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

repast." The Nahanni remained at the post the rest of the day. During the evening a group of young warriors burst into the dwelling house, catching Campbell and McLeod unprepared. Screaming their war cries, they seized the traders' guns and would surely have killed them but for the Chieftainess, who had been sleeping at the other end of the house. She thrust herself into the middle of the fray. The warriors were immediately silent and still; the Chieftainess "found out the instigator of the riot, walked up to him, and, stamping her foot on the ground, repeatedly spat in his face, her eyes blazing with anger."<sup>54</sup>

But when the Chieftainess returned to the Stikine these warriors stayed in the Dease Lake area. With her "controlling presence" gone they began a campaign of terror and intimidation. It was an old custom for Indians coming to trade at a post to fire shots into the air as a salute. The Nahanni gave a new wrinkle to this practice on one occasion when they came towards the post firing their guns right at the buildings. Campbell said to McLeod, as they both took cover, "I have often heard it said that a ball passing through one feels like an icicle; we will soon know."<sup>55</sup> But the Indians ceased fire and contented themselves with roughing up the fur traders. A few weeks later, another band of Nahanni burst into the post. They seized hold of Louis Lapierre, a veteran voyageur, who asked Campbell uneasily, "Are we to yield to them or are we to sell our lives as dearly as we can?" Campbell feared that resistance might spark a general massacre. Trying to stall for time, he picked up his Bible and read out the first lines he

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 40.



came upon: "Have not I commanded thee? Be Strong & of good Courage, be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed, for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thogoezt." The words were a tonic to Campbell's spirit and disconcerted the Nahanni who were awed by both the book and the grave tone of the fur trader's voice. Campbell then defused the crisis by a few presents and asking a Nahanni to deliver a note (a task they enjoyed) to A. R. McLeod, who was told to bring the men from the rabbiting area at the south end of Dease Lake to the main post.<sup>56</sup> With these reinforcements Campbell was able to rid the post of the marauders, though not before they plundered the storeroom of its contents. This constant humiliation was bitterly accepted by Campbell only because "To resent the outrageous conduct of the Indians would have been suicidal folly." Campbell could only relish the thought that if "we had been in a stockaded fort with plenty of provisions & all our men inside, I venture to say we would have taught these aggressive gentlemen a wholesome lesson."<sup>57</sup>

The Indians of the Fort Halkett region, with whom the Company had good relations, tried to help Campbell, bringing food and furs to Dease Lake. But this traffic was stopped, after only two or three visits, by the Nahanni who threatened to kill anyone who gave aid to the English traders. In late February, Campbell set out on snowshoes to see how the men he had sent toward the Liard were faring. After three days' travel over the snow he came upon the first of several camps in which the men were living. Their winter had been as difficult

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid., pp. 51-52.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 51.

as those at Dease Lake, save for the presence of the Nahanni, which they were spared. On one occasion the nine men shared a single squirrel for their only meal. Two of these engages and an Indian had despaired of ever surviving the winter in such a fashion, and set out for Fort Liard. But they were in too weak a condition for the lengthy trek and the engages perished on route, with only the Indian able to stagger to the fort safely.<sup>58</sup>

As spring began, Campbell and his men were found scraping their empty larder for anything edible. With the snow melting, they tore off the webbing of their snowshoes and boiled it up for dinner. Their last meal at Dease Lake was the boiled parchment of the post's windows, which had the savory "consistency of glue." Then on May eighth, the Hudson's Bay men left the site of their wretched winter and headed down the Dease River, which was now free of ice and flowing clearly toward the Liard. Ducks and geese flying to their nesting grounds in the Arctic provided the first good meal that the fur traders had known in many a day. Further downstream they came upon the camp of one of the Nahanni bands which had bullied them all winter. The Indians "were much alarmed at seeing us in such force, & were now as abject & submissive as they had formerly been bold & arbitrary." Campbell's men thought that this was a perfect opportunity to pay back the savage treatment that they had suffered in the past season; it took all the trader's influence, not to mention his own Christian patience, to stop the men from killing these Nahanni. Instead, the English satisfied

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<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 53.

themselves with retrieving some of their stolen property and continuing downriver in peace. Campbell reached Fort Halkett at the end of May. He sent some men down to Fort Simpson with the few furs that they had collected during the winter. He would re-establish Fort Halkett and await further orders.<sup>59</sup>

Robert Campbell, in the spring of 1839, was physically and mentally exhausted. In the past year he had endured constant and considerable danger, unrelenting privation, and now despair. The Dease Lake operation, his responsibility, had failed, and three of his men had died of starvation. Little did he realize when he returned in triumph from the Indian trade rendezvous a few months before, that in so short a time period he would be routed from the area. Doubtlessly his mind kept returning to Chief Trader McPherson's refusal to increase his supplies, perhaps a little more support would have made the difference. Nor were the Scotsman's feelings lifted when in September he received word from Governor Simpson that all his efforts had been for naught. While Campbell had been battling Russian influence in the Dease Lake region, Simpson and Baron von Wrangell had come to an amicable agreement concerning the trade of the Stikine and inter-Company relations in general. There was no longer any need for the Company to push toward the Stikine from the interior.<sup>60</sup>

The Contract of 1839 and the End of the  
Northwest Coast Trade Rivalry

The agreement which Governor Simpson was referring to in his letter to Robert Campbell was a unique document known as The Contract

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p. 56.

of 1839. This treaty was a direct result of the "Dryad Affair," and the trade war which ensued. After Count Nesselrode had admitted the guilt of the Russian-American Company in basing its blockade of the Stikine on an incorrect interpretation of the Anglo-Russian Convention, the dispute had bogged down on the issue of reparations, with the Russian government trying every possible excuse to avoid payment. The British Foreign Office tried to maintain pressure on the Russians for compensation, but with the explosive Eastern Question heating up, and conflict with Russia on the Persian and Afghan frontiers, the Stikine River was bound to be regarded as a minor matter.

In August of 1838, the Hudson's Bay Company decided to take the bull by the horns. On the frontier its servants, like Robert Campbell, were maintaining their pressure on Russian trade, while George Simpson and John Henry Pelly, the London Governor of the Company, journeyed to St. Petersburg to wave the olive branch. Simpson and Pelly hoped to solve their dispute with the Russians with some solid head to head business meetings. This proved to be a difficult matter. Neither Simpson nor Pelly spoke Russian and the British consulate was unable to help them make contact with the Russian-American Company's officials. Pelly, almost in despair, wrote that "so much involved in mystery are the affairs of that Concern, that none of the English residents in St. Petersburg with whom we had communication could give any distinct information respecting its affairs, altho [sic] many of them were Stockholders."<sup>61</sup> Patience and persistence in the end carried the day, and a series of

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<sup>61</sup>John S. Galbraith, The Hudson's Bay Company as an Imperial Factor (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), p. 151.

meetings were arranged with Baron von Wrangell.

During the negotiations the Hudson's Bay Company used the claims of the "Dryad Affair" as a bargaining chip for further concessions. Simpson and Pelly went back to the proposal first made almost ten years before, when Aemilius Simpson had visited Stika. They wanted to secure a contract for provisioning the Russian-American Company's settlements. This would allow the Hudson's Bay Company to drive out the Yankee traders, who were still making profits from that business. The exit of the American traders would reduce United States' influence in the northwest, an important consideration in the light of the rivalry for Oregon. Further, it would reduce the Russian-American Company to dependence upon their English rivals for supplies. After much dickering over price, the Russians finally agreed to the Hudson's Bay Company's proposal. But the provisions agreement was merely the springboard for a much broader scheme to reduce tensions between the two monopolies. Baron von Wrangell proposed to lease to the English control of the Russian-American Company's southern coastal territories. The rent was put at two thousand beaver skins annually and the lease was to run for ten years. This proposal promised something to both parties; the British were given complete control of the northwest coast, while the Russians were guaranteed the land furs which had made the Stikine so important to them.<sup>62</sup> The formal provisions of the contract between the two monopolies were drawn up in January of 1839, and on February sixth, in Hamburg, the document was signed. The Hudson's

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<sup>62</sup>E. E. Rich, History of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1670-1870 (London: The Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1958), pp. 653-654.

Bay Company had assumed the supervision of a large portion of the Russian Empire, in the matter-of-fact manner of routine business.

The Contract of 1839 marked the end of the Hudson's Bay Company's attempt to push through the mountains of the interior and exploit the trade of the Pacific-bound waters. With the coast under British control, the furs of the interior, even if acquired by Talhtan or Tlingit middlemen, would still eventually fall into the hands of the Hudson's Bay Company. There was no need for such costly and dangerous posts as Dease Lake; as long as the Company held the Russian lease, the trade of the Pacific Slope would best be conducted from the coast. That is not to say that the Hudson's Bay Company was abandoning its western expansion, particularly from the Mackenzie. But the direction of this ~~expansion~~ was deflected from the southwestward urge to the Stikine, toward the northwest and the ~~as-yet-undiscovered~~ upper Yukon River. The English, having achieved control of the southern coast of Russian-America, were beginning a campaign to capture the ~~undeveloped trade of Russian-~~ America's northwestern frontier as well.

#### The Discovery of the Peel River

The drive for the Stikine River, of which Samuel Black's and John McLeod's expeditions should be seen as a part, was an exercise in what may be termed negatively motivated expansion.<sup>63</sup> The Hudson's Bay Company's aim was to thwart its trade rivals. The trade of the Stikine River was not greatly valued as a new source of fur. The furs available

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<sup>63</sup>Galbraith, The Hudson's Bay Company as an Imperial Factor, p. 10.

along the Stikine River could be acquired either at the interior posts of New Caledonia and the upper Liard River in the Mackenzie District or along the coast by Company trading ships. The Stikine had only been important when Russian or American rivals were in a position to interrupt the flow of furs into English hands. The purpose of the explorations, therefore, had not been so much to open a new area as to protect a commerce that had already been developed.

After the successful completion of the Northwest coast trade rivalry, the Hudson's Bay Company continued its westward exploration program. But the purpose of the explorations changed. The end result of these explorations was no longer to **subvert the trade of a** rival but to develop the trade of a new area and to discover its unknown geography. These had been goals which the company had been aware of during its explorations toward the Pacific Slope, but they had been in the background, subordinate to the struggle with the Russians.

Just as the Hudson's Bay Company explorations in the 1840s had a new purpose so too did they have a new goal. With the Russian-American Company "bought off" and the American maritime traders crushed, the Hudson's Bay Company had complete control of the fur trade of the Northwest coast. Any furs which found their way from the cordillera region to the Pacific coast would fall into the hands of the Hudson's Bay Company. Exploration toward the Pacific Slope was, therefore, commercially purposeless. The English instead turned their attention from the region southwest of the Liard River and the Stikine River Valley to the area northwest of the Liard, the headwaters of the as yet undiscovered Yukon River. An entirely new exploration front was also open

on the lower Mackenzie River along the Peel River.

The new orientation to the northwest had been prompted by the discoveries of the Arctic explorers. Between 1825 and 1827 Captain John Franklin was in the Mackenzie District continuing his survey of the northern coastline of America. Franklin's second arctic land expedition was a much more successful endeavor than his first journey. Over twelve-hundred miles of new coast were surveyed, from Return Reef on the north coast of modern Alaska to the Coppermine River.

Besides adding to the fund of geographic knowledge, the second Franklin expedition had two very pragmatic aims. The first was to thwart any attempt by Russian explorers to complete the mapping of the Arctic coast and thereby impress the Russians that the north was a British sphere of influence--an aim in keeping with the hot international rivalry of the 1820s. The second aim was to scout for British commerce, particularly the Hudson's Bay Company, the commercial opportunities west of the Mackenzie River delta.<sup>64</sup>

In the realm of the second aim, Franklin made a valuable find. During the return voyage along the north coast, a band of Eskimos warned Franklin that a band of western Kutchin Indians planned to ambush the exploration party as it entered the main branch of the Mackenzie River. These Indians traded with interior tribes in contact with Russian-American Company posts. The Kutchins then took the goods they received from the middlemen and in turn traded them for a healthy profit

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<sup>64</sup>John Franklin, Narrative of a Second Expedition to the Shores of the Polar Sea in the Years 1825, 1826, and 1827, reprint ed. (Edmonton: M. G. Hurtig, 1971), p. 2.



to the Eskimos.<sup>65</sup> However, Franklin avoided any trouble by entering the Mackenzie River via the seldom used west channel. By doing so the explorer discovered a large tributary of the Mackenzie which he named after Sir Robert Peel, then Secretary of State for the British Home Department.<sup>66</sup>

The Peel River enters the Mackenzie River from the southwest. Because of this the Hudson's Bay Company saw it as a possible new source of furs and a potential route to the transmountain region. However, the Company's early efforts to exploit the promise of the Peel River were thwarted by poor planning.

A consistent theme in the Hudson's Bay Company's explorations in the far northwest was the lack of consistency displayed by the administration of the Company. Time and time again the officers in the field were given orders to explore or expand their district, only to have the means needed to execute those orders--the necessary men and supplies--curtailed. It was this problem which prevented the early exploration of the Peel River area.

In 1827, and again in 1828, the Northern Council ordered Chief Trader Peter Warren Dease, who had served with the Franklin expedition, to acquire information about the furs and Indians of the Peel River area, in order to ascertain if a post should be built there.<sup>67</sup> But owing to a "scarcity of men," he was not able to investigate the river

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p. 180

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., p. 182.

<sup>67</sup>R. Harvey Fleming, ed., Minutes of Council Northern Department of Rupert's Land, 1821-31 (London: The Champlain Society, 1940), p. 179.

personally. Dease, by enquiring among the Indians trading at Fort Good Hope, the district's northern-most post, was able to gain some interesting information about the Peel River Country. He wrote Governor Simpson that, according to the Eastern Kutchin Indians,

. . . no other tribe but themselves frequent that Stream, they generally remain to the westward between it and where the Mountains dip into the Ocean which is their hunting grounds, They tell us that toward the sources of that River, Beaver is to be found Pretty numerous, but the distance great for them to hunt and bring their hunts to this Establishment, that was a Post established for them they would be able to make better hunts, But at the same time the Whites would require to be strong, as they would be the subject to the Visits from the Esquimaux who they represent as very treacherous and hostile people.<sup>68</sup>

But again shortages in the district prevented any attempt to extend the trade. This time there was a lack of trade goods along the Mackenzie River. Far from being able to found a new post, the Company was actually forced to go into debt to the Indians and exchange furs for credits on the next year's outfit.<sup>69</sup> In the face of this problem, the Company's interest in the Peel River dissipated and its energies were directed toward the upper Liard and Stikine rivers.

It was not until 1837 that the Hudson's Bay Company again showed an active interest in expanding from the lower Mackenzie Valley. Arctic exploration again stirred the Company's commercial interests in the area. This time, however, the Company itself became involved with Arctic exploration. A survey team composed entirely of Company employees was outfitted in the Mackenzie District to fill in the unmapped

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<sup>68</sup>Ethel G. Steward, "Fort McPherson and the Peel River Area" (M.A. Thesis, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, 1955), p. 339.

<sup>69</sup>Fleming, ed., Minutes of Council Northern Department, p. 235.

gaps of coastline remaining after Franklin's explorations. Command of the survey team was divided between Thomas Simpson, cousin of Governor Simpson, and Chief Factor Peter Warren Dease.

The Company explorers descended the Mackenzie River and proceeded westward along the coast, reaching Franklin's furthest point, Return Reef, a month ahead of that explorer's pace. While surveying the unmapped coast between Return Reef and Point Barrow, the expedition discovered the mouth of a large river. The main channel of the river was over two miles and the river itself spread out into an even larger delta area. This impressive sight convinced Dease and Simpson that they had discovered a major river which, if its mouth was a fair indication, drained a considerable part of the interior. They named this important discovery the Colville River, after Andrew Colvile, an important Hudson's Bay Company executive.<sup>70</sup>

The Dease and Simpson survey team operated in the Mackenzie District for two additional field seasons. Their explorations were confined to the Arctic coast east of the Coppermine River. In terms of the on-going exploration of the interior their most significant find was the discovery of the Colville River. Although the Hudson's Bay Company never erected a single trading post along the Colville River, the mere knowledge of its existence molded events. Governor Simpson and other Company officers envisioned the Colville as being one of the great rivers of western America, a sister of the Mackenzie River. The

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<sup>70</sup>H.B.C.A., Peter Warren Dease--Governor Simpson, September 5, 1837, D. 5/4 fos. 327-327d. On modern maps the Colville River is spelled with two ls, unlike the name, Colvile.

fact that the Colville River entered the Arctic Ocean west of the Russian border and was therefore out of British territory was not even noted as an obstacle to expansion. The Colville River held out the promise of being what the fur trade had hoped to find since Sir Alexander Mackenzie's 1789 journey, a large river west of the Mackenzie Mountain divide.

The Colville River also raised the known but still as yet unexplored Peel River to a new level of importance. Entering the Mackenzie River from the southwest the Peel held out the possibility of leading to the headwaters of the Colville. The discovery of the Colville River, a small incident in the evolutionary picture of Arctic exploration, was of paramount importance to the Hudson's Bay Company's exploration of the interior of the northwest. For over ten years the Colville was destined to be the elusive goal of the Company's western explorers.

## CHAPTER VII

### "WESTWARD OF THE MOUNTAINS": JOHN BELL AND THE PEEL RIVER, ROBERT CAMPBELL AND THE PELLY

In 1838, Fort Good Hope was the northern-most post in Rupert's Land, located less than four hundred miles from the mouth of the Mackenzie River. Only two years before, the post had been moved. The old site on Manitou Island near the right bank of the river was subject to frequent inundations when the spring flood swelled the river. The spring of 1836 turned this nuisance into a dangerous hazard. On the twenty-third of May, the water quickly spilled over its banks and Fort Good Hope was engulfed by the rising tide. Nearly twelve feet of swirling brown river flooded the buildings, swept away the stockades, and undermined the bastions. The stands of spruce which covered Manitou Island were ripped from the ground and hurled down river. John Bell, the clerk commanding the post, managed to crowd his men and most of the post's valuables into a York boat. For two days they lived as if at sea, confined to the boat, exposed to wind and rain. Heavy blocks of ice continually had to be dodged, though for a time they found one ice floe large enough to camp on. Eventually, the boat became so entangled in the ice that they lost all ability to maneuver the craft and most certainly would have been crushed had the water not begun to subside.<sup>1</sup> Returning to the mud encrusted remains of what had been Fort

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<sup>1</sup>G. P. De T. Glazebrook, ed., The Hargrave Correspondence,

Good Hope, John Bell was understandably despondent.

At the age of nineteen, young John Bell had left his native Isle of Mull. Turning his back on the Scottish coast, he entered the service of the North West Company. Following the Union of 1821, Bell became a clerk in the Hudson's Bay Company. He was "a quiet, steady well behaved Man," who shrank from the overbearing and brusque manner of address some officers used to order about the voyageurs and engages.<sup>2</sup> Bell instead offered a much more reasoned approach to leadership, based on respect and example. He was a good natured and generous man, sometimes at his own expense.<sup>3</sup> He was also a bit of a musician, fond of playing his fiddle as a comfort during the long winter night, or as an accompaniment to an exuberant fur trade party, where dancing was transformed from a social to an athletic activity.<sup>4</sup> In 1824 Bell was assigned to the Mackenzie District. He spent the summer of 1825 at Fort Simpson and trading along the South Nahanni River. Bell was there after having been positioned at the posts of the lower Mackenzie. The isolation, particularly at Fort Good Hope, was numbing. For ten years his only personal contact with the outside world was the twice annual boat from Fort Simpson, which would pick up the year's fur returns and later deposit the next season's trade outfit. These visits, which

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1821-1843 (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1938), pp. 253-254.

<sup>2</sup>George Simpson, "George Simpson's Character Book, 1832," Hudson's Bay Miscellany, 1670-1870, ed. G. Williams (Winnipeg: The Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1975), p. 213.

<sup>3</sup>John Richardson, Arctic Searching Expedition: A Journal of a Boat-Voyage through Rupert's Land and the Arctic Sea (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1851), p. 74.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 79.

scarcely lasted a day, and the winter mail packet were greatly relished by Bell. James Hargrave, who served as a clerk with Bell earlier in his career, was the fur trader's source for news of the outside world. Bell's own letters were brief and sparse of information, as he explained: "I am as usually the case with me in this miserable and distant part of the country, a bankrupt for news of any kind. Where My friend shall I glean any? from the Indians, animals or Fowls of the air."<sup>5</sup> As Bell began the difficult task of rebuilding Fort Good Hope, his despair was at its low point. He was thirty-three years old, facing no likelihood of advancement, and seemingly no prospect of relief from his castaway existence.

John Bell did receive at least a break from his gloom in the summer of 1836 when he was allowed to spend part of the summer at the district depot, Fort Simpson. The company of Murdock McPherson, Robert Campbell, and the other men at the headquarters proved to be a mild tonic for Bell, broadening his lonely world. In 1838, Bell's prospects, though still linked to the "dismal and secluded" Mackenzie River District, which he detested, began to improve. Governor Simpson advised Mackenzie commander Murdock McPherson of the Company's wish to expand the district toward the newly discovered Colville River:

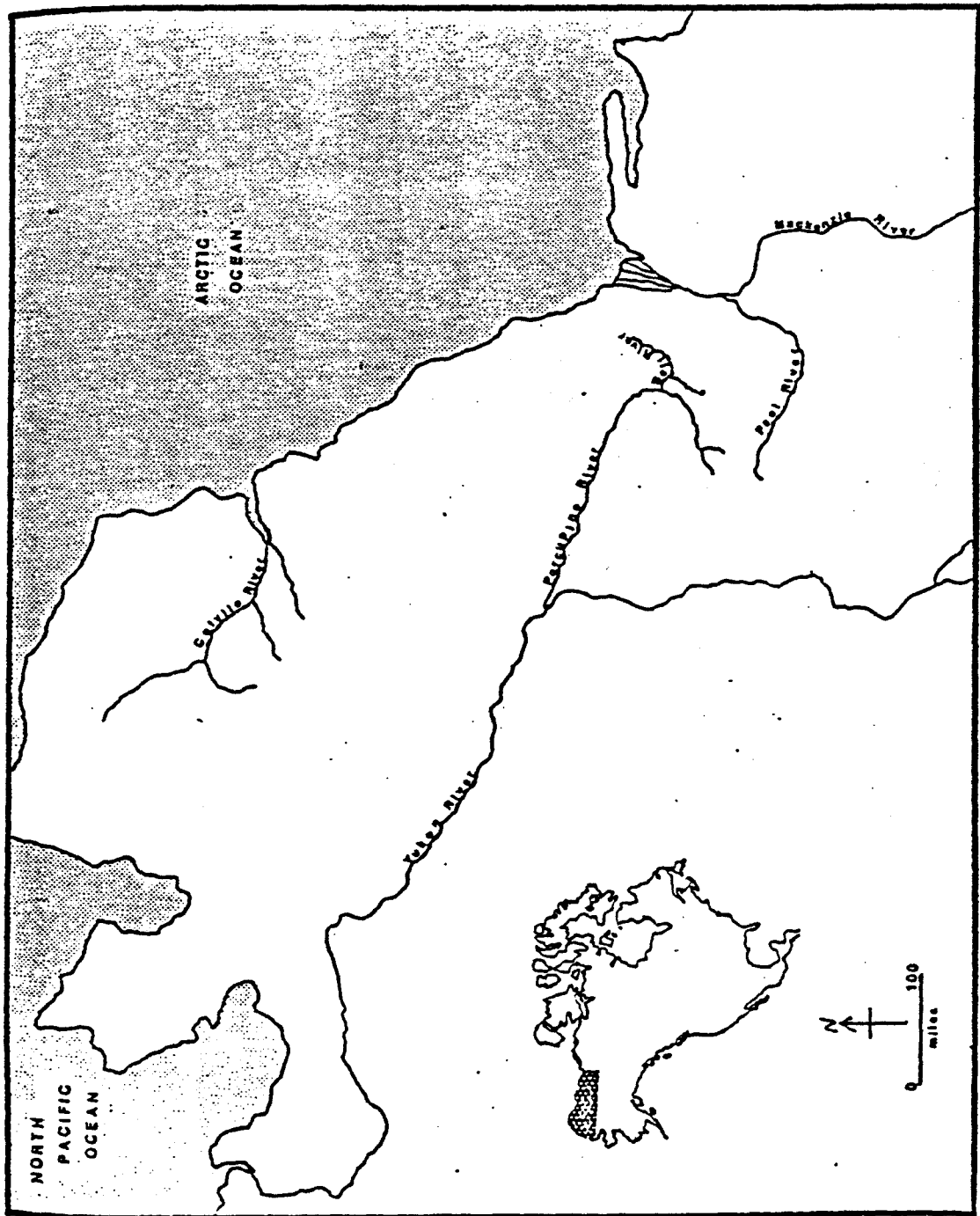
the Governor and Committee are desirous that Mr. Bell, or any other active experienced leader, should proceed with a small party (say 4 in all) across country to the westward, by ascending any of the streams in the neighborhood of Fort Good Hope, and endeavour to fall on the waters of the Colville River at a distance of 150 to 200 miles from the Coast, and select a good situation for an Establishment to be formed there Summer 1840.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Glazebrook, ed., The Hargrave Correspondence, p. 223.

<sup>6</sup>Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Governor

MAP 6. The Peel-Porcupine-Colville River Areas





Later the Company decided it would be best to explore first the Peel River area and thereby open up a possible route to the Colville River. Bell was ordered, in the summer of 1839, to

. . . proceed down the Mackenzie River in a boat manned by 5 servants and 2 hired Indians and ascending Peels River from its mouth endeavour if time & circumstances will admit to trace that stream to its source. Your principal aim will be to select a commodious situation for an Establishment, and to acquire knowledge of the resources of the country in its vicinity for its support. These objects attained your utmost endeavour must be directed towards ascertaining /sic/ whether a practicable communication exists between the Peel and Colville Rivers. . . .<sup>7</sup>

On the twenty-fifth of June, 1839, John Bell embarked for the Peel River. Three days later his party reached the mouth of the river. The Peel was about four hundred yards wide and flowing with a smooth, steady current of about four to five miles an hour. The profile of the terrain along the lower river was low, and stretching out from the level banks of sand and clay were plains of thick forest, broken only by intermittent lakes and stretches of muskeg.<sup>8</sup> Bell traveled up the Peel for three days, covering about sixty miles. He then encountered a minor rapid. The Indians of the vicinity

had constructed a barrier of basket-work, which extended entirely across the stream, sufficiently open however to permit the water to pass freely through its interstices, for the purpose of catching fish which ascend from the sea during the summer.<sup>9</sup>

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Simpson--Murdoch McPherson, May 31, 1838, D. 4/23 fos. 160 - 160d. Hereafter this collection will be referred to as H.B.C.A. Grammatical and spelling errors are reproduced verbatim.

<sup>7</sup>Ethel G. Stewart, "Fort McPherson and the Peel River Area" (M.A. Thesis, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, 1955), p. 343.

<sup>8</sup>R. G. McConnell, "Report on the Yukon and Mackenzie Basins," Geological Survey of Canada, 1891, Part D, p. 115.

<sup>9</sup>Alexander Kennedy Isbister, "Some Account of the Peel River

The Peel then began to pass through the Mackenzie Mountains and Bell noted that the river became "narrow and shallow with a strong current which descends with a rapidity I have not seen in any other river in the country."<sup>10</sup> He continued with his York boat as best he could, until the eighth of August. The boat had to be abandoned when the river began "descending with great velocity."<sup>11</sup> They passed through canyons later described as "bold, romantic defiles, so steep and lofty as often to hide the midday sun from view."<sup>12</sup> Bell tried to proceed on foot but was soon stopped by an unfordable tributary. He was forced to hike back to the boat for a small bark canoe which allowed him to cross the larger tributaries. The country through which Bell was marching was fine beaver country; although he did not see many of the animals, the great number of gnawed sticks and fallen trees revealed their presence. As the going became more arduous, Bell was forced to abandon the canoe. When they came to creeks and streams they now had to wade through the Arctic water, whose frigid temperatures numbed the limbs of some of the men.<sup>13</sup>

Bell, however, was coming to the end of his upstream journey. He had reached a section of river where the stream was only forty yards

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N. America," Journal of the Royal Geographic Society, 15 (1845):336.

<sup>10</sup>H.B.C.A., John Bell--Murdoch McPherson, August 11, 1839, B. 200/b/12 fos. 2d.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Isbister, "Account of Peel River," Journal of the Royal Geographic Society, p. 337.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 338.

wide. His guide told him that beyond this place the Peel's "source is lost in the innumerable streams and rivulets which descend from the mountains and that late in the season it becomes dry."<sup>14</sup> There was no point in proceeding as the Peel did not promise to be an important avenue to the interior or an access point to the Colville River. In reality, Bell had only ascended the Peel for about one hundred and eighty miles, before turning up the Snake River, an insignificant tributary. The error was not critical for though the Peel, second only to the Liard among the Mackenzie's feeders, was navigable for another hundred miles past the Snake River, it is not nor would it have been, an important route to the Yukon.

Turning downstream on the Peel, John Bell was finished with the first part of his voyage. He had traced the Peel as far to its source as he thought practical and had noted a good location for a trading post about a day and a half's march from the mouth of the river. He now hoped to scout out a route to the Colville River, or at least make contact with the tribes which dwelled in its river valley. Near the mouth of the Peel, Bell had an interview with the natives of the area, the Loucheux Indians. This is the Indian group that modern anthropologists call the Kutchin. The earlier name appears to date from Sir Alexander Mackenzie's voyage of discovery. The Indians of the Peel River, who had often traded on the lower Mackenzie, described themselves to the voyageurs as "the people who keep both eyes alert for enemies." For this reason they were called the squinters, or the

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<sup>14</sup>H.B.C.A., John Bell--Murdock McPherson, August 11, 1839, B. 200/b/12 fos. 3.

Loucheux.<sup>15</sup> They were anxious to have a trading post of their own and were helpful to Bell. They told him of a small tributary of the Peel which flowed down from the mountains and which could be followed to a portage across the height of land. They themselves used the river to travel to the portage where they traded with a branch of their tribe, the "Tramontane Loucheux."<sup>16</sup>

The river that the Kutchin described to Bell was the Rat, and the explorer elected to trace it to its source in the mountains. The boat must have been left on the Peel, for only a canoe can ascend the Rat River. The first fifteen miles of the river were slow and sluggish, with willows and an occasional spruce tree leaning over the quiet water. Then the first rapids were encountered, and as the Rat climbed higher into the mountains it was reduced to a whitewater chain of falls and riffles. Alexander Isbister, who would join Bell at Peel River in 1840, described travel up the Rat as "smooth." Yet most voyageurs on that river would find such a statement difficult to reconcile with the actuality of the Rat. Progress upstream can only be accomplished by relentless effort, pulling the canoe by its gunnels up the riffles, wading in the frigid water in order to catch the tail-end of an eddy, stumbling with a tracking line through mosquito infested bushes, which snag the tracking line and disguise the boulders that bruise and fell the traveler. After a few days of this sort of abuse, Bell reached a broad meadow with thick luxuriant stands of grass. This was the head

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<sup>15</sup>Richardson, Arctic Searching Expedition, p. 378. The French word louche means squinting or suspicious.

<sup>16</sup>Isbister, "Account of Peel River," Journal of the Royal Geographic Society, p. 338.

of the portage and he met a large band of Indians. Bell did not profit much in the way of geographic knowledge from his encounter with the western Kutchin, but he was able to do a fine trade in beaver with these Indians. It is unfortunate that Bell did not appreciate the significance of the rendezvous site. It was located at the head of McDougall Pass, a break in the great western divide only a bit more than a thousand feet in altitude; it was a natural gateway to the fur fields of the Mackenzie Mountains. Sir Alexander Mackenzie's route through the mountains at Summit Lake was 2500 feet; Lewis and Clark crossed the Continental Divide at 8000 foot Lemhi Pass, while the South Pass of Oregon Trail fame was 7500 feet above sea level. But the difficulties of the Rat River meant that the access offered by McDougall Pass went unappreciated for a number of years. Bell returned to Fort Good Hope on the third of August after spending more than a month in the Peel River area.<sup>17</sup>

Bell's report of the fine prospects for trade on the Peel River set the Hudson's Bay Company's machinery of expansion working. At Fort Simpson an outfit of goods was assembled and additional men were assigned to the lower Mackenzie. Governor Simpson had slight reservations about supplying the Peel River area directly from the Mackenzie River. He would have preferred a route through the interior, thus avoiding contact with the Eskimo, who were known to frequent the area around the mouth of the Peel.<sup>18</sup> The Hudson's Bay Company was

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<sup>17</sup> H.B.C.A., John Bell--Murdoch McPherson, August 11, 1839, B. 200/b/12 fos. 2d.

<sup>18</sup> H.B.C.A., Governor Simpson--Murdoch McPherson, February 28, 1838, D. 4/24 fos. 5.

apprehensive of conflict with the Eskimo--an understandable fear considering Sir John Franklin's several altercations with them during his second expedition, not to mention the massacre of Duncan Livingston's Nor'Westers in 1799. But the experience of Dease and Simpson, who put up a bold face when dealing with those people (Thomas Simpson wrote: "the display of our arms was sufficient for Exquimaux stomachs.") convinced the Company to risk collision with the Eskimo and open Peel River.<sup>19</sup>

On June 3, 1840, John Bell set out from Fort Good Hope to put the Peel's prospects into effect. His party, traveling in York boats, consisted of Alexander Kennedy Isbister, twelve Orkneymen and Canadians, as well as four Indian families, who would serve as the post's "home guard," hunting, dressing skins, and doing other chores about the fort. Arriving at the mouth of the Peel three days later, they met a large group of Kutchin Indians. The war party's intention was to provide an escort for the fur traders, protecting them from Eskimo attack. Bell, however, trusting in the size of his party and perhaps distrusting so many Indians about his trade goods, gave the Kutchin a gift of tobacco and graciously declined the escort. They camped that night about thirty miles up the Peel, within sight of the Richardson Range of the Mackenzie Mountains.<sup>20</sup>

The next morning the Hudson's Bay men reached the spot selected for the new post; the Indians, in considerable numbers, had already

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<sup>19</sup>Glazebrook, ed., The Hargrave Correspondence, p. 294.

<sup>20</sup>Isbister, "Account of Peel River," Journal of the Royal Geographic Society, p. 335.

gathered in expectation of trade. Bell was not especially pleased with the post site.

Its elevation above the present level of the River is considerable, but notwithstanding I entertain some fears of the waters rising in the spring. That is perhaps the only objection which can be urged against it as a site for a Fort but that objection from the uniformly Low & swampy Country through which this River flows is unfortunately impossible to be obviated.<sup>21</sup>

The new post was called simply Peel's River Post, though later it was known as it is today as Fort McPherson. It consisted of a trading shop, the post commander's residence, and living quarters for the engages, all surrounded by a wooden stockade. By September, the post had been completed and trade commenced with the Indians. The Indians not only of the Peel and Rat rivers visited the post, but some trappers from far west of the mountains. Bell interviewed all the Indians, asking them about a water communication to the Colville River, but never with much success.

Bell's assistant at the Peel River Post, Alexander Kennedy Isbister, was a bright and able young man. Though of Scottish descent, he had been born in Rupert's Land and educated at Red River. With the active disposition natural to an eighteen year old, Isbister was excited by the prospect of opening new country. While at Fort Simpson in 1839, Isbister was given a pocket sextant by Thomas Simpson. The young clerk used the instrument to make a chart of the Peel River area which he published in the Journal of the Royal Geographic Society in 1845. Throughout the winter of 1840-1841 he explored the post's hinterlands, making snowshoe journeys many days in length. Isbister's initiative and

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<sup>21</sup>H.B.C.A., Peel River Post Journal, B. 157/a/1 fos. 1.

curiosity would no doubt have cast him a large role in the Hudson's Bay Company's westward explorations but he did not care for the life of a fur trader. When his contract ran out in 1841 he elected to leave the Company, and furthered his education in Europe.<sup>22</sup>

On Isbister's final journey before leaving the district he managed to cross the Continental Divide. That was in March of 1841 when the post was short of food. Three Kutchin Indians arrived at the post with news that the Indians west of the mountains had plenty of meat in their camps. Bell dispatched Isbister and three men to accompany the Indians back to the camp and trade for provisions.<sup>23</sup> They followed the valley of the Rat River to the source of that river, a number of small ponds in a mountain meadow. But due to the ice and a thick snow lying on the ground, Isbister was unable to distinguish the area as the head of the Rat River. Hence, when he came to another small river, less than a mile away, which we know today as the Bell, Isbister assumed that he was still following the Rat. It was an understandable mistake for in times of high water the sources of the Rat and Bell rivers mingle, and one can pass from one river to the other without a portage. This is all the more remarkable because the Bell flows westward

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<sup>22</sup>Isbister fared well in his studies, eventually becoming a barrister in London. He also became an **influential** adviser to the British government on North American affairs and an opponent of the Hudson's Bay Company. Isbister became a powerful ally of the expansionist party in Canada, which eventually succeeded in taking control of Rupert's Land and forming Canada as the continental nation she is today (W. L. Morton, The Critical Years: The Union of British North America, 1857-1873 /Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1964/, pp. 29 and 81).

<sup>23</sup>H.B.C.A., Peel River Post Journal, B. 157/a/1 fos. 10.



toward the Yukon River and the Bering Sea, while the Rat heads east to the Mackenzie and thence to the Arctic. Isbister had found what the Hudson's Bay Company so earnestly wanted, a water route through the mountains, but he did not know it, as it lay hidden beneath his snow shoes.<sup>24</sup>

John Bell enjoyed a fine year's trade at his new establishment. His storeroom was packed with over fourteen hundred beaver pelts, a thousand marten skins, "besides some other Furs of less value, forming in all 45 packs of 85 lbs. ea."<sup>25</sup> The articles most avidly sought by the Kutchin were beads and tobacco. The traders had large bundles of tobacco wound up like coiled rope, which they would sell in sections the size of a man's fist with his thumb extended. The bigger the Indian's hand, the longer his smoking pleasure. Each of these lengths sold for one beaver pelt, three muskrats, or two weasel skins. In order to have a leader to deal with the Hudson's Bay Company traders often appointed one of the Indians as a "trading chief." This was usually one of the better trappers so as to set an example of what kind of behavior the Company would reward. In the case of Peel River, the first chief was named "Red Leggings."<sup>26</sup>

The successful trade of the Peel River post did not satiate the Hudson's Bay Company; rather, it merely whetted its commercial appetite. In the Company's eyes the furs gathered on the Peel were mere crumbs

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<sup>24</sup>Isbister, "Account of Peel River," Journal of the Royal Geographic Society, p. 339.

<sup>25</sup>Glazebrook, ed., The Hargrave Correspondence, pp. 359-360.

<sup>26</sup>Stewart, "Fort McPherson and the Peel River Area," p. 346.

from the rich region west of the mountains, the valley of the Colville River.

### The Discovery of the Pelly River

Following the rout at Dease Lake, Robert Campbell repaired to Fort Halkett, where he spent the winter of 1839-1840. It was the Council of the Northern Department's original intention to have Campbell and his men transferred to the lower Mackenzie where they could assist John Bell in the founding of the Peel River post.<sup>27</sup> Governor Simpson, however, felt that his talents would best be used exploring the unknown country west and north of the upper Liard. The traders at Fort Halkett had for many years heard the Indians of this region speak of a large lake or "Toutcho" (Great Water), which lay "no great distance from the Headwaters of the West Branch and from Simpson's Lake discovered by Mr. John M. McLeod in 1831."<sup>28</sup> In the spring of 1840, Campbell was ordered to explore this lake, make contact with the Indians of the region, and be alert for any navigable rivers "flowing in a Northerly or Northwesterly Course."<sup>29</sup> It was hoped that Campbell might fall upon the headwaters of the Colville River.

At the end of May, when the ice had left the Liard River, Robert Campbell left Fort Halkett. With him were seven men, including

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<sup>27</sup>E. H. Oliver, ed., The Canadian North-West: Its Early Development, Vol. II, Minutes of Northern Department Council (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1915), p. 776.

<sup>28</sup>H.B.C.A., Murdock McPherson--Robert Campbell, March 29, 1840, B. 200/b/12 fos. 7d.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

Lapie, Kitza, and Hoole. Campbell's route took him up what the fur traders sometimes called the "North Branch" of the Liard River, which in reality was the Frances River, named by Campbell after Lady Frances Simpson, the Governor's wife. It is a fine, cool, clear river, winding its way through mountainous country, not unlike the Dease River in its striking beauty. Beaver were abundant along its banks and the explorers ate their fill of the valuable animal, alternating this fare with grayling and Dolly Varden trout, which could be easily caught on hooks baited with beaver kidneys or livers.

The Frances' current was moderate for the first few days of upstream travel. That it was until Middle Canyon was reached. Here yellowed and rugged limestone cliffs shadowed the river and constrained the current in a canyon strewn with boulders and jutting ledges of rock. The canyon, about three miles long, is caused by the Simpson's Mountains, which attempt to block the Frances River's passage south.<sup>30</sup> In this the mountains failed, but they did succeed in creating a hazard to navigation which caused the voyageurs many anxious and difficult moments, scrambling along the near precipitous bank of the river, trying to line the canoes upstream.

Middle Canyon was the prelude to two further canyons on the Frances River. The first of these was False Canyon, an extremely picturesque place with fine black granite cliffs hemming the river. The beauty of False Canyon was enhanced because, although it was

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<sup>30</sup>George M. Dawson, "Report on Exploration in the Yukon District, N.W.T. and adjacent Northern Portion of British Columbia," Geological Survey of Canada, 1889, Reprint ed. (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1898), p. 103.

constricted to a narrow two hundred foot passage, the river ran deep and smooth, free of rapids. The voyageurs had no such luck with Upper Canyon, which was an unpleasant succession of rapids and small falls. They were forced to repeat their wearisome tactic of wading and lining the canoes. Three miles above Upper Canyon Campbell came to the final rapids on the Frances, a deceptively difficult half-mile of fast water.<sup>31</sup> In his journal Campbell makes little mention of the canyons on the Frances, which a later traveler referred to as "savage and dangerous."<sup>32</sup> Perhaps after repeatedly navigating the rapids of the Liard, whitewater ceased to make an impression on him.

On the nineteenth of July, Campbell reached the source of the Frances River, "a beautiful sheet of water," which he again named in honor of Frances Simpson, the Governor's wife. Frances Lake might more properly be regarded as two lakes, each about thirty miles long and averaging a mile in width. The east and west arms of the lake are separated by a detached range of mountains, whose highest point is a round peak which Campbell named Simpson's Tower in honor of his superior.<sup>33</sup>

Campbell directed the canoes up the west arm of the lake. The deep quiet waters of the mountain lake proved a pleasant change from

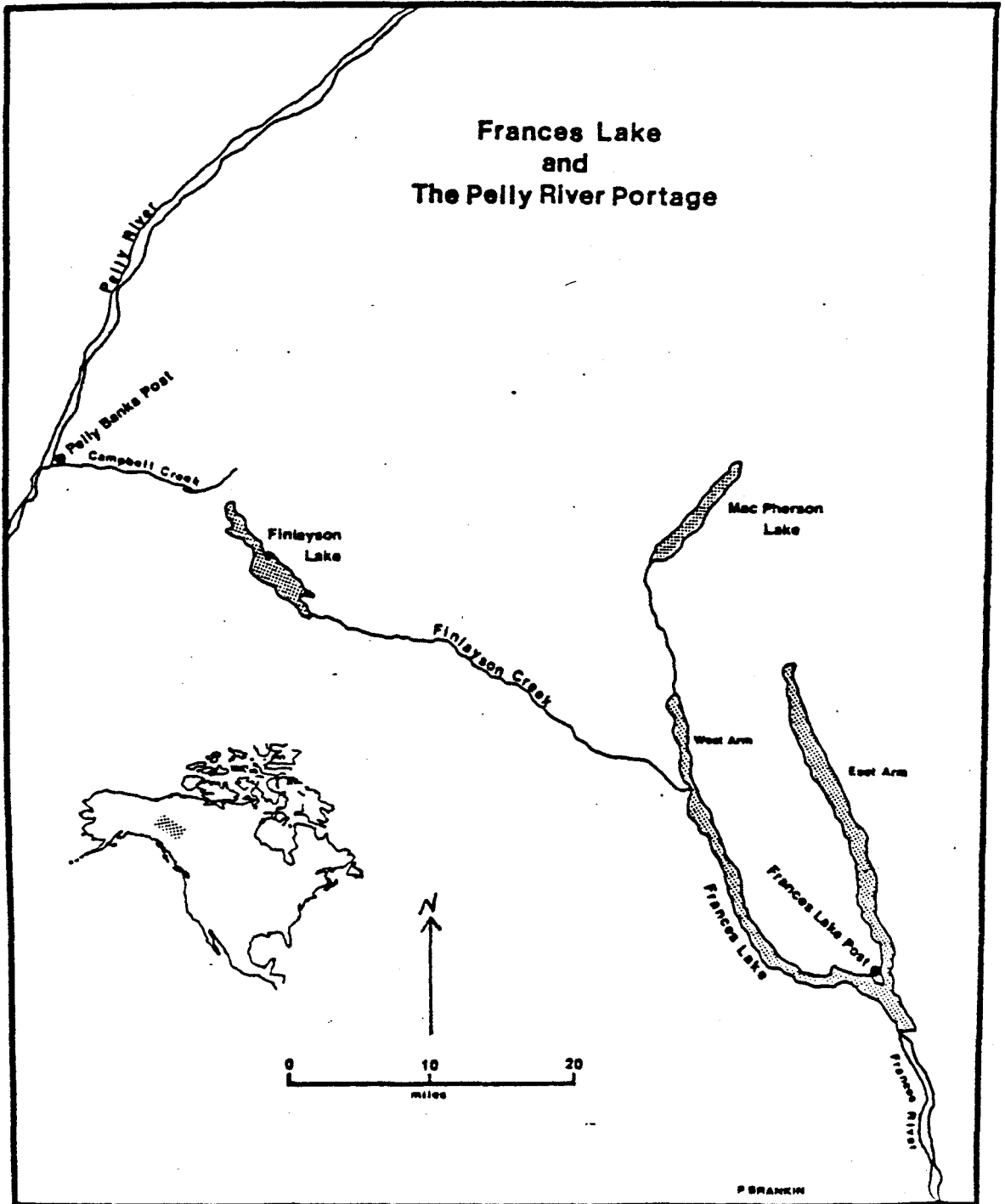
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<sup>31</sup>Fenley Hunter, Frances Lake, Yukon (New York: Privately printed, 1924), pp. 37-41.

<sup>32</sup>Anton Money, This Was the North (New York: Crow Publishers, 1975).

<sup>33</sup>Robert Campbell, Two Journals of Robert Campbell (Chief Factor, Hudson's Bay Company, 1808 to 1853) Autobiographical Journal--1808 to 1851, Later Journal--1850 to 1853, ed. J. W. Todd, Jr. (Seattle: Shorey Books, 1958), p. 58.

MAP 7. Frances Lake and the Pelly River Portage



the constant rushing of water which had slowed their river travel. On the explorer's left, as he proceeded up the lake, was a low group of mountains, no more than five or six thousand feet above sea level. They did not attract his notice, though today they are known as the Campbell Range, one of the few geographic features that bear his name. Campbell's mind was on trying to find a route from Frances Lake to a large river rumored to be to his northwest. He halted his party at a small island about twenty-five miles up the west arm. Here he left three of the crew "with a canoe & nets & guns to fish & hunt round there & wait our return."<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, Campbell, Hoole, Kitza, Lapie, and another Indian set off overland, hoping to find a river which might guide them west.

Entering Frances Lake from the west is a small unnavigable river. Campbell proceeded up its narrow valley, hoping that it would lead him to the height of land separating Frances Lake from the large river he hoped to find. The explorers traveled light, carrying only their guns and a few blankets; for provisions they would trust to the fortunes of the hunt. Even so, they found the going rough. Deep, thick carpets of moss, which gave way at each step, brush, thick with alder bushes, and intermittent stretches of swamp, slowed their march.<sup>35</sup> After twenty-five miles of such difficulties, made worse because they had not eaten for three days, the explorers came to a narrow body of water, about ten miles long. Campbell named the lake and the small

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Dawson, "Report on Exploration in the Yukon District," Geological Survey of Canada, p. 115.

river which drained it after Chief Factor Duncan Finlayson.

Rather than continue overland, Campbell and his men hastily built two pine-bark canoes. They traversed Finlayson Lake and managed to shoot several beaver and a deer at its west end. Their energies renewed, the Hudson's Bay men continued overland from the lake. Soon after leaving the lake they came upon several streams, all flowing westward, alerting Campbell that he had successfully crossed the divide between the Mackenzie River system and the unknown water courses ahead. Then, on their sixth day of travel from Simpson's Tower, Campbell spied, from a high ridge, "a large river in the distance flowing Northwest."<sup>36</sup> Hastening to the river's bank they drank its "pellucid water to Her Majesty & the H. B. Co."<sup>37</sup> Campbell named his discovery the Pelly River, after Henry Pelly, the London Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company and former director of the Bank of England.

Campbell searched the river bank for a large pine tree from which he could construct a canoe but was unsuccessful. So he contented himself with throwing together a rude little raft and drifting a short distance down the Pelly. He also floated a sealed tin can, containing a record of his discovery, and sent it downstream. The Company men then hoisted the Hudson's Bay Company flag and carved its claim to the area on the bark of a tree. The explorers were now, justly, "highly delighted" with their success, and they headed back to Frances Lake.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, p. 59.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

Although the return trip to Frances Lake was much easier than the outward march, as Campbell was able to use the canoes he had constructed on Finlayson Lake to float down the Finlayson River to within ten miles of Frances Lake, he remained unsatisfied with that route as the best possible access to the Pelly River. He hoped that one of the other streams which fed Frances Lake might reach closer to the Pelly, and therefore require a shorter portage. Back at "Glenlyon House," as his men pretentiously referred to the tent cabin that they had built in his absence, Campbell had the voyageurs build two more pine-bark canoes.<sup>39</sup>

After exploring further the area around "Glenlyon House," Campbell and his party canoed down the west arm to the base of Frances Lake; here they discovered the entrance to the east arm. The lower reaches of Frances Lake's east arm gives every appearance of being a river. It enters the main body of the lake with a strong current through a narrow channel, and for the first few miles the winding lake shores look very much like river banks. But after ten miles of this deception the lake dramatically changes its appearance. Expanding to a mile wide, with its water deep and clear, the east arm becomes a gigantic mirror, reflecting the snow covered mountains which rise up from its long sandy beaches. Through some of the most beautiful scenery in the northwest, Campbell led his men to the head of the east arm. Here he discovered another river feeding Frances Lake, which he named the Thomas River, after Thomas Simpson, the Arctic explorer. The

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid.



Thomas River was a small and swift flowing stream which proved to be impractical for use as a route to the Pelly River.

Although Campbell had been unsuccessful in finding an alternate route to the Pelly River, his exploration of the entire Frances Lake area enabled him to assess the resources of the country. He thought the country rich in beaver, and that the lake would provide enough fish to keep starvation at bay. Satisfied that he had carried out his orders, Campbell set off down the Frances River, arriving back at Fort Halkett in mid-September.<sup>40</sup>

Shortly after he arrived back at his base on the Liard River, Campbell was greeted with good news. Murdock McPherson, whom Campbell blamed for the Dease Lake disaster in 1838-1839, was replaced as commander of the Mackenzie District. In his place was appointed a robust, forty-nine year old Englishman, John Lee Lewes. Born in 1791, the son of a popular actor, Charles Lee Lewes, John Lewes entered the Hudson's Bay Company's service in 1807, rose to Chief Trader in 1821, and Chief Factor in 1830. George Simpson, although he respected Lewes's integrity, sneered that he was "Deficient in point of Education."<sup>41</sup> However, his correspondence reveals a knowledgeable man with a lively pen. In November of 1840 he closed a letter to James Hargrave with the plea:

If you do not send me something to read by the P. L. L. /Portage La Loche/ Boats I shall sett /sic/ you down as a thirsty book worm, wishing to keep all the good things' /sic/ to yourself, anything I care not what it is I am miserable for want of something to drive away the dull hours' /sic/, so Charity, it is one of the Cardinal Virtues, and you should extend it even to the far distant clime of

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid.,. p. 60.

<sup>41</sup>Simpson, "George Simpson's Character Book," Hudson's Bay Miscellany, p. 185.

MK. R. ̄Mackenzie River̄.<sup>42</sup>

One thing that Governor Simpson would not quibble with was that Lewes was a man of energy, and one who could get things done. He was dispatched to put into effect Simpson's plans for extending the Company's operations to the Colville River.<sup>43</sup>

In a summary journal of his experiences in the Hudson's Bay Company to 1853, Robert Campbell mentions that during his journey he failed to encounter any Indians. Yet in his contemporary report to Chief Factor Lewes, Campbell mentions a good deal of secondary information about the Pelly River, which he presumably garnered from the Indians trading at Fork Halkett. These informants told the explorer that salmon ascend the Pelly River as far as the spot he had reached "which would indicate that there is no serious obstacle from here to the coast to impede navigation."<sup>44</sup> They also told him that Eskimo were known to travel the river, "and even to extend their inland excursions to Frances Lake." These reports, plus the "course and magnitude" of the Pelly River, forced Campbell to inform Lewes that "I have no doubt it is identical with the Colvile ̄River̄."<sup>45</sup> Now the explorations of John McLeod and Robert Campbell on the Liard River, John Bell on the Peel River, and Dease and Simpson on the coast, were all joined

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<sup>42</sup>Glazebrook, ed., The Hargrave Correspondence, p. 329.

<sup>43</sup>H.B.C.A. Governor Simpson--John Lee Lewis, December 1, 1842, D. 4/28 fos. 3.

<sup>44</sup>Clifford Wilson, Campbell of the Yukon (Toronto: MacMillan of Canada, 1970), p. 43, quoting a letter from Robert Campbell to John Lee Lewes.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

together. The Hudson's Bay men were closing in on the geographic mysteries of the far northwest.

While Campbell was flushed with the success of his summer journey, and was beginning to lay plans for expanding his trading operations to the Pelly River, fortune again intervened for the worse, and the explorer and the Company's affairs in the Mackenzie District were beset by a new series of disappointments and disasters.

When Campbell had returned to Fort Halkett in September of 1840, he sent John Mowat, who had minded the post throughout the summer, back to Fort Simpson with eight voyageurs in a brand new North canoe. The voyageurs had left Fort Halkett early in the morning, and putting in a hard day on the Liard River, they succeeded in crossing Devil's Portage and shooting down the dangerous Grand Canyon of the Liard. Before them lay one more rapid, and then they would make camp for the night. The early evening is one of the best times to run a rapid. The bright sun of day, whose glare will often hide a rock, a standing wave, or some other hazard, is diminished and the rapids' secret traps are laid bare. Nor were the voyageurs especially worried; after all, they had run this particular rapid several times without incident. But the Liard is not an ordinary river; it is treacherous and ever-changing. The slightest fluctuation in water level can create an entirely new collection of obstacles.<sup>46</sup> The veteran canoemen expertly guided the craft through the boiling onrush of water, and safely maneuvered the canoe to the end of the rapid. With a great sense of relief, the voyageurs began to congratulate each other; they had

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<sup>46</sup>Glazebrook, ed., The Hargrave Correspondence, p. 319.

successfully negotiated the dangerous rapid, "all cause for dread was past." Suddenly, the canoe's progress was arrested, and the craft was spun around, as the Liard, without warning, opened into a giant whirlpool. Before the stunned voyageurs could even react, the body of the twenty-five foot canoe was drawn into the yawning black mouth. John Johnstone, Jean Baptiste Bruce, and another voyageur were able to spring from the stern of the canoe, just as it broke in two. The shattered canoe and the six remaining men, including John Mowat, were sucked into the vortex, and the rushing waters of the Liard muted their cries and enveloped their bodies.<sup>47</sup>

The three men who had leapt from the canoe, though carried far downstream by the current, managed to reach shore safely. Vainly they studied the river, hoping for a sign of their companions, but they saw only the bleak and desolate face of the Liard; the river did not give up its dead. The survivors then began a desperate march overland to Fort Halkett, which they reached after much "hard toil and misery" three days later.<sup>48</sup> Campbell was stunned by this reverse; he later wrote in his journal that the news "was inexpressibly sad to me, I knew them all so well."<sup>49</sup>

This disaster cost the Mackenzie District, which was always short of men, the services of six veteran servants. Further, the accident made many of the district's voyageurs leery of taking assignments on the Liard. John Lee Lewes wrote that the Liard had "long been the

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, p. 60.

dread of people in McKenzie's River, and the sad catastrophe of last Autumn has now rendered it doubly so, the very best and first-rate men are required for navigating that dangerous stream."<sup>50</sup> Hence, plans to expand the fur trade to Frances Lake and the Pelly River had to be postponed for a year.

In the spring of 1841 Campbell descended the Liard to Fort Simpson. At the depot he met Alexander Isbister, who had just returned from Peel River and was retiring from the service of the Hudson's Bay Company. In their short time together they became good friends and Campbell later was a frequent guest at Isbister's house when he later visited London. Campbell also met Chief Factor John Lewes for the first time, who unlike his predecessor, promised "cordial support" for Campbell's exploratory efforts.<sup>51</sup>

Campbell also had some farewells to make, though good riddance might have been more appropriate. Alexander R. McLeod, Jr., his second-in-command at Dease Lake and Fort Halkett, was being removed from the district. The wayward young man had cast his eye upon the wife of Campbell's interpreter, Hoole. The woman in question was by no means an unwilling lover. In spite of the fact that she had been married to Hoole for a number of years and had borne him several children, she boldly began to live with A. R. McLeod, Jr., as his wife. Campbell, who tried to keep things calm in the crowded little community of Fort Halkett, was unsuccessful in trying to separate the lovers. McLeod

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<sup>50</sup>H.B.C.A., John Lewes--Governor Simpson, November 20, 1840, D. 5/5 fos. 371.

<sup>51</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, pp. 60-61.

greeted Campbell's efforts with scorn. John Lee Lewes wrote,

McLeod's behavior to that Gent<sup>m</sup> as his Junior was most shameful, not content with constantly disobeying all orders, insolence, the most barefaced and unbecoming was added, and instead of being a support to Mr. Campbell was greater the reverse. . . .<sup>52</sup>

This type of behavior got young McLeod recalled to Fort Simpson. Here, John Lee Lewes, no doubt out of respect for the young man's father, Chief Factor Alexander Roderick McLeod, who had died only months before, tried to take a fatherly interest in the affair. But young McLeod told him to mind his own business. Thus McLeod earned himself a discharge alone in 1841; the woman decided to remain with her husband.<sup>53</sup>

Campbell remained at Fort Simpson for the rest of the summer, in charge of the headquarters while Chief Factor Lewes journeyed to Portage La Loche for the next year's supply of trade goods. When the "Portage Boats" returned, Campbell again made his way up the Liard to his winter quarters at Fort Halkett. With him he carried a letter from Governor Simpson, who had recently been knighted for his role in sponsoring the Dease-Simpson Arctic Survey. Sir George was well pleased with Campbell's discovery of the Pelly. However, the Governor was not at first sure that the Pelly was part of the Colville River; rather, he thought that the river flowed to the Pacific. He was anxious for Campbell to extend the Company's operations to Frances Lake the following

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<sup>52</sup>H.B.C.A., John Lee Lewes--Governor Simpson, November 20, 1841, D. 5/5 fos. 371-371d.

<sup>53</sup>Jennifer Brown, "Ultimate Respectability: Fur Trade Children in the 'Civilized World'," The Beaver (Spring, 1978), p. 52.

summer.<sup>54</sup>

Robert Campbell was able to carry out the Governor's wishes in the summer of 1842. At Fort Simpson the explorer received orders from Chief Factor Lewes to establish a post on Frances Lake, and the following spring explore the Pelly River to its mouth, presumably on the Pacific. On the twenty-seventh of July, he left Fort Halkett with two York boats. After a "tedious, toilsome, and laborious voyage" Campbell reached Frances Lake.<sup>55</sup> Camp was made at the foot of Simpson's Tower near "Glenlyon House," the rough shanty that his men had built in 1840. The site provided easy access to the mouth of the east arm, where fast water provided a promising fishing ground.

The first concern upon reaching their wintering grounds had to be the erection of suitable quarters. The bitter and brief autumn was already upon the Hudson's Bay men so construction was begun immediately. Frances Lake Post was much like any other post in Rupert's Land. It was composed of two buildings, a store, thirty by twenty feet, and a dwelling house, thirty by sixteen feet. These structures were probably of the old provincial French style of construction, dominant on the northern frontier since the French regime. Posts were erected on the sill logs in the corners and formed the supports for squared horizontal logs which made up the walls.<sup>56</sup> Both the house and the store were then enclosed in a stockade of wooden pickets with a bastion in each corner

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<sup>54</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, p. 61.

<sup>55</sup>H.B.C.A., Frances Lake Post Journal, B. 73/a/1 fos. 6.

<sup>56</sup>John A. Hussey, "Unpretending But Not Indecent: Living Quarters at Mid-19th Century H. B. C. Posts," The Beaver (Spring, 1975), p. 15.

and the Company flag flying overhead. Inside the dwelling house partitions were sometimes erected to provide an element of privacy for the post's inhabitants. Campbell had his own room which he furnished by his own hand, with a table, chair, and bedstead. Much of his time, however, was spent either out of doors or in the main room where there was a large fireplace made of mud and stone.<sup>57</sup> The fireplace not only supplied the only source of heat but also of light; Campbell did not even have the luxury of a candle. Unfortunately, this type of heating system usually proved incredibly smoky so that, except in the severest of blizzards, the post's inmates spent as much time in the fresh air as possible.

While the post was under construction Campbell became concerned that the food resources of the Frances Lake region were not as flattering as he had originally expected. In his first few weeks on the lake the fish nets were consistently yielding fifty to sixty fish a day. But as was often the case, the fish moved to different locations after the lake froze over. To alleviate the strain on his post's larder, Campbell elected to send three men back to Fort Simpson for the winter.<sup>58</sup>

At this time he received a letter from Sir George Simpson. The Governor had always had a personal as well as professional interest in Campbell's career, and he often took the time to drop the young man a line of encouragement and tell him some of the news of Rupert's Land. On this occasion he wrote Campbell,

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<sup>57</sup>H.B.C.A., Frances Lake Journal, B. 73/a/1 fos. 9d.

<sup>58</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, p. 64.



I heard of your friend the Nahany chiefess /sic/, who assisted you in your distress in the Mountains 3 year /sic/ ago. She was then upon a visit to the Coast, where she is much respected. I understand she spoke of you in terms of high commendation. /Simpson also wrote that he was/. . . truly /sic/ concerned to see that you are 'still haunted' at Fort Halkett, by your old enemy starvation; a smell even of the flesh pots of Red River, would I have no doubt, be a treat to you, and braxy /rotten sheep meat/ a perfect banquet, circumstances as you then appear to have been.

Circumstances at Frances Lake were hardly better when Campbell read the Governor's letter. But at least he could be assured that Sir George Simpson, who had spent the past winter touring California and the Hawaiian Islands, appreciated his efforts.<sup>59</sup>

The food situation at Frances Lake was worsened by the loss of one of Campbell's best hunters, Hoole. The hapless interpreter seems to have gone from one misfortune to the next; having recently gotten his wife back from A. R. McLeod, Jr., he now cut his foot while chopping wood, and was disabled for much of the winter. Thus there was no call for optimism at the post that year. Even the great Scottish holiday of St. Andrew's Day found Campbell grimly tending the fish nets, freezing his hands and hoping for just a few fish for supper.

In February of 1843, Chief Factor Lewes sent Campbell instructions for the further exploration of the Pelly River. Since the discovery of the Pelly in 1840, the fur traders had rethought their original supposition that the river was actually the headwaters of the Colville River. The true identity of the Pelly, the upper Yukon River, was a subject of constant speculation during the ten years between its discovery and exploration. It is clear from the orders that Lewes and Simpson sent to Campbell in 1843 that they expected the Pelly River to

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid., pp. 61-62.



flow westward to the Pacific Ocean. They thought that Campbell would be able to descend the river to the sea, and have no problem returning to Frances Lake by the end of the summer. Campbell himself had changed his mind that it might be the headwaters of the Colville River. He explained to Governor Simpson that the only reason he had committed an error such as considering the Pelly part of the Colville "arose from having no map, nor anything to correct my judgement but the very faint idea I had in memory of how the country lay."<sup>60</sup> Now Campbell felt that the Pelly River would turn out to be either the "Comptrollers River" (the modern Copper River?) or the Cook River. Here again the apocryphal concept of the Cook River was molding an explorer's thinking; like Peter Pond, Sir Alexander Mackenzie, and Samuel Black, Robert Campbell felt that the river might hold the key to the geography of the interior. What the mapmakers were calling the Cook River was in all probability the Susitna River, an important river in the Cook Inlet region of Alaska, but not a major route to the interior.<sup>61</sup>

Part of Campbell's uncertainty over the probable course of the Pelly River stemmed from inability to make accurate readings of longitude and latitude. Just prior to his expedition on the Pelly River, in May of 1843, he made a thinly veiled plea to Governor Simpson to be provided with the proper equipment.

I regret much that I have not Instruments with the necessary Books, and a few lessons for taking altitudes, to enable me to ascertain the geographical position of the more prominent points of the

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<sup>60</sup>H.B.C.A., Robert Campbell--Sir George Simpson, May 26, 1843, D. 5/8 fos. 269-269d.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

country through which I have, and may yet likely pass, it is most desirable that they be accurately known and the task would be to me a pleasant one, It is a science for which I ever had an ardent desire to cultivate practically but fortune has so far denied me the chance. . . .<sup>62</sup>

Governor Simpson did not acknowledge Campbell's request for mapping instruments. Such instruments would have greatly aided the resolution of the perplexing geography of the upper Yukon by letting the Company know the exact location of Campbell's post.

It is possible that Sir George Simpson wished to keep the Company's western explorations obscured by geographic uncertainties. He must have suspected that as Campbell pushed northwestward he was approaching the 141st meridian, since 1825 the agreed boundary between Russian and British America. With no precise information concerning the location of the Company's posts and explorations, no charge of trespassing could be leveled.

In this regard the Company's exploring effort in the Yukon valley was a form of selective exploration. Robert Campbell, John Bell, and later Alexander H. Murray were dealing with a real geographic problem, the nature of the Yukon River Valley. This was a mystery as perplexing as the source of the Nile, which other British explorers were seeking at the same time. However, the Hudson's Bay Company did not emphasize the possibility for scientific knowledge in the unknown Northwest. Rather, it chose to, naturally, focus on the commercial prospects of the region. For the Hudson's Bay Company, then, the exploration of the Pelly River, the upper Yukon, was complete when it could locate and exploit the fur resources along its banks. The fact

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

that the Pelly River's source or ultimate destination was unknown did not greatly cloud the Company's perception of the area.

That is not to say that purely geographic questions were ignored during the Company's expansion into the Yukon. A man such as Robert Campbell had the same urge to reveal the unknown, to aid the advance knowledge as the celebrated explorers of Africa in the mid- and late-nineteenth century. Robert Campbell's "ardent desire" to contribute to geography was only partially suppressed by the Company's selective goals.<sup>63</sup> Though only fur trade objectives were sponsored, the actual explorers remained involved in the purely geographic aspects of the problem as well.

Early in June, 1843, Campbell left the Frances Lake post and headed for the Pelly River to continue his explorations. During the winter he had dispatched Hoole to the Pelly River to build a house there and make things ready for the summer journey. The house was appropriately called Pelly Banks. When Campbell arrived there on the sixth of June, he found a large canoe, made with birch-bark brought from Fort Liard, built, gummed, and ready for service.

Campbell's exploration party consisted of Hoole, Lapie, Kitza, two French Canadians, and an Indian hunter named Gauche. It was traditional among the northern Indian tribes that before going on a journey of any kind to have a shaman or some individual gifted in "conjuring" foretell the future. This was thought to be important as it warned the part of any enemy ambushes, as well as alerting them to the

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<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

hunting conditions ahead.<sup>64</sup> On the evening before they set off down the Pelly, Kitza, Lapie, Gauche, and perhaps the Canadians, gathered together without Campbell's knowledge. With only the firelight to reveal him, the men turned their attention to Gauche, whose name referred to his left-handedness, and who was known to his comrades for his uncanny psychic powers. With his mind's eye he saw the party proceeding downriver, and after a certain time meeting with two Indians on the right bank of the river. Later they met up with an Indian family, with whom they ate. The country he saw the expedition travel through was mountainous, and although the hunters would kill plenty of small game, no big game animals were killed. Finally, the expedition would reach the junction of two large rivers and fall in with a large group of Indians. After that, Gauche's future vision began to blur and he could see no further, but he failed to detect any sign of blood, so he felt safe in assuring his listeners that they would not quarrel with any of the Pelly Indians.<sup>65</sup>

Satisfied that the coming voyage would be a safe one, the men slipped into their blankets and went to sleep. Campbell was unaware of this clandestine voyage into the future until the real Pelly trip was nearly over. On many occasions he had heard his men, after one incident or another, mumbling "That's what Gauche said."<sup>66</sup>

On the tenth of June, the explorers embarked on the Pelly River. The river was flanked by high hills on both sides of its course,

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<sup>64</sup>James W. Vanstone, Athabaskan Adaptations: Hunters and Fishermen of the Subarctic Forests (Chicago: Atline Co., 1974), p. 68.

<sup>65</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, pp. 65-66.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

though the Pelly Range, to the south, dominated the scenery. After proceeding downstream about thirty miles Campbell came to a deep, swift flowing river, about fifty feet wide, which he named in honor of his interpreter, Hoole. Below the mouth of the Hoole River they came to a dangerous rapid. Hoole's Rapid drops the waters of the Pelly six feet in about two hundred yards of whitewater. The rapid is navigable in low water conditions, but traveling in June, with the spring runoff still entering the Pelly, Campbell was forced to make a short portage along the north bank. After Hoole's Rapid the Pelly's current increased. The river, now between three and four hundred feet wide, flowed through alternating scenery, first through scarped banks of grey and white silt, then past open and grassy meadows interspaced by thick groves of cottonwoods and scrubby stands of spruce.<sup>67</sup>

As Campbell canoed downriver he continued to name the local geography after his personal friends and companions, a refreshing change from the government expeditions, such as Franklin's, where the names of the gentry of London were placed on some of the most beautiful and foreboding features on the continent. The Ross River, a major waterway draining the Mackenzie Mountains to the southwest, he named after Chief Factor Donald Ross, who had befriended Campbell during his journey to Rupert's Land thirteen years before. The Kitza River, a small mountain freshet, he named after his Indian hunter Kitza. The Macmillan River he named in honor of his cousin Chief Factor James McMillan, who was responsible for Campbell joining the Company. A

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<sup>67</sup>Dawson, "Report on Explorations of the Yukon District," Geological Survey of Canada, pp. 120-123.

modern map of the Pelly also reveals Lapie River. This stream, however, was named by George M. Dawson, of the Canadian Geological Survey, a friend of Campbell's, later on in life. Dawson felt that if Kitza had a river named after him, then Lapie deserved equal consideration.<sup>68</sup>

The further the voyage progressed, the more the voyageurs became impressed with the accuracy of Gauche's predictions. During their second day on the river they came upon two Indians with whom Campbell held a brief interview. The following day, as they rounded a sharp turn in the Pelly, they surprised an Indian family which was camped along the river. The Indians fled into the forest, but soon returned when they saw the Hudson's Bay men's peaceful intentions. Then exactly as Gauche had predicted, the fur traders had a peaceful smoke and dinner with the family before proceeding downstream.<sup>69</sup>

On the sixth day of the voyage, Campbell came to the junction of another large river. This swiftly flowing waterway he named the Lewes River, after Chief Factor John Lee Lewes. Even Campbell realized the importance of putting one's superior's name on the map. Just downstream from the forks of the Lewes and Pelly rivers, the exploratory party came upon a large group of what Campbell called "wood Indians." Actually, they were the Northern Tutchone, and they were taken completely by surprise by the first whitemen they had ever seen.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, p. 67.

<sup>70</sup>Catharine McClellan, My Old People Say: An Ethnographic Survey of the Southern Yukon Territory (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1975), p. 22.



Campbell directed his voyageurs to land the canoe near the Indian camp so that he could establish trade relations with the Tutchone.

After a moment of shock the Tutchone recovered their composure and two of their leading men stepped forward to greet Campbell. It was Thlin-ikik-thling and his son Hanan, both "tall, stalwart, good-looking men, clad from head to foot in dressed deer skins, ornamented with beads & porcupine quills of all colors."<sup>71</sup> Together with the explorers they shared the "pipe of peace." The Tutchone were friendly and Campbell moved freely among them, distributing tobacco and other gifts. But when he made known his intention of continuing his voyage down the united Lewes and Pelly river, "they all raised their voices against it." Through sign language, and a smattering of the Tutchone tongue that his interpreter knew, Campbell was informed that the tribes of the lower river were a warlike people with whom no parley was possible; not only would they kill the Hudson's Bay men, but eat them as well. Campbell thanked the Tutchone for their concern, but was unaffected by their warnings, perhaps realizing that neighbors are often the worst character witnesses.<sup>72</sup>

The explorers set up camp for the night across the river from the Tutchone. Here Campbell was surprised to find that his men were very much frightened by the Tutchone warnings. After discussion amongst themselves, they refused to go further down the river. Campbell was enraged, he used every threat and argument at his disposal, but was unable to **shake** his crew's resolve.

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<sup>71</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, p. 68.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

Thus Campbell's exploration came to an end. He had traveled over three hundred and twenty miles down the Pelly, but his plan of following the river to its mouth had been dashed. Before the journey he wrote Governor Simpson that he hoped to follow the Pelly to the sea, open up a new trade route, and then retire to a nice country farm. But now this plan had to be postponed as the geographic mystery of the Pelly would remain unsolved. In fact, the plot thickened with the discovery of the Lewes River. The Indians of Frances Lake, and later the Northern Tutchone, had told him much about this river. The Lewes, according to the Indians, flowed from a large lake in the mountains. The lake's size was such that from its "center the land is hardly discernible on either side, and of several days march in length." This was Lake Laberge, and southeast of the lake the Indians of the interior rendezvoused with the native traders of the coast at a place known as "the point of peace." Campbell had hoped to investigate this area, but again the **timidness** of his men prevented him.<sup>73</sup>

In retrospect it was probably better that Campbell did turn back at that time. He was not prepared for a long voyage, and although the Pelly and the Lewes, together forming the Yukon River, do flow to the Pacific, the journey is about fourteen hundred miles long, rather than the short float down to the coast that the Hudson's Bay men expected. Campbell, however, was very dejected and was lost in the gloom of disappointment. As he admitted, "I was perfectly heedless of what was passing."<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup>H.B.C.A. Robert Campbell--Governor George Simpson, May 26, 1843, D. 5/8 fos. 268d.

<sup>74</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, p. 69.

Campbell remained in his despair through the first two days of his party's voyage back up the Pelly River. During the third day's travel Campbell noticed fires burning on top of the hills on both sides of the river. His men were at a loss to explain what they were, but Campbell "conjectured that as in Scotland in the older times, these were signals to gather the tribes so that they might surround and intercept us." This roused the explorer "to the sense of our situation." They were still in basically unknown country, with limited native contacts. The small Hudson's Bay party might easily be overcome, and their meager possessions prove a treasure to the poor tribes of the Pelly. The voyageurs doubled their efforts with their paddles and on the tracking line, trying to get upstream as fast as possible.<sup>75</sup>

The next morning they came upon a party of Indians, gathered on the far bank of the river. The Indians beckoned Campbell to cross the river, which he did. The strange tribe, however, proved anything but friendly. They stood stone-faced on the high bank of the river, with their bows drawn in a menacing fashion. Moving confidently, yet slowly, so that his actions would not be misinterpreted, and bring a host of arrows down upon them, Campbell removed some tobacco from his pack, and had one of his hunters present it as a gift. The Indians did not seem overly grateful, as "they would scarcely remove their hands from their bows to receive it." Campbell

...then ascended the bank to them, as they would not come down to us, and our bold and at the same time Conciliatory demeanor had the effect of cooling them down. We had an amicable interview with them carried on with words and signs. It required some

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid.

finessing however to get away from them. . . .

But as soon as the explorers got into their canoe, they quickly pushed off and the voyageurs paddled out of arrow range, while Campbell, with gun ready, stared down the Indians.<sup>76</sup>

The party traveled at top speed all day, working against the current with all their strength. Campbell had hoped he would have been able to reach a rough section of river he had named "Desrivieres' Rapid" by nightfall. But as twilight closed in they were well short of that spot, and he ordered his men to make camp. Campbell knew that there was still a possibility of Indian trouble and he wanted a watch kept over the camp. But his voyageurs, after a hard day's work, were dead to the world. So Campbell had them sleep in his tent while he stood guard.<sup>77</sup> The camp had been set up at the base of a steep bank with large trees on its slope. Campbell climbed into the branches of one of the trees and there, with his rifle in his lap, sat reading in the twilight of the midnight sun, "Harvey's Meditations."<sup>78</sup>

The explorer was ready for trouble, but felt that the hostile band was most likely left behind. Yet at that very moment the Indians were closing in around the camp. They had followed the Hudson's Bay men throughout the day, carefully remaining out of sight, but always on their trail. The Indians' plan was to rush the whiteman's camp, steal his goods, and perhaps capture the whitemen themselves, but only

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<sup>76</sup>Ibid.

<sup>77</sup>The tent was a luxury usually reserved for company officers. The voyageurs normally slept under the stars, or, in case of rain, huddled under the canoe.

<sup>78</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, p. 70.

if they could be taken by surprise. The Indians did not want to risk losing one of their own men to the stranger's guns. So while Campbell stood guard, reading snatches of religious prose, those that plotted ambush edged closer, waiting perhaps, for him to doze off. The Scotsman, however, fought off the urge to sleep and climbed down from the tree. He walked along the river bank and found "all was still." The Indians, carefully hidden, remained true to their purpose, patiently waiting. Their signal to attack would be if the whiteman took a drink of water from the river. He would then have to kneel down, and with his back turned, would be at their mercy. Campbell, however, allowed no such opening, for he used a horn cup to drink from and "after filling it, turning quickly round & glancing up & down the river & towards the hill while in the act of drinking" he showed that he was ever alert. As dawn came the Indians gave up their ambush and withdrew from the camp.<sup>79</sup>

The explorers continued their homeward journey the next day, never realizing how close they had come to death. Continuing overland they crossed the divide and returned to Frances Lake by the end of July.<sup>80</sup> Campbell found his post much as he had left it, with its inhabitants in want of food. Even his dogs, debilitated with hunger, ambled up to their master, hardly able to bark. Campbell's post was

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<sup>79</sup>Ibid. Two years later, when Campbell was on good terms with the Indians of Pelly River, he learned how close he had come to ambush that night. "They confessed that had I knelt down to drink, they would have rushed me & the sleeping inmates of the tent" (Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, p. 70).

<sup>80</sup>Ibid.

"still haunted" by his "old enemy starvation," and as the season changed the specter loomed larger, though not alone as a new host of trials descended upon the settlement.

Campbell's exploration of the Pelly River to its junction with Lewes River had brought the Hudson's Bay Company into the heart of the Yukon Valley. This was the region it unknowingly had been driving toward since the Contract of 1839. The Company wanted a large section of undeveloped country to exploit. The drive to reach the Colville River had been motivated by the desire to increase the Mackenzie District's fur returns.<sup>81</sup> Although Governor Simpson was unaware that it was actually the Yukon River Valley that his men were exploring, Campbell's account of the Pelly River's fur trade potential told him all he wanted to know. He advised Campbell that the forks of the Pelly and Lewes rivers sounded like an excellent site for a trading post and directed that one be established as soon as practical.<sup>82</sup>

Unfortunately, supply problems both at Frances Lake and in the Mackenzie District as a whole made such an ambitious move impractical for a number of years.

The starvation which Campbell faced at Frances Lake was something which plagued the entire Mackenzie District. In the winter of 1841-1842, John Lee Lewes wrote, "All the Gents' [sic] in charge of the several Posts, one and all singing the same song, scarcity of food."<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup>H.B.C.A., Sir George Simpson--John Lee Lewes, June 5, 1843, D. 4/28 fos. 50d.

<sup>82</sup>H.B.C.A., Sir George Simpson--Robert Campbell, June 3, 1844, D. 4/31 fos. 49.

<sup>83</sup>Glazebrook, ed., The Hargrave Correspondence, p. 378.

The Chief Factor himself suffered "from hand to mouth the whole winter."<sup>84</sup> In the worst situation of all was Chief Trader Alexander Fisher at Fort Good Hope. Throughout the winter he exercised the most economy over his meager provisions. Even so, February found Fisher and staff weakened by the growing numbness of starvation to the point they were "nearly on all fours."<sup>85</sup> With his men subsisting on beaver skins, Fisher knew help was needed. Accompanied by an Orkneyman, the only other member of the post capable of making the journey, Fisher set out for Fort Norman, normally an eight day march to the south. For thirteen days they staggered through the snow before reaching the neighboring post. Aid was quickly dispatched and the fur traders were saved.

Upon returning to his charge Fisher found

. . . that 52 Indians, men, women & children had perished by famine and the surviving living on the dead carcasses of their Relations all within 200 yards of the Fort during my absence, my man and his family living on Moose Skins, Pack Cords, Bear Skins, Leather Sled Trappings etc. These poor Indians seldom could get sleep, they both men and women kept axe in hand for self preservation & if any found knapping [sic] instantly was knocked on the head and as soon devoured by their nearest relatives.<sup>86</sup>

Although the fur traders in that horrible winter of 1841-1842 were not reduced to the sad extremity of many of their aboriginal neighbors, they did not escape the season unscathed. The winter mail packet drivers, a Scotsman and an Orkneyman, died on the trail between Fort Good Hope and the Peel River post. One night a party of starving Indians slipped into their camp, slew the Hudson's Bay men, and ate their provisions. That meager amount hardly dented their hunger and the two white men were then butchered and eaten by the Indian women.

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<sup>84</sup>Ibid., p. 379.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., p. 378.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., p. 402.

News of this atrocity shocked the district, but it did not cause the Company's officers to lose their sense of perspective. Sir George Simpson advised Chief Factor Lewes not to punish the Indians involved. The Governor noted that cannibalism was not unknown even among civilized peoples during periods of extreme want, and that the Indians had already suffered enough.<sup>87</sup>

Part of Simpson's understanding attitude toward the unfortunate incident stemmed from realization that the Company's fortunes in the Mackenzie rested upon the same meager subsistence base as the Indians. Separated from the nearest centers of production and politics by over three thousand miles of trail, frozen in for over half the year, the Mackenzie District fur traders were denied the use of the agricultural surpluses upon which their culture was based. In 1834, in an effort to reduce costs, the Council for the Northern Department prohibited the importation of flour into the area. The district was to supply its own.<sup>88</sup>

The experimental growing of wheat was not very successful at Fort Simpson. At Fort Liard, wheat was, during favorable seasons, able to ripen, and it was ground into flour for use by the traders. Barley was successfully grown at Forts Simpson, Liard, and Norman, as well as potatoes, turnips, cabbage, even beets.<sup>89</sup> These gardens' returns were meager, but more often than not they made the difference between

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<sup>87</sup>H.B.C.A., Sir George Simpson--John Lee Lewes, June 5, 1843, D. 4/28 fos. 50d-51.

<sup>88</sup>Oliver, ed., The Canadian North-West: . . . Vol. II, Minutes of Northern Department Council, p. 692.

<sup>89</sup>Richardson, Arctic Searching Expedition, pp. 165 and 170.



starvation and survival.

However, the bulk of the fur traders' diet was composed of the fish and game of the area. Each fall the Hudson's Bay men prepared for the fishing season. Nets were repaired, and the fishermen, often engaged especially for that task, were dispatched to a nearby lake. A good fishery could supply its mother post with as many as ten thousand fish, but all too often the Mackenzie District fisheries, except Big Island Fishery on Great Slave Lake, fell woefully short of that figure.<sup>90</sup> The fish were trapped in gill nets lowered through the ice. There was no problem preserving them as they froze solid within minutes of being caught. Fish was the sole diet of the Company's sled dogs throughout the winter.

A major portion of the posts' inmates' diet was rabbit. They were snared by the women and children of the post, the local Indians, and hunters specifically employed for that purpose. When the rabbit cycle climaxed and their population dramatically fell off, a winter of privation for both the whites and Indians was guaranteed. Rabbit hunting was all the more important because of the overall poor big game hunting along the Mackenzie River.

Moose and caribou hunting went on all year long, though the most productive season was late winter, after the new year and before the spring thaw. At this time drifts would be deep and the snow frozen with a thick crusty surface. Aided by breezy weather, skilled hunters

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<sup>90</sup>Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario, Fort Simpson Post Journal, October 28, 1834, MG 19D6. Hereafter this collection will be referred to as P.A.C.

could bring in an incredible amount of meat. In one three month period during the winter of 1826-1827, nearly eleven thousand pounds of meat (mostly moose and caribou) were collected for Fort Simpson.<sup>91</sup>

The majority of this hunting was done by Indians, either officially as "fort hunters" paid in powder and shot, or independently by the local bands known as the "home guard." This provisions trade was the most important way for the Indians to acquire European goods. Unlike setting up traplines, moose and rabbit hunting could be done without disturbing the traditional winter-hunting band structure. Perhaps because of this, the Indians seemed to have been more consistent in supplying the trading posts with food than with trapping furs. Captain John Henry Lefroy, who visited Fort Simpson in 1844, was surprised to see a group of Indians drag a sled of dried caribou meat all the way from the Coppermine River. These Indians refused to touch the meat they meant for trade, even though they were without food themselves for days. Upon reaching the fort they traded the meat to the Company and one said, "I am starving, give me something to eat."<sup>92</sup>

Trade goods, therefore, were vital to the provisioning of a Hudson's Bay Company post. Although in time of famine, when the Indians themselves were starving, no amount of goods could keep the traders from doing likewise. The Hudson's Bay men's physical welfare under normal conditions was dependent upon the number of trade goods at

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<sup>91</sup>P.A.C., Fort Simpson Journal, December, 1826-February, 1827.

<sup>92</sup>John Henry Lefroy, In Search of the Magnetic North: John Henry Lefroy, A Soldier Surveyor's Letters from the North-West 1843-1844, ed. George F. G. Stanley (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1955), p. 114.

hand. These goods served a double function, the provisions trade and the fur trade. This system of supplying its posts had both its advantages as well as problems for the Hudson's Bay Company. The biggest plus on the balance sheet, although an unwitting one, was that the fresh meat provided by the Indians rendered scurvy an unknown disease in the Mackenzie District. The British Empire's naval explorers were to remain plagued by scurvy into the twentieth century.<sup>93</sup> The main difficulty with the system was that trade goods, the medium of exchange, still had to be imported at great expense and over great distances into the district.

If mistakes or miscalculations were made in ordering the district's trade outfit, disaster could result. This indeed was something which happened at Dease Lake in the winter of 1838-39. Campbell had been ordered by Governor Simpson to expand the district's frontiers, but when he petitioned Chief Trader McPherson for additional supplies, he was refused, the latter gentlemen pleading that he had none to give.<sup>94</sup> The result was a winter of starvation for Campbell and his men.

Of course, the inverse of this problem would be bad for the Company as well. Importing more trade goods into the Mackenzie River District than could be sold would increase transport costs without any corresponding return in profits. The great distance between the Mackenzie District and the London fur market aggravated the situation. Goods

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<sup>93</sup>Captain Robert F. Scott's two Antarctic expeditions, 1901-1904 and 1910-1912 both suffered from scurvy. Scott believed that the disease was caused by tainted canned and preserved foods rather than by a lack of fresh food.

<sup>94</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, p. 46.

purchased in London could not be turned into a profit for five years. If the Company purchased an outfit of goods for the Mackenzie District in 1840, it would reach York Factory on Hudson's Bay by the end of that summer. In 1841 the outfit would be shipped to the inland depot of Norway House, and only in 1842 would the goods reach Fort Simpson. The furs purchased with these goods would be sent out from Fort Simpson in 1843. In 1844, they would be forwarded from Norway House to York Factory, and not until 1845 would the furs be sold in London, completing the circle.<sup>95</sup> When the Company expanded into the Yukon drainage system, an additional two years was required from investment to profit. In today's environment of high inflation few business firms could weather a five to seven year delay in profits. Even by nineteenth-century standards, the Hudson's Bay Company was assuming quite a risk with the Mackenzie District. Governor Simpson tried to lessen this risk by demanding the strictest economy from his Mackenzie traders.

Murdock McPherson, however, in his term as district commander, had obeyed too closely the letter of Governor Simpson's dictum, "Oeconomy," and as Robert Campbell found out, had forgotten the rationale behind it. In 1840, McPherson dispatched John Bell to establish the new post at Peel River. But in his request for goods, he did not ask York Factory to supply the district with the necessary increase in trade goods. When John Lee Lewes assumed command at Fort Simpson he found the district's supply system in chaos and immediately set about reforming it. Looking at McPherson's ledgers, Lewes remarked that he must

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<sup>95</sup> Dawson, "Report on Explorations of the Yukon District," Geological Survey of Canada, p. 140.

have been "possessed of some secret, whereby to make Amm<sup>n</sup> [sic] & Tob<sup>o</sup> [sic] go further."<sup>96</sup> Any more economy of McPherson's sort and the Company "had better shut up shop or abandon some of our Posts."<sup>97</sup>

Lewes had not been pleased with his assignment to command at Fort Simpson. He referred to the sparse Mackenzie Valley as "this Land of Nod," and confided to a friend that "I want to be off as soon as I can with safety to my old ways."<sup>98</sup> The best way to achieve that end was to reorganize the district as quickly as possible. Lewes nearly doubled the amounts of gunpowder, shot, and tobacco imported into the Mackenzie District.<sup>99</sup> These goods were the most valuable because there was a continuing demand for **them on the part of the Indians.** Gun powder and tobacco were especially important for opening up new regions. Here the Indians would be capable of living without white goods, if they were not available. But if at its new posts the Company had a good supply of trade goods on hand, it could quickly reduce the Indians into a state of dependence, at least for such basics as gunpowder. Both John Bell at Peel River and Robert Campbell on the upper Liard had been hindered by McPherson's failure to realize this basic law of the fur trade.

Chief Factor Lewes set himself to another problem which plagued the district's supply system: a distressing amount of damaged or spoiled

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<sup>96</sup>Glazebrook, ed., The Hargrave Correspondence, p. 323.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., p. 324.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid., pp. 377 and 327.

<sup>99</sup>Ibid., p. 323.

merchandise. The culprits here were the voyageurs who transported the trade goods from Norway House to the long portage:

the portage La Loche Boys' /sic/ are a sett /sic/ of rough & terrible fellows' /sic/ caring little for the contents of packages. All their aim is to get through the voyage as quick as possible their cry is the D---l take the hindermost helter skelter, bing, bang, the pieces containing the most brittle ware are as tenderly dashed on the rocks' /sic/ as two or three pieces of bar iron.<sup>100</sup>

Those who packed the pieces (bales of trade goods) were also inclined to be negligent in how the bundles were arranged when they left York Factory. In 1840, when Lewes was on his first trip from Portage La Loche to Fort Simpson, he and his boat crew stopped for a short snack on an island in Great Slave Lake. Lewes had promised his men some cheese he had ordered from England. An expectant group of hungry voyageurs gathered around the Chief Factor as he opened his personal cassette of food. But all thought of a treat left their heads as their normally "strong noses & Stomachs" were greeted by the pungent odor of rotten cheese. Worse yet, the cheese had been packed with Lewes's yearly allowance of tea and sugar, articles sorely missed throughout the winter. This problem Lewes tried to solve (at least to the satisfaction of his temper) by writing a long letter to the York Factory office describing the proper way to load fragile and perishable items.

In short, Lewes was an energetic force in reorganizing the logistics of the Mackenzie District. In spite of severe problems like the famine of 1841-42, he was able to build a solid base from which the expansion of the district could proceed with greater dispatch. Because of his experience and intimate knowledge of the administration of all

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<sup>100</sup>Ibid., p. 325.

of Rupert's Land, Lewes was able to convince Simpson to approve his requests. This is something that the less experienced and trusted Murdock McPherson may not have been able to do, even if he had been so inclined. When Lewes wrote:

. . . let those who's /sic/ business it is supply me with officers Men and other means' /sic/, and by the powers' /sic/ of St. George, I will not leave a stone unturned to ferret out the gold of the North ("Beaver").<sup>101</sup>

Simpson knew that Lewes meant what he said.

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<sup>101</sup>Ibid., p. 322.

## CHAPTER VIII

### WHAT IS THE COLVILLE RIVER?

On the twenty-sixth of May, 1842, John Bell and his aids were driven from the Peel River post. The breaking ice of the river had jammed and formed a natural dam, forcing the water to overflow its banks, and flood the countryside, Though the water spilled through the fort and into the dwelling house, Bell did not panic. He had been through this miserable situation before, in 1836, when the Mackenzie River jammed and destroyed Fort Good Hope. Coolly, Bell helped his men remove the fort's valuables to a high hill behind the post. Then, checking that all was in order, the fur traders themselves retreated to the elevated point, taking with them a large wooden boat, just in case things got worse.<sup>1</sup>

In this wet and dangerous way did spring come to the Peel River and put an end to the winter of 1841-42. The season had been as difficult at Peel River as at the other posts in the district. As at Fort Good Hope the inhabitants had been reduced to eating, rather than trading, beaver skins.<sup>2</sup> Bell thought that one Indian family, reduced to a diet of beaver skins, "looked more like MacBeath's Ghost than human

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<sup>1</sup>Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Peel River Post Journal, 1842, B. 157/a/2 fos. 3. Hereafter this collection will be referred to as H.B.C.A. Grammatical and spelling errors are reproduced verbatim.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.



beings!"<sup>3</sup> But in spite of such an extremity he enjoyed a good trade, although being somewhat short on beaver skins. The hardship of the season was only somewhat dispelled by the news that he was promoted to the rank of Chief Trader.

The majority of the furs brought into the Peel River post came from west of the Peel River, across a branch of the Mackenzie Mountains known as the Richardson Mountains. The Indians who traded at the post were the Kutchin, though the voyageurs referred to them as the Loucheux, or Squint-eyes. The Kutchin were among the most numerous of the Athabaskan Indian tribes in northwestern America. The Eastern Kutchin, who lived along the Peel River and in the Mackenzie Delta, had been in steady contact with white traders since the establishment of Fort Good Hope in 1804. With the easy access that Fort Good Hope and, of course, later the Peel River post afforded, the Eastern Kutchin became middlemen between the Hudson's Bay Company and the large numbers of Indians west of the Richardson Mountains. The western Indians were mostly members of the Kutchin tribe, though known to the traders as the Gens du Large, the Gens de Rat, and the Vanta Kootchin.<sup>4</sup> There was also a small tribe of Han Indians along the Yukon River, though they were called the Gens de Fou.<sup>5</sup> These transmountain Indians were only rarely, and in some cases not at all, able to visit the Peel River post, though they

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<sup>3</sup>G. P. De T. Glazebrook, ed., The Hargrave Correspondence (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1938), p. 407.

<sup>4</sup>Lawrence J. Burpee, ed., Journal of the Yukon, 1847-48, Publications of the Canadian Archives, No. 4 (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1910), pp. 35-36.

<sup>5</sup>Shepard Krech, III, "On the Aboriginal Population of the Kutchin," Arctic Anthropology 16 (1978):97.

themselves produced a large number of the furs traded there. Hence, the Hudson's Bay Company was anxious to penetrate west of the Richardson Mountains, an area which promised not only a large number of furs, but also the valley of the Colville River.

This motivation is clearly expressed in John Bell's letter of August twenty-fourth, 1841:

I had a visit from the Indians beyond the Western Rocky Mountains by the last Ice of May. They brought valuable hunts consisting of fine Beaver. . . . These Indians are in the habit of making annual excursions to the lands of another tribe more remote than theirs, where they generally pass the Winter in hunting and trading. . . . Could I once succeed in inducing these strangers to visit the Fort, I have not the least doubt but a very profitable trade would be the result.<sup>6</sup>

Bell was unsuccessful in inducing any of these western tribes to visit the Peel River post, but he did manage to convince a Rat Indian to conduct him through the mountains and into the rich fur lands beyond the divide.

There were two additional factors besides furs and the search for the Colville which motivated Bell to explore the Richardson Mountains. The first was the large amount of caribou meat hunted in the mountains and traded by the Indians at the Peel River post. Bell was anxious to secure a direct route to these hunting grounds and hopefully find a good location for an outpost.<sup>7</sup> The auxiliary post would serve the dual purpose of a provisions center as well as encouraging the transmountain Indians to trade. Second, Sir George Simpson had been pressuring Chief Factor Lewes to expand his operations in the direction

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<sup>6</sup>Glazebrook, ed., The Hargrave Correspondence, p. 360.

<sup>7</sup>H.B.C.A., Peel River Post Journal, 1842, B. 157/a/2 fos. 7.

of the Colville.<sup>8</sup> Bell was anxious to win Simpson's approval because he had recently petitioned the Governor for a reposting to one of the more southerly and less severe districts.<sup>9</sup>

On the twenty-third of June, a gray and overcast Thursday, John Bell, two voyageurs, Wilson and Boucher, and two Indians, the Rat Indian serving as a guide, and the other as an interpreter, set off on a "trip of Discovery across the Mountains."<sup>10</sup> They were ferried across the Peel River to a point about a mile downstream of the fort, and landed on the west bank. Here the overland journey began. The Hudson's Bay men were traveling light, with little in the way of provisions or trade goods. Bell did attempt to transport a small canoe, which he hoped could be portaged across the mountains and used to reach the Colville.

The first few miles of the march they traversed a thick forest of spruce, which rendered carrying the canoe difficult due to the overhanging branches of the trees. Upon emerging from the forest they ascended a steep terrace of about one hundred and fifty feet and which led them to a broad flat plain. Any relief that the absence of thick forest may have engendered was quickly dispelled as they proceeded across the plain.<sup>11</sup> What looked at a distance like a fine grassy

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<sup>8</sup>H.B.C.A., Sir George Simpson--John Lee Lewes, December 1, 1842, D. 4/28 fos. 3.

<sup>9</sup>H.B.C.A., Sir George Simpson--John Lee Lewes, June 5, 1843, D. 4/28 fos. 52.

<sup>10</sup>H.B.C.A., Peel River Post Journal, 1842, B. 157/a/2 fos. 6d.

<sup>11</sup>H.B.C.A., John Bell--John Lee Lewes, November 17, 1843, B. 157/a/2 fos. 6d.

prairie, interspersed with patches of willow bushes, turned out to be a swampy lowland. Four miles of difficult marching brought them across the plain and to the base of a second and higher terrace. When they reached the summit of the second terrace Bell and his party had already climbed over twelve hundred feet above the level of the Peel River post.<sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately, the second slope led to another swampy plain, this due to the elevation, devoid even of shrubbery. The black horizon was broken only by the peaks of the Richardson Mountains and a few stunted larch. Walking across the plain was difficult because of large tufts of grass which the voyageurs indelicately called Tetes des femmes. R. G. McConnell, who crossed the mountains in 1888, accurately described the problems that Tetes des femmes caused the explorers:

These project a foot or more above the clayey soil, and are the cause of constant stumbling which becomes somewhat exasperating when one is weighted down with a pack. An attempt to walk on top of the mounds soon becomes excessively fatiguing on account of the irregular length of strides, and a slight miscalculation as to distance precipitates the unlucky traveller /sic/ down into the muddy depths between. When down, the resolve is usually made, and adhered to for awhile, to keep to the lower levels, but the effort required to step over the intervening hillocks presents obvious disadvantages of a different kind.<sup>13</sup>

It was this sort of terrain which forced Bell to abandon his canoe during the second day of the journey.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>R. G. McConnell, "Report on an Exploration in the Yukon and Mackenzie Basins, N.W.T." Geological and Natural History of Canada Report from the Year 1887 (Montreal: William Foster Brown and Co., 1891), p. 116.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>14</sup>H.B.C.A., Peel River Post Journal, B. 157/a/2 fos. 7d.

As Bell and his men approached the mountains, the swampy ground was left behind. The mountains about them had a unique appearance, unlike any others in the long succession of peaks which make up the Rocky Mountains. They were rounded and somewhat uniform in shape, an appearance fostered by their covering carpet of moss and rock which seems to smooth off any rough edges. The only variation in color between the dull greenish-gray of the mountains and the blue of the sky were the patches of snow protected by the shadows of the mountain's folds. What makes the Richardson Mountains unique geographically is that the summits of its peaks scarcely top four thousand feet above sea level and the majority of the terrain traversed by John Bell was less than twenty-five hundred feet. These mountains are among the lowest in the entire Rocky Mountain chain.<sup>15</sup>

After "four days of hard labourious travelling" the Hudson's Bay men crossed over the mountains, the divide between the Yukon and Mackenzie rivers.<sup>16</sup> Their overland journey came to an end at the banks of a meandering mountain stream. This river, their guide told them, would lead to another, larger river, which flowed through the territory of those Indians from whom the Eastern Loucheux, or Kutchin, acquired many valuable furs. Bell and his men searched the banks of the small river, among stands of birch, aspen, and spruce, for wood suitable for

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<sup>15</sup>McConnell, "Report on an Exploration in the Yukon," Geological Survey of Canada, p. 118.

<sup>16</sup>H.B.C.A., Peel River Post Journal, B. 157/a/2 fos. 7d. In a letter to James Hargrave, dated August 22, 1842, Bell says that he took five days to cross the mountains (Glazebrook, ed., The Hargrave Correspondence, p. 382). But in a November 17, 1842 letter (H.B.C.A., Peel River Post Journal, B. 200/b/15 fos. 5) to Chief Factor Lewes he mentions only a four day journey. I have used the four day figure because

building a raft. The small canoe they had been forced to leave behind was bitterly missed when they embarked in their less than satisfactory craft. This small river is today known as the Bell River, though the fur traders called it the Rat River, a confusing situation because there was another river known as the Rat only a few miles to the east, which flowed into the Peel River.<sup>17</sup>

The Bell River is a sluggish stream, about forty to fifty yards wide, with little current.<sup>18</sup> It was hardly an ideal river for rafting, and Bell and his men made slow progress. After three frustrating days, the explorers came upon three small Indian hunting canoes. Without hesitation Bell abandoned the raft and appropriated the canoes.<sup>19</sup> The canoes, however, were rather small and somewhat unstable. Bell was forced to lash two of the canoes together with cords of rope to give them the stability to support two men in each. The third canoe with one man preceded the double canoe and it was hoped that he would be able to surprise any game along the river and provide some supper for the men. Bell noted that with the Indians' canoes they "proceeded more expeditiously," but that the "least wind and waves would sink them to the bottom."<sup>20</sup>

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the Peel River Post Journal account of the trip, written the day after Bell returned, mentions four days.

<sup>17</sup>H.B.C.A., John Bell--John Lee Lewes, November 17, 1842, B. 200/b/15 fos. 5.

<sup>18</sup>McConnell, "Report on the Exploration in the Yukon," Geological Survey of Canada, p. 121.

<sup>19</sup>H.B.C.A., John Bell--John Lee Lewes, November 17, 1842, B. 200/b/15 fos. 5.

<sup>20</sup>H.B.C.A., Peel River Post Journal, 1842, B. 157/a/2 fos. 7d.

Shortly after finding the canoes, the explorers came to the junction of a larger river flowing from the northwest. John Bell assumed that this was just a branch of the Bell River, though in reality he was embarking upon the Porcupine River, a major river in its own right, over five hundred miles long and an important tributary of the Yukon River. The explorers proceeded cautiously down the Porcupine until the Rat Indian guide called a halt near an abandoned encampment of his band. Here the guide proposed that the explorers stop for the day as he wished to travel inland and visit his relatives. He said that he would procure some dried fish for the Hudson's Bay men, and as Bell was out of provisions he agreed to let the man go. The next morning the Indian did not return as promised, but did send a replacement to continue to guide the traders west. Initially Bell was "highly pleased with his substitute, being an experienced man and seemed acquainted with the River to which we were bound." But on the day after he began to guide the party, Bell was

. . . much surprised in hearing him declare he would proceed no further with us, alleging the distance to reach the large River I so anxiously wished to see, to be so great that we should be overtaken by the cold before we could be able to come back in the Fall, and that for want of clothing he was not prepared for such a long Journey.

Bell tried to sway the Indian's mind but "remonstrated with him in vain on the impropriety of his conduct."<sup>21</sup>

Without a guide and short of provisions Bell was hesitant to advance. He did not know how far he was from the "large River" to the west. At this point Bell was in the vicinity of the present border

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<sup>21</sup>H.B.C.A., John Bell--John Lee Lewes, November 17, 1842, B. 200/b/15 fos. 5d.

between Alaska and the Yukon Territory. Though his guide described a long journey to the "large River" he was in fact less than one hundred and fifty miles away from the Yukon River, with no rapids or portages between. With a gamble that the Indian had lied Bell could have pushed on to the Yukon. But he instead elected to return safely with the information he had already garnered. A further consideration was Bell's concern for his duties as a fur trader. He was "apprehensive had I persevered in reaching the object of my search without a Guide, I might probably return too late to forward the Peel River fur Returns to Fort Good Hope."<sup>22</sup> Bell returned to the Peel River post on the twenty-fourth of July, after a journey a day and a month long.

Chief Trader Bell was not pleased with the results of his exploration. Though he believed that the land west of the mountains was "rich in Beaver and large animals," he did not think it could be economically exploited.<sup>23</sup> He wrote to James Hargrave at York Factory that:

I fear we cannot succeed in transporting our Goods for the trade through such an abominable track where I could hardly travel with My Gun on My shoulder, scrambling up and down Mountains & deep valleys where goats and Deer could hardly get footing!!<sup>24</sup>

His disappointment was all the more acute because he believed that the large river he had come close to reaching was the long sought Colville River. In fact, he believed that the Porcupine River, which he had discovered, and another large river coming up from the south, when

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>H.B.C.A. Peel River Post Journal, 1842, B, 157/a/2 fos 7d.

<sup>24</sup>Glazebrook, ed., The Hargrave Correspondence, p. 408.



joined together, formed the Colville River.<sup>25</sup>

What John Bell did not appreciate is that all that separated him from the Yukon River, what he thought was the Colville River drainage, was one of the lowest ranges of mountains in the entire Rocky Mountain chain. Unfortunately, the Chief Trader failed to grasp the advantage geography offered. His judgment was blinded by the problems, real and imagined, before him. The most important of these was the cultural bias, reenforced by the entire history of the fur trade, which forced him to look for a water route through the mountains. His frustration was real when he wrote, "What a pity it is that a water communication does not exist to enable us to form an Establishment in that apparently rich Country."<sup>26</sup> Every post in Rupert's Land was built on some navigable waterway and nearly all were supplied by water. It is easy to see why Bell looked for a water route west; not only was it generally cheaper to ship by water, but it was standard Company policy. As early as 1839 when he explored the eastern Rat River, and found it too difficult, Bell had sought a water route west. His 1842 journey was an attempt to see how much of a portage was necessary to reach western waters. The fact that he regarded it as a portage can be seen by his attempt to carry a canoe across the mountains. The portage trail he found was not easy, with some difficult terrain, and sixty miles long. But it was shorter than the Company's route through the Canadian Rockies at Athabasca Pass, which was over eighty miles long.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>William C. Wonders, "Athabasca Pass: Gateway to the Pacific," Canadian Geological Journal, (December, 1974), p. 26.

What drove Bell to discount his discoveries was his lack of means in 1842 to be able to exploit them. He did not have enough men to be able to pack an entire outfit of trade goods sixty miles across the Rocky Mountains, so he disregarded the route which would require such an effort, and concentrated his energies on finding a route he could exploit.

A year later, in June of 1843, he dispatched James Purden, a young apprentice postmaster, with two veteran voyageurs, Lewis and Boucher, to make a second journey over the mountains. A Rat Indian by the name of Tachshee claimed to know a new route westward, "in which were many Lakes in the Portage for easy transport of the canoe across the Mountains."<sup>28</sup> The exact route followed by Purden and his party is difficult to determine exactly. However, from the mention of "many Lakes" and later of "the Portage beyond the Rat River," it would seem that Tachshee knew of no new pass westward but merely led the Hudson's Bay men up the eastern Rat River, through McDougall Pass.

This was the route that John Bell and Alexander Kennedy Isbister took west in 1839. Leaving the Peel River post, Purden canoed down the Peel River to its mouth and into the Huskie channel of the Mackenzie River Delta. A few miles up the channel led them to the mouth of the Rat River.<sup>29</sup> He and his men battled their way up the Rat River, eventually reaching the head of the river and a chain of five small lakes which led across the Mackenzie-Yukon Divide. Upon reaching the lakes,

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<sup>28</sup>H.B.C.A., Peel River Post Journal, 1843, B. 157/a/3 fos. 7d.

<sup>29</sup>For the early explorers there were two Rat Rivers. One was west of the mountains and is today known as the Bell River, while the eastern river is now properly known as the Rat River.

the guide told Purden to abandon the canoe as he had another hidden at the end of the portage. However, there was something about Tachshee's behavior which made Purden suspect his honesty and the young trader decided to continue on with the canoe. This assumption was proven out the next day when Tachshee refused to lead them further across the mountains and he deserted the Company's service. Without a guide Purden was forced to turn back, and he arrived back at the Peel River post less than a week after his departure.<sup>30</sup>

This second failure in two years did nothing to improve Bell's pessimistic opinion of extending the trade to the Colville River. He recorded in the Peel River Post journal that

The unexpected failure of this second attempt in discovering a practicable overland track by which we might be able to transport goods for carrying on the trade beyond the western Mountains, has blighted my fond hopes.<sup>31</sup>

As with Bell's own expedition a year earlier, Purden was frustrated by the desertion of his Indian guide.

The Eastern Loucheux, or Kutchin, Indians were in a very advantageous position. They enjoyed a profitable middleman role with the Western Kutchin and Han Indians across the Richardson Mountains, and some Eskimo hunting bands to the north. The Kutchin's commercial sense was as highly developed as the Hudson's Bay Company's. These Indians, though thankful that the white men had established the Peel River post in their territory, were not anxious to see the Company expand its operations to any of the Eastern Kutchin's rivals. Through intimidation

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<sup>30</sup>H.B.C.A., Peel River Post Journal, 1843, B. 157/a/3 fos. 7-7d.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

and often open hostilities, the Kutchin kept the Eskimo from trading at the Peel River post.<sup>32</sup> It is no wonder then that the Hudson's Bay Company had difficulty finding Eastern Kutchin willing to guide them west. Both Bell and Purden had a Rat Indian (the Crow River Kutchin) serve as a guide and it is significant that they both served the explorers well, until they reached Rat Indian territory. But the Indians did not want the white men to expand their trade past their own territory, so they deserted.

Another tactic adopted by the Mackenzie District Indians to slow the Hudson's Bay Company's western expansion was to attribute warlike designs to their neighbors. Robert Campbell was a victim of this in 1843 when the Northern Tutchone convinced his voyageurs that it would have been certain death to advance past the forks of the Lewes and Pelly rivers. The Peel River Kutchin were also fond of this and often warned the fur traders of impending Eskimo attacks or near ambushes.<sup>33</sup> This was particularly devious as it left the impression that the Eskimos were the ones who opposed free trade rather than the Kutchin. Sir George Simpson, had he not been the victim of their deception, would have appreciated the Kutchin's acumen.

#### The Exploration of the Keele River

By the summer of 1843, the Hudson's Bay Company had probed the flanks of the Mackenzie Mountains. To the southwest Robert Campbell had

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<sup>32</sup>Richard Slobodin, "Eastern Kutchin Warfare," Anthropologica 2, 1 (1960):90-92.

<sup>33</sup>H.B.C.A., Murdock McPherson--Sir George Simpson, November 18, 1845, D. 5/15 fos. 464d.

circumvented the mountains and had reached one of the sources of the Yukon River, the upper Pelly River. But Campbell's progress was slow due to his tenuous supply line up the deadly Liard River. To the northwest John Bell had blazed a trail through the Richardson Mountains, a branch of the Mackenzie Mountains, and managed to reach the Porcupine River, a major tributary of the Yukon River. But again, the route that Bell had discovered was a long and difficult one. The Hudson's Bay Company was closing in on the Yukon River (though it thought only in terms of the Colville), yet it had not yet found a satisfactory road by which it could exploit that river's fur trade. In order to discover such a route, John Lee Lewes launched a third exploratory survey in the Mackenzie District.

Whereas Campbell and Bell were at the extremes of the Mackenzie Mountains, Lewes proposed to send a third party into the very heart of the range. The man selected for the task was Adam McBeath, a native of Rupert's Land who joined the Company's service in 1829.<sup>34</sup> McBeath was promoted to Post Master in 1836 and was assigned first to Fort Simpson and later to Fort Norman.<sup>35</sup> It was from the latter establishment that McBeath embarked upon his exploratory survey. His purpose was to ascend the Keele River (then known as the Gravel River) to a

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<sup>34</sup>John Rae, John Rae's Correspondence with the Hudson's Bay Company on Arctic Expedition, 1844-1855, ed. E. E. Rich (London: Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1953), p. 130.

<sup>35</sup>E. H. Oliver, ed., The Canadian North-West: Its Early Development and Legislative Records, Vol. II, The Minutes of Northern Department Council (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1915), p. 727.

large lake the Indians reported at the river's source.<sup>36</sup> It was hoped that the Keele River would provide better access to the headwaters of the Colville than Bell and Campbell had found.

McBeath left Fort Norman on the third of July. In his North canoe were four Indians serving as guides and hunters, and an engage named La Rocque from the fort. They took their course up the Mackenzie River to the mouth of the Keele, which they reached late the first day. Like most rivers falling from the mountains the Keele is swift and shallow. McBeath, however, was hindered not only by the fast current but by strong headwinds blowing in from the west. He therefore kept his canoe in the smaller channels, protected from the wind, but confounded by snags of driftwood which blocked his path, forcing the Indians to march ahead with axes and make the way clear for the canoe. To make matters worse the river was rising and its strength kept increasing. After three days of slow progress McBeath called a halt to allow the Keele to drop in volume and his hunters to increase the supply of provisions.<sup>37</sup>

After two days of waiting, however, the Keele's current did not abate. McBeath therefore elected to abandon his canoe and proceed on foot. He was now at the base of the Mackenzie Mountains, which were only vaguely visible when he had entered the Keele. His journey, which had not been easy, now became positively brutal. Tormented by mosquitos

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<sup>36</sup>H.B.C.A., Adam McBeath--John Lee Lewes, August 1, 1843, B. 200/b/18 fos. 1.

<sup>37</sup>H.B.C.A., Journal of an attempt to ascend the Gravel River by A. M. McBeath, 1843, B. 200/b/18 fos. 32.

and flies they scrambled up, then down, steep mountain ridges. While crossing "one of the Deep chasms of the Mountains one of the indians got his arm much injured by a fall, myself and others got severe bruises."<sup>38</sup> This accident convinced McBeath that it was "too difficult to climb Mountains with any weight being carried," so the explorers erected a cache to store their unnecessary equipment.<sup>39</sup>

Proceeding with the lighter loads the Indians led McBeath up the deep valley of the Keele River. The wild, rugged scenery about them was foreboding to the success of the expedition, yet McBeath was still struck by its beauty. On the twelfth of June he wrote:

I have something strange to record it appears the same everywhere we are now deep in the mountain & can see little but sky above us, to look so it might appear terrific yet it is a picturesque sight & worth the beholders eyes.<sup>40</sup>

The next day they left the Keele River and proceeded up a small tributary that the Indians called the "Deer River." Because the Keele took "a windy direction at this place," better progress was made marching along the "Deer River." McBeath followed the "Deer River" until about ten o'clock at night when the explorers again began to ascend the mountains to rejoin the Keele River. The late subarctic sunset overtook them "on the summit of the highest mountain" without anything to pass the night but the hard stone, **neither** wood nor moss to cook our supper with." The explorers had the choice of dining on the raw flesh of

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<sup>38</sup>H.B.C.A., Gravel River Journal, 1843, B. 200/b/18 fos. 32d.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>H.B.C.A., Gravel River Journal, 1843, B. 200/b/18 fos. 33.

goat's meat or huddling in the rocks hungry.<sup>41</sup>

Continuing the march the next morning, the Indian hunters spotted a herd of close to thirty mountain goats. The explorers gave chase, but were unsuccessful in procuring any for their larder. They descended to the Keele River for part of the day, finding it still flowing swiftly through banks about one hundred and fifty yards wide. The fifteenth of June found them again in the high country, and they camped that evening on the edge of the timberline, amid snow-covered mountains.<sup>42</sup>

That, however, was as far as McBeath was able to proceed. The morning of the sixteenth he awoke to find "to my great chagrin and disappointment that two of my Indians had deserted during the night." The loss was especially important because "those were the very two I solely depended upon as one was Guide & the other my principal Hunter." The Indians were tired of "the laborious duty of climbing the mountains."<sup>43</sup> It must have seemed quite pointless to them to keep plodding along through such difficult terrain. Indeed, in this they were correct, for it was painfully clear that the Keele River area was not going to yield a trade route west. Unfortunately, the desertion left McBeath without a guide and short of provisions in rugged mapless country. With a touch of understatement, McBeath described his plight as "a situation very difficult for me to extract myself."<sup>44</sup>

The following morning "with a sorrowful heart," McBeath, La Rocque, and his remaining two Indians began the march home. Unsure of their position, they decided to strike straight across the mountains. If worse came to worse they could head east until they hit the Mackenzie

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.



River. However, during the day they encountered a river which McBeath thought might lead them to the Keele River. The remainder of the day they followed that river and at nightfall encamped along its bank, "still ignorant of where we were."<sup>45</sup>

The river turned out to be the "Deer River" and they had no trouble following it to the Keele. Their departed guide had led them on a more difficult route during their outward march. By accident, and a fortunate one at that, McBeath had found an easier line of march. It would never be of fur trade importance but it had saved his party's lives. When they reached the Keele, they were out of food, and McBeath was forced to stop and try to catch fish. After a supper of trout and a night's rest, McBeath was ready to continue the march back to the Mackenzie. His two remaining Indians, however, had other ideas; they were through with walking and wanted to build pine bark canoes and float down the Keele. McBeath, who for a fur trader seems to have been surprisingly inept at handling Indians, disregarded their suggestion and continued the march with only La Rocque following. Two days of hard travel, through a swamp of knee deep muck and thick forests, brought McBeath and La Rocque to the place where they had cached the canoe. The site was hard to recognize because a forest fire had swept through the area, burning to within a few yards of the overturned canoe, which suffered only minor damage.<sup>46</sup>

The next morning the two Indians drifted down the Keele, and

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<sup>45</sup>H.B.C.A., Gravel River Journal, 1843, B. 200/b/18 fos. 34.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

presented the white man with some reindeer steaks for breakfast. They had been bothered by none of the swamps and thickets which had harassed McBeath, and arrived quite fresh. Together they returned to Fort Norman. The trip took a mere six hours, while on their outward journey six days had been required to cover the same distance.<sup>47</sup>

Adam McBeath gave a discouraging report to Chief Factor Lewes. The country through which he had traveled supported only a small fur bearing population.<sup>48</sup> The Keele River was too shallow and swift to be of practical use in penetrating the interior, and the Mackenzie Mountains were too formidable to be breached by a frontal assault. If the Honorable Company was going to reach the Yukon River it would have to be via the routes blazed by John Bell and Robert Campbell.

Sir George Simpson was even more disappointed with the results of McBeath's exploration than was Chief Factor Lewes. Sir George saw it as not only a failure, but as a waste of resources and he dashed off a note of disapproval to the district commander.

You seem to be carrying your Explorations farther than I contemplated or you were authorized to do so, in forwarding Mr. A. McBeath up the Gravel /Keele/ River. Two surveying parties, say those of MRS. Bell and Campbell I consider to be quite sufficient at one time.<sup>49</sup>

Governor Simpson was back to his old inconsistent policy of economy and exploration; he wanted expansion, but not its risks or costs.

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>H.B.C.A. Governor Simpson--John Lee Lewes, December 14, 1843, D. 4/30 fos. 23d.

difficulties at the Frances Lake Post

The winter began for Robert Campbell in much the same way as the summer had ended, with the inmates of the Frances Lake post short of food. The provisions situation was aggravated in early October when the boats from Fort Simpson finally arrived with the year's trade outfit. The boats also brought Campbell reinforcements of men, whom Campbell was forced to send back for want of means to feed them. Remaining at Frances Lake, however, was William Lucas Hardisty, a clerk who was to be Campbell's new assistant. Hardisty was the metis son of Chief Trader Richard Hardisty. He was an intelligent and inquisitive young man, who would later make important contributions to the early natural history of the Mackenzie Valley, in addition to writing an important piece of pioneer ethnology: "The Loucheux Indians," which appeared in the Smithsonian Institute's Annual Report of 1866.<sup>50</sup> Simpson trusted Campbell with Hardisty's education as a fur trader. The first lesson was austerity.

As the ice closed over Frances Lake the amounts of fish caught in the gill nets again fell off. To counteract this Campbell dispatched his fishermen to several of the small lakes in the vicinity of the post. Unfortunately, the results were "indifferent" at best.<sup>51</sup> Campbell's food gathering was further hampered by a new entry on his list of

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<sup>50</sup>William Lucas Hardisty, "The Loucheux Indians," Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institution for 1866 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), pp. 311-320.

<sup>51</sup>Robert Campbell, Two Journals of Robert Campbell (Chief Factor Hudson's Bay Company, 1808-1853, Autobiographical Journal 1808 to 1851, Later Journal, 1850 to Feb. 1853, edited by John W. Todd (Seattle: Shore Books, 1958), p. 73.

problems, feuding among the Indians. Shortly after his return from the forks of the Lewes and Pelly rivers, a Tutchone woman, who had recently come with her three sons to the Frances Lake region, was slain. Campbell swore to have the murderer, if he caught him, "hung to a tree." Then in October he received the report that several of the Indians who traded at his post and provided him with provisions and furs had also been killed.<sup>52</sup>

Campbell was originally inclined to blame these deaths on traditional blood feuds. But a few weeks later he received a report that

. . . our old enemies the Nahannies in concert with the Tribe or tribes south of the Pelly river towards the Lake of the head of the Lewes River are trying to cut off ourselves and establishments and dependent upon us, in the early part of this winter.<sup>53</sup>

As soon as his trading partners heard this, Campbell could not "get an Indian to remain. . . ."54

The Hudson's Bay Company post at Frances Lake, which Campbell and Simpson had assumed was established in virgin fur territory, was actually located on the fringe of another rival commercial network. The Tlingit Indians on the Pacific coast, particularly the Chilkat tribe of the Lynn Canal region, had, since the late eighteenth century, been in contact with the white maritime traders. The Chilkat traded furs with first the "Boston men," as the American traders were called, and later with the Russian merchants; after the Contract of 1839, they dealt with Hudson's Bay Company ships. The trade goods thus acquired were

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>H.B.C.A., Robert Campbell--Sir George Simpson, October 23, 1843, D. 5/9 fos. 13.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

then loaded into leather bundles of one hundred or more pounds. Each spring the Chilkat traders, with numerous slave auxiliaries, would then pack these bundles through Chilkat Pass and over the Coastal Mountains. In the cordillera region the Chilkat would trade their goods with the Tagish, the Inland Tlingit, and the Southern Tutchone. On more far-ranging ventures the Chilkat would even float down the Lewes River to the Pelly, where they would trade with the Northern Tutchone, whom Campbell had opened up contact with in the summer of 1843. The Chilkats were not alone in conducting far-ranging trading expeditions. The Tagish, the Inland Tlingit, and the Southern Tutchone, after dealing with the Chilkats, themselves entered into a lucrative barter with the Indians of the Pelly River.<sup>55</sup>

The structure of the native trade system in the southern Yukon was the same as that of the Stikine River area, which Campbell had encountered in 1838. The coastal Tlingit lorded over the interior tribes, but those Indians closest to them, in the case of the southern Yukon, the Tagish, in the Stikine region, the Tahltan, although forced to endure the insults of the Tlingit, were in enough of an advantageous position to exploit the tribes further inland. In 1838-39 Robert Campbell's presence at Dease Lake had disrupted the Tahltan's, or as he called them, "Nahannies," trade. The result was the harassments that eventually drove him from the area. In 1843 his establishment at Frances Lake was in a similar position. The Indians he described as "our old enemies the Nahannies" were probably the Tagish, whose middlemen

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<sup>55</sup>Catharine McClellan, My Old People Say: An Ethnographic Survey of Southern Yukon Territory (Ottawa: National Museum of Canada, 1975), pp. 501-509.

trade he had broken. The fighting that the Indians who traded at Frances Lake had been engaged in was probably not as much a matter of blood feud as it was of commercial realignment.

Campbell's position was less precarious at Frances Lake than it had been at the Dease Lake, because the region seems to have been a sort of no-man's-land. It was an unclaimed border land between the Kaska of the Liard River, the Northern Tutchone of the Pelly River, and the Tagish and Tlingit to the south. During the course of the winter Campbell came to realize at least the existence of an aboriginal trade system. In May of 1844 he wrote Governor Simpson, telling him that the majority of the furs he collected at Frances Lake would otherwise make their way to the Pacific and be bought by the Company at a higher cost.<sup>56</sup> But what Campbell did not realize, and what he would not realize until 1852, was the strength of the aboriginal trade network.

After the new year, and as the threat of "Nahanny" attack subsided, native visits to Frances Lake began to increase. Campbell recorded meeting "strange Indians many of whom had never seen a white man before." At the same time the fur trade improved, so did his food situation. Caribou began to frequent the area, and the post hunters were able to bring in large quantities of fresh meat.<sup>57</sup> In March, the snow on Frances Lake began to melt, while from under the as yet thick ice came the loud deep clap, like rolling thunder, of the shifting ice

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<sup>56</sup>H.B.C.A. Robert Campbell--Sir George Simpson, May 16, 1844, D. 5/11 fos. 226.

<sup>57</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, p. 73.

sheet.<sup>58</sup> Then, just before the last of the snow had melted, dispatches from Fort Simpson arrived. Campbell was ordered to bring his post's fur returns down to the depot and take command of Fort Simpson for the summer.

Campbell's trip down the Liard to Fort Simpson was a miserable journey. Upon arriving at Fort Halkett he found that Alexander Christie, the clerk commanding the post, had been forced to eat the pemmican that had been reserved for the voyageurs from Frances Lake. The same circumstances occurred at Fort Liard. Campbell and his men were therefore forced to provide for themselves as they made their way downriver, and they had an unwelcome opportunity to practice the all too familiar exercise of fasting.<sup>59</sup>

When Campbell arrived at Fort Simpson he was warmly greeted by Chief Factor Lewes. Lewes was preparing to leave the Mackenzie District. The fifty-three year old fur trader had not been fond of his posting in the austere Mackenzie District, but he had planned to stay on long enough to see the Company's expansion toward the Colville River completed. However, in November of 1843 Lewes suffered a near fatal accident. In a moment of carelessness his shotgun accidentally discharged, blowing off Lewes's right hand and a considerable portion of his forearm. Lewes could hardly have been further from surgical care than at Fort Simpson, and a man of less hardy a constitution would have died. Fortunately for Lewes, a young clerk, August Peers, was able to

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<sup>58</sup>Anton Money, This Was the North (New York: Crown Publishers, 1975), p. 140.

<sup>59</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, p. 73.

dress the bleeding stump. He meticulously tied up every artery and vein exposed, and then washed the wound thoroughly. Although for many weeks Lewes was a gaunt, weakened figure of his old self, he gradually recovered his strength. Only the cold bothered his crippled arm, which he remedied by designing a thick fur sleeve. At the same time Lewes, who had suffered severely in the past from neuralgia (painful nerve spasms), shook off that condition completely.<sup>60</sup>

Also at Fort Simpson that spring was Captain John Henry Lefroy of the British Army. Lefroy had been sent to Rupert's Land with the backing of the Royal Society to take magnetic readings in northern British America. He left Toronto in April of 1843 and after touring much of the Company's territory reached Fort Simpson in March of 1844. Lefroy was an affable man who got along very well with the little society of Fort Simpson. Robert Campbell, when he arrived that spring, in particular enjoyed Lefroy's company. Ever eager to improve himself, Campbell had Lefroy give him a crash course in astronomy, and its practical uses.<sup>61</sup> Lefroy also expressed an interest in Campbell's explorations in the direction of the Pelly River, which he feared would lead to conflict with the Russians. Campbell's acquaintanceship with Lefroy was short-lived because the latter gentleman remained only a few months in the Mackenzie District, but he and Campbell corresponded frequently over the years, forming a friendship from which, Campbell wrote, "I derived

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<sup>60</sup>John Henry Lefroy, In Search of the Magnetic North: A Soldier-Surveyor's Letters from the North-West, 1843-1844, edited by George F. G. Stanley (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1955), p. 98.

<sup>61</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, p. 73.



much pleasure and benefit."<sup>62</sup>

Also at Fort Simpson that spring was Chief Trader John McLean. The forty-five year old trader had joined the Hudson's Bay Company in 1821 and had seen service in New Caledonia and in Ungava (northern Quebec). In the latter district he had distinguished himself by his steady management of the Company's posts and by two arduous journeys across the Labrador peninsula. During the last of these journeys he discovered the Great Falls of Labrador on the Churchill River.<sup>63</sup> From Governor Simpson's correspondence both McLean and Lewes were led to believe that when Lewes left the district that summer, that McLean was to assume control of its affairs. Campbell was sorry to see Lewes depart. The Chief Factor had done much to encourage Campbell's explorations and had improved the flow of trade goods into the Mackenzie Valley. However, he was pleased with the apparent selection of McLean to succeed to the charge of Fort Simpson. He felt that McLean "was a very active enterprising officer."<sup>64</sup> McLean was also an explorer himself and was familiar with the problems of opening up a new area to commerce. There was another trait which Campbell shared with McLean, "Wherever we were stationed near water, we invariably took our morning dip outside until the ice got too thick to break a hole through."<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>George Simpson, "George Simpson's Character Book, 1832," Hudson's Bay Miscellany, ed. Glyndwr Williams (London: The Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1975), p. 223.

<sup>64</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, p. 74.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

Campbell remained at Fort Simpson for the rest of the summer, supervising operations there while McLean went to Portage La Loche to receive the district's supplies. Upon his return Campbell made his way up the Liard to Frances Lake. Instead of voyageurs, the majority of Campbell's boatmen were Indians whom the Company had hired at lower wages than white men and could dismiss after the completion of the voyage. This was an unsatisfactory arrangement as the Indians had neither the experience or discipline of the voyageurs. In ones and twos they deserted as the difficulties of the Liard River mounted. Finally, at Devil's Portage, the remaining Indians deserted in mass. Campbell and the few remaining men, with great effort, and some help from the engages of Fort Halkett, managed to cross the portage. He was not, however, able to proceed with his entire outfit to Frances Lake. John McLean had fortunately given Campbell permission to deposit half of his supplies at Fort Halkett if circumstances required. So Campbell took advantage of this and proceeded to Frances Lake with a reduced outfit.<sup>66</sup>

Campbell's difficulties with the Indian boatmen was not an isolated incident in the summer of 1844. The grim famines which had plagued the Mackenzie Valley in the early 1840s had taken close to three hundred Indian lives, out of a population which probably did not exceed four thousand people.<sup>67</sup> Many Indians blamed the traders for the fearful sweep that death had made through their ranks. At Fort Good

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<sup>66</sup>H.B.C.A., Robert Campbell--Sir George Simpson, October 31, 1844, D. 5/12 fos. 428.

<sup>67</sup>Lefroy, In Search of the Magnetic North, p. 154.

Hope one group of Indians planned to act upon their grievances. Nine hunters, with their bodies blackened, and armed with both dagger and gun, burst into the post's trading room. George F. Deschambeault, the clerk commanding the post, offered the men the usual piece of tobacco, given as a pre-trade gratuity. The Indians refused and accused the Hudson's Bay Company of being responsible for all the Indians who had died in the past few years. At the end of the harangue the leader of the Indians urged his followers to revenge themselves on the whites, and at the same time, began a personal attack on Deschambeault. The clerk, however, was up to the situation:

M. Deschambeault, dicto citius, instantly sprung upon him, and twisting his arm into his long hair laid him at his feet; and pointing his dagger at his throat, dared him to utter another word. So sudden and unexpected was this intrepid act, that the rest of the party looked on in silent astonishment, without power to assist their fallen chief, or revenge his disgrace.<sup>68</sup>

Deschambeault's quick action probably saved the post from plunder if not destruction. At Fort Liard the Indians took a less violent and more effective form of action, by not supplying the traders with food or furs.

John McLean, however, was not free to act upon these matters. In August he had received a letter from Sir George Simpson which stated that "another gentleman was appointed to the charge of McKenzie's River District."<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, Simpson chided McLean for thinking that he

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<sup>68</sup>John McLean, Notes of a Twenty-five Years' Service in the Hudson's Bay Territories, ed. Wallace W. Stewart (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1932), p. 344.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., p. 332.

would be given control of the valuable charge. This touched the high strung McLean's quick, and he dashed off an emotional letter to the Governor in which he listed his meritorious past services to the Company. McLean also told the Governor that John Lee Lewes and other officers who had read the district correspondence book all interpreted Simpson's letters as giving charge of the Mackenzie District to him. The result of this dispute was that Murdock McPherson was brought back to Fort Simpson to assume command of the district, while McLean was given charge of a trading post on Great Slave Lake. A year later McLean quit the Company's service and in retirement wrote a detailed narrative of his life in Rupert's Land, Notes of a Twenty-five Years' Service in the Hudson's Bay Territory. The book is one of the best eyewitness accounts of life in the Company, marred only by McLean's bitterness over his dispute with Governor Simpson.

John McLean was not the only one upset by the return of Murdock McPherson. For Robert Campbell it was an unexpected reversal. He blamed McPherson for his winter of harassment and starvation at Dease Lake. Had McPherson been more generous in supporting Campbell, three of the latter's men may have not died of famine in 1839. Further, McPherson was not a believer in the exploration westward. During his sojourn in Canada, McPherson had written to a friend:

I was happy to learn that Peel's River is likely to realize expectations; others thought only of the magnificent Colville River which is to make all our fortunes. Under the able and judicious management of my friend Bell I knew there would be 'no mistake' about Peel River.<sup>70</sup>

McPherson thought only of the account books in front of him. His

<sup>70</sup>Glazebrook, ed., The Hargrave Correspondence, p. 375.

concern was not future profits but of the expenses of the present, and exploration was one of the larger of those expenses. Campbell knew McPherson's tendencies and wrote that his reappointment "tended to the disadvantage of the District & the discomfort of the junior officers."<sup>71</sup>

What Campbell did not know was that it was McPherson's tight-fisted tendencies that endeared him to Sir George Simpson. The Governor had wanted Chief Factor Lewes, an active enterprising man, to expand the Mackenzie District toward the Colville River. This Lewes was beginning to do prior to his accident, going so far as to launch three exploratory probes at the same time. However, at the same time Lewes demanded, and received from the depot at York Factory, across the board increases in trade goods to support his operations, new and old. This of course meant an increase in cost, an insult to everything that Governor Simpson held dear. The Mackenzie District was exporting on an average, £12,000 to £15,000 of furs annually.<sup>72</sup> Since the maintenance costs of the district were no more than ten to twenty percent of that figure, it would seem that a slight increase in overhead would be easily allowed by the profits accrued. Unfortunately, Governor Simpson was forced to view the Mackenzie fur trade from the perspective of not just the district but of all of Rupert's Land. The Company needed large profits from the Mackenzie District to support other areas where the fur trade operated at a loss due to competition or exhaustion of fur bearing animals. Thus Simpson was very much alarmed when under Lewes,

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<sup>71</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, p. 76.

<sup>72</sup>McLean, Notes on a Twenty-five Years' Service in the Hudson's Bay Territories, p. 346.

the amounts of trade goods sent into the Mackenzie Valley increased to nearly the size of the Columbia District requisition.<sup>73</sup> The Governor felt that some "curtailments" were in order and that Murdock McPherson, who in the past had kept the district under-supplied if anything, was the man to do the pruning.

#### John Bell on the Yukon River

While Governor Simpson was making his personnel changes, John Bell, at the Peel River post, the northern-most establishment in North America, continued to grapple with the problem of the Colville River. In December of 1844 he wrote to his old friend Murdock McPherson that it was his intention "to make another excursion across the mountains, early [this] ensuing June, with the view of reaching, if possible, the large river supposed to be the Colville."<sup>74</sup> As Governor Simpson was still as interested in exploration as he was in economy, Murdock McPherson gave his approval of John Bell's plan.

Bell left the Peel River post on the twenty-seventh of May, 1844. With him were two engages and two Indians, serving as guide and interpreter. So slim were the means McPherson afforded Bell, that when two of his men at the post had taken ill in April, Bell was nearly forced to postpone the proposed journey.<sup>75</sup> The line of march followed was the same he had taken in 1842. There would be no attempt to find

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<sup>73</sup>Ibid., p. 308.

<sup>74</sup>H.B.C.A., John Bell--Murdock McPherson, December 31, 1844, B. 200/b/15 fos. 25.

<sup>75</sup>H.B.C.A., John Bell--Murdock McPherson, April 9, 1845, B. 200/b/15 fos. 27.

a water route across the mountains; the experience of the intervening three years had taught him that no such route existed. He resigned himself to the "harassing walk of five days" that was required to cross the mountains. By the first of June, the Hudson's Bay men reached the western flowing waters of the Little Bell River.<sup>76</sup>

For the next week Bell and his party camped along that mountain stream. The Indians hunted in the brush of the surrounding country, trying to build up a stock of provisions. The two engages worked under John Bell's supervision on a canoe, constructed out of birch bark carried over the barren mountains. Upon completing the canoe the explorers set off down the Little Bell River. The stream was swift with the run-off of melting snow from the Richardson Mountains, and the canoe made fast progress, in spite of the many twists and turns in the river's course. In only a few days' time they reached the Porcupine River and continued westward upon its current. Passing the spot where he had turned back in 1842, Bell noticed the banks of the Porcupine River gradually rise up, and form rocky defiles and ramparts of weathered rock on both sides of the river. In this section the Porcupine itself contracts to a mere seventy-five yards wide, and the constrained water increases its flow, occasionally breaking into small riffles. However, no significant obstacle to navigation was encountered by the explorers.<sup>77</sup>

On the sixteenth of June, Bell reached the mouth of the Porcupine River. Before him was another large river nearly two miles broad

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<sup>76</sup>H.B.C.A., Murdock McPherson--Sir George Simpson, November 18, 1845, D. 5/15 fos. 464.

<sup>77</sup>McConnell, "Report on the Exploration of the Yukon," The Geological Survey of Canada, p. 129.

and filled with small wooded islands. The brown waters of the Porcupine River spilled into the pale gray flow of the larger stream. Were it not for the river's strong, swift current, the grand waterway might easily have been mistaken for a large lake. Pleased with their success, the explorers eased their canoe into the midst of the river. The country about the river was "flat but extremely dry, and free from swamps"; it formed no restricting valley, but lay prostrate before the river. On the bank of this river Bell noticed two Indians, an old woman and a boy. From them he learned the name for the great river, "the Youcon," meaning white water, or swift flowing river.<sup>78</sup>

Bell remained a week on the Yukon River, exploring the area of its junction with the Porcupine River and trying to make contact with the natives of the river. Save for the old Indian woman and the young boy, from whom he was able to glean little information, Bell was unsuccessful in opening up contact with the Indians. The majority of them were away from their hunting grounds, on a trading expedition down the great river.<sup>79</sup> On the twenty-second of June, Bell left the Yukon and headed back up the Porcupine River. During his return voyage Bell was fortunate enough to meet with three western Kutchin Indians, who lived on the Yukon River.

According to their accounts the country is rich in Beaver, Martens, Bears, and Moose deer, and the River abounds with Salmon, the latter part of the Summer being the season they are most plentiful, when they dry enough for winter consumption. The Salmon ascends

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<sup>78</sup>H.B.C.A., Murdock McPherson--Sir George Simpson, November 18, 1845, D. 5/15 fos. 464.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid.



the River a great distance but disappear in the fall.<sup>80</sup>

The Indians assured Bell that there was no trading in the area and the manufactured goods they had come from "White People." These traders had been

. . . seen by Natives further down the river with boats from the sea coast on trading excursions, they describe them as being very liberal with their goods. The Esquimaux from the Westward ascend the "Youcon" and carry on trade with the distant Musquash Indians who annually visit Peel's River.<sup>81</sup>

Most of the trade goods found in the various Indian encampments along the Porcupine River were of Russian manufacture.

John Bell and his party returned to the Peel River post on the ninth of June, having successfully reached the Yukon River, the fourth largest river in North America. It was the river that the Kutchin Indians, in 1789, had told Sir Alexander Mackenzie flowed from the Rocky mountains to the Pacific Ocean. The Yukon was the great western river that Sir George Simpson had hoped since 1822 would provide a new field for commercial expansion as profitable as the Mackenzie River. The Hudson's Bay Company had now breached the Yukon Valley in two places, Robert Campbell on the Pelly River, the Yukon's upper branch, and John Bell along the main river itself. Yet Governor Simpson and his explorers were further than ever from understanding the geography of the transmountain region. Their minds were still cluttered with the apocryphal concepts which twisted their interpretation of the course of the Yukon River.

The most significant factor influencing Sir George Simpson, John Bell, and Robert Campbell, was the Colville River. That river, since

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<sup>80</sup>Ibid.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid.

Peter Warren Dease and Thomas Simpson had discovered its mouth in 1837, was the basic geographic fact of the far northwest. It was the foundation upon which all subsequent information was placed, often at the expense of logic. John Bell believed that the "Youcon River" was the same as the Colville River of Dease and Simpson.<sup>82</sup> The Yukon, where Bell fell upon it, flows northwestwardly. Bell assumed that the river kept this direction until it flowed into the arctic sea. Bell had also been in communication with Robert Campbell, and the two explorers agreed that the Pelly and "Youcon Rivers" were one in the same, and that they both were the Colville.<sup>83</sup>

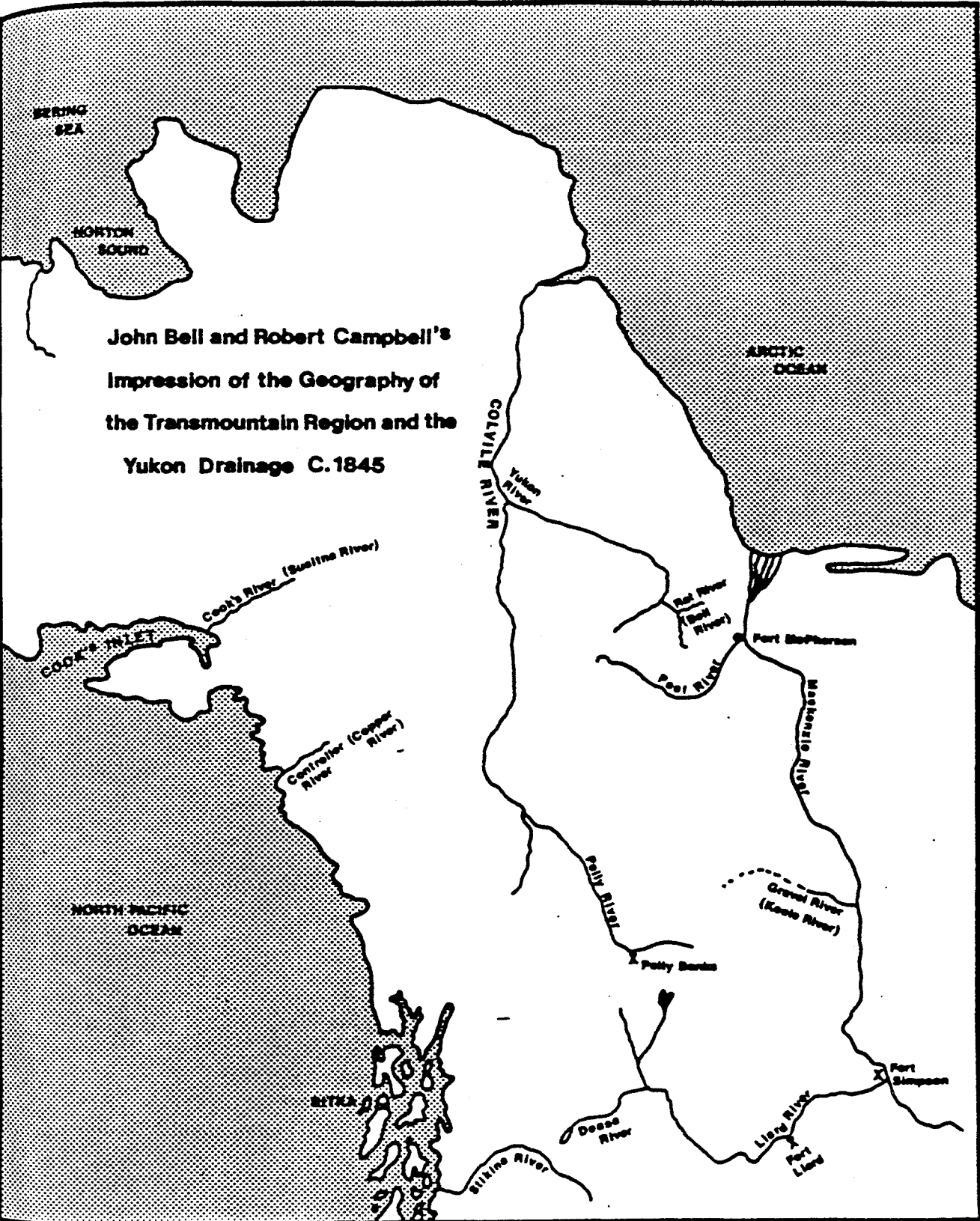
The Pelly River and the Yukon River are, of course, the same river. Although it would be some years before Bell and Campbell would be able to prove their point, they were at least moving in the right direction. Where they were mistaken was in assuming that those two rivers were identical with the Colville River. Two clues garnered during his 1845 journey should have warned Bell from making such a supposition. The Indians had told him that white men traveled up the lower reaches of the Yukon on trading excursions. The mouth of the Colville River was well east of Point Barrow, in the midst of dangerous seas even for exploring expeditions. From Thomas Simpson's own published account of the Colville River it should have been clear that no commerce was possible from that direction. Thus if the Indian report was to be relied upon, and Bell had seen supporting evidence in the form of Russian

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<sup>82</sup>Ibid.

<sup>83</sup>H.B.C.A., Murdock McPherson--Sir George Simpson, November 28, 1845, D. 5/15 fos. 466.

MAP 9. John Bell and Robert Campbell's Impression of the Geography of the Transmountain Region and the Yukon Drainage c. 1845



trade goods, Bell's "Youcon" could not have emptied into the Arctic Ocean like the Colville, but instead must have had its mouth at a more accessible location like on the Bering Sea or North Pacific. The second clue that Bell failed to reconcile was the presence of salmon on the Yukon River. Murdock McPherson realized the importance of this in a letter to Governor Simpson:

. . . whether it [the Yukon] falls into the sea east of Point Barrow or into one of the deep inlets to the west I will not say. We have not heard of Salmon on this side of Point Barrow. . . .<sup>84</sup>

In the western fur trade a river with salmon invariably meant a river flowing into the Pacific Ocean.

Bell and Campbell were at least correct on one account, the **the like** identity of the Pelly River and the Yukon River. Sir George Simpson, who was supposed to be directing their operations, was even more confused. He "scarcely" thought it possible that the Pelly River and the Yukon River were one. The mouth of the Pelly, the Governor was certain, was somewhere on the Pacific coast. He had suggested many possible locations for the Pelly's estuary, but held his fondest hopes for "Comptroller's Inlet," near the mouth of the modern Copper River.<sup>85</sup>

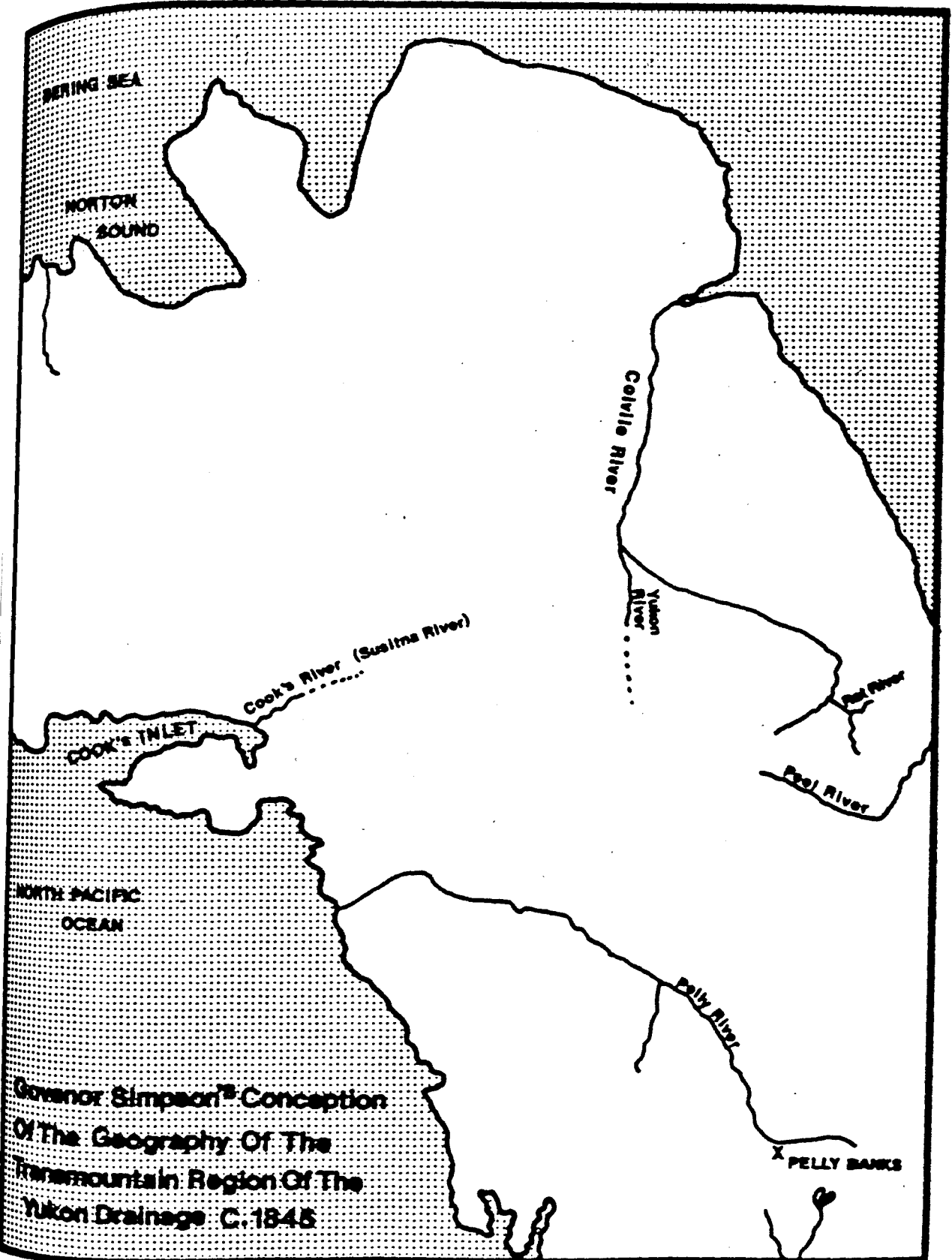
What made the Hudson's Bay Company's task of sorting out the Yukon drainage all the more difficult was the remarkable character of the waterway. The ultimate sources of the Yukon River are the innumerable streams and freshets which spill down from the Coastal Mountains. Some of these rivulets reach to within fifteen miles of the Pacific

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<sup>84</sup>Ibid.

<sup>85</sup>H.B.C.A., Governor Simpson--Robert Campbell, June 1, 1845, D. 4/32 fos. 94d.

MAP 10. Governor Simpson's Conception of the Geography of the Transmountain Region of the Yukon Drainage c. 1845



Ocean. However, due to the mountains they spill eastward toward the Yukon lakes. As the Lewes River, and later as the Yukon River proper, this water is carried northwestward, away from the Pacific Ocean. But upon passing the mouth of the Porcupine River, the very spot where John Bell reached the Yukon, the great river radically changes its direction and charges southwestward toward Norton Sound and the same Pacific Ocean which witnessed its birth.<sup>86</sup> With such an unorthodox, arching course, it is no wonder that the fur traders were confounded when they attempted to decode the Yukon's geographic realities.

#### The Russians on the Yukon River

The Hudson's Bay Company was not alone in its effort to exploit the fur trade of the Yukon River Valley. Since the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1825, the Russian-American Company had increasingly been directing its operations toward the unexplored interior of mainland Alaska. The Contract of 1839, in which Russia removed itself from active involvement in the fur trade of the northwest coast, reflected that change of emphasis. Baron von Wrangell, Governor of the Company, dispatched in 1832 Fedor Kolmakov to establish a trading post on the Kuskokwim River. The Company's interest in the Bering Sea region was also expressed by a naval expedition of A. K. Yetolin and Mikhail Tebenkov, which explored Norton Sound and verified the mouth of the Yukon River. A year later, in 1833, Tebenkov returned to the area and erected Fort St. Michael on Norton Sound.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup>Pierre Benton, The Klondike Fever: The Life and Death of the Last Great Gold Rush (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), p. 7.

<sup>87</sup>Lavrentiy Alekseyevich Zagoskin, Travels in Russian America,

The **Russians'** trade prospered at Fort St. Michael and soon began to expand into the interior. In 1835, Andrey Glazunov, a Creole native of Russian America, who had previously explored the Yukon Delta region, traveled overland from St. Michael to the Yukon River. Glazunov explored the lower river and found an excellent location for a trading post at the present site of the village of Russian Mission. A year later, in 1836, Glazunov established the Ikogmyut post, the first Russian post on the Yukon River.<sup>88</sup> Vasily Malakhov, another adventurous Creole, journeyed even further up the Yukon and his companions journeyed almost four hundred and fifty miles upriver to the Koyukak River. It was then March and the snow and ice grew soft, making travel dangerous and laborious. Malakhov halted to await the spring break-up. When the Yukon was clear of ice, Malakhov purchased umiak, native skin boats, for his party, and drifted back down the river to Norton Sound. In his report to his superiors Malakhov noted a good location for a trading post at Nulato, a short distance from his farthest progress.<sup>89</sup>

The most important Russian explorer on the Yukon River was Lavrentiy Alekseyevich Zagoskin, a Lieutenant in the Imperial Russian Navy. In December of 1838 Zagoskin, looking for more active service than he found in the Baltic Fleet, transferred to the Russian-American Company.

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1842-1844, ed. Henry N. Michael (Toronto: Arctic Institute of North America, 1957), p. 10.

<sup>88</sup>James Vanstone, ed., "Russian Exploration in Interior Alaska, An Extract From the Journal of Andrei Glazunov," Pacific Northwest Quarterly, (April 1959), p. 37.

<sup>89</sup>Zagoskin, Travels in Russian America, p. 10.

For two years he captained Company supply ships. But in 1840 he sent a proposal to Baron von Wrangell for the exploration of the Alaskan interior. In 1842 the Company finally moved on the suggestion and Zagoskin's exploration was approved. It is interesting to note that the Company specifically requested that Zagoskin investigate the trade routes by which furs made their way west, from the interior of Alaska to the coast, and via aboriginal traders, to Siberia. They were interested in Indian trade rivals, and gave no thought to the possible activities of the British traders to the east.<sup>90</sup>

After four months of preparation Zagoskin and four companions left Fort St. Michael on the fourth of December. With five sleds of supplies and twenty-seven dogs, they made their way up the Yukon River to Nulato. Here they found an officer of the Russian-American Company named Deryabin with five men constructing a trading post. Zagoskin and his men lent a hand to the work and the fort, or redoubt, as the Russians referred to their post, was completed before spring. The winter was hard at Nulato and the fish traps set under the ice yielded an insufficient amount of food for all the men at the post. It was not until mid-April, when the geese began to make their way north, that the Russians were again able to enjoy three meals a day.<sup>91</sup>

On the fourth of June, Zagoskin noted in his journal that "we prayed to God and took leave of our Nulato comrades."<sup>92</sup> With a large skin boat and six companions the young naval lieutenant proposed to explore the Yukon River to its source. Zagoskin had read Sir Alexander

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<sup>90</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., p. 162.



Mackenzie's Voyages From Montreal . . . to the Frozen and Pacific Ocean, and the Scotsman's narrative had greatly influenced his exploration plans.

We ourselves did not know where we were going, but we entertained hopes of reaching the ridge that divides the British possessions from ours. I proposed that we undertake to prove Mackenzie's supposition about the true direction of the "Great River" that flows westward from the Rocky Chain. I have no doubt that what he was told concerned the Yukon. . . .<sup>93</sup>

Taking advantage of the midnight sun, the Russians pushed off at ten in the evening.

The Yukon River, where Zagoskin began his journey, was almost a mile and a half wide and frequently filled with wooded islands. The local Indians called the river the "Yuk-khan," meaning "Big River."<sup>94</sup> But the explorers, as they struggled upstream against the strong current, would have agreed more with the Kutchin's name of "Youcon," or "swift water" for the river. Part of their problem was the awkward skin boat that they had been forced to use. The Russians were inexperienced at handling such a craft, and with the relentless push of the river, there was little opportunity to learn. Much of their time was spent pulling the boat upstream from shore, most of the time by means of a line, sometimes by its very gunnels. Furthermore, the boat had been inadequately greased, which meant that its skin frame, after any length in the water, would begin to leak and would need to be dried in the sun. Zagoskin bitterly regretted his inability to acquire a canoe for the trip.<sup>95</sup>

Their difficulties with the boat were, of course, incidental to

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<sup>93</sup>Ibid.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid., p. 173.

the ordinary hazards of wilderness travel, obstacles to navigation, procuring food supplies, and enduring the nuisances of the trail, such as **mosquitoes**. Of the last of these, Zagoskin wrote:

To say nothing about the midges and mosquitoes would be to remain silent about the most acute suffering we had to bear on this trip, a suffering to which one becomes accustomed, as to an inevitable evil from which there is no escape.<sup>96</sup>

The expedition's progress was further slowed by the frequent necessity to stop and hunt for food. The rations of hard biscuit, which made up the bulk of their stores, did little more than take the edge off the appetites of men who battled the Yukon for fourteen hours a day. The most frustrating delays, however, were those encountered when the changing shoreline forced them to cross the river to gain an adequate tracking beach. Even with the boatmen straining at their oars, the time taken to cross the wide river invariably meant that the explorers would have been pushed downstream, losing hard won ground.<sup>97</sup>

Zagoskin proceeded about one hundred and fifty miles up the Yukon. However, on the thirtieth of June his progress came to a halt. Near the present town of Ruby, Alaska, the Yukon flows through a series of rapid, rocky, shallows. This is normally no great hazard to navigation, but frequent rain had redoubled the strength of the current, and with the inadequacies of the umiak, combined to halt the Russians. Zagoskin tried a number of tactics to overcome the riffles, but each, whether involving pole, paddle, or line, failed.<sup>98</sup>

Near his point of farthest progress Zagoskin was able to enquire among the Indians about the source of the Yukon. They told him that he

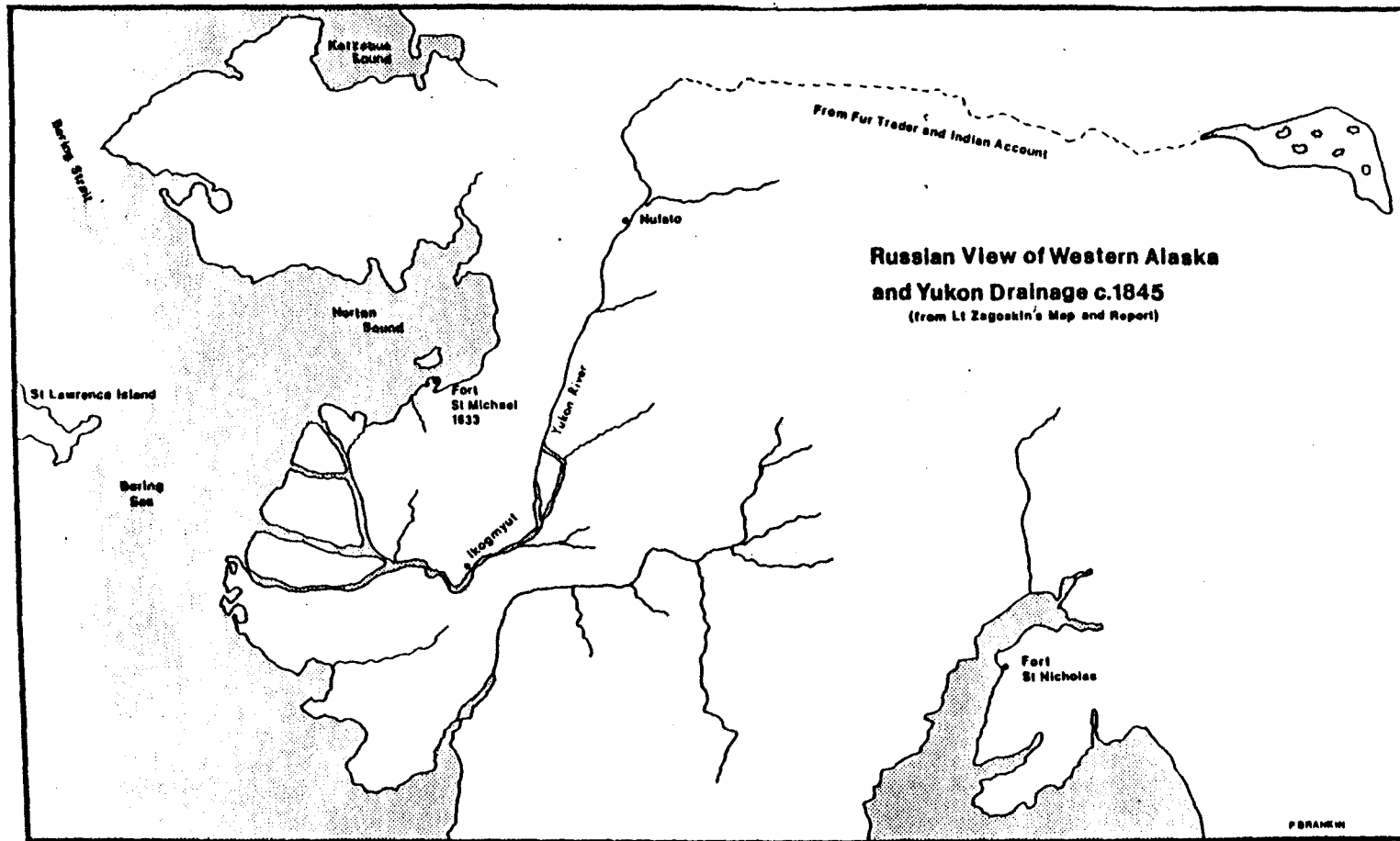
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<sup>96</sup>Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., pp. 169-171.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid., p. 174.

MAP 11. Russian View of Western Alaska and Yukon Drainage c. 1845



was about three hundred miles from the headwaters, a place where the river forms a large lake, "so broad that one bank cannot be seen from the other."<sup>99</sup> The location described by the Indians conforms to that section of the river known as the "Yukon Flats." It was also the spot that John Bell would reach two years later. The actual sources of the Yukon were more than a thousand miles further to the south.

Lieutenant Zagoskin and his party returned to Nulato on the seventh of July after a journey of more than a month. The naval officer, for the next year, continued his exploratory survey, but to the southwest, along the Kuskokwim River. He never again approached the upper Yukon. Zagoskin's expedition was the crest of the Russian-American Company's expansionist energies. Roving promyshlenniks, hunting and trading furs, made their way upriver, but for Russia the upper Yukon remained officially unexplored. In his report Zagoskin remarked: "The Yukon is our only fairly easy route to the heart of the interior. . . . Judging from the vegetation and wealth of fur-bearing animals in the part we surveyed, one can hope that further westward explorations will be rewarding."<sup>100</sup> In this Zagoskin was correct but it was the British who would undertake and benefit from those further explorations.

Zagoskin's journal reveals that the Russian-American Company had little interest in the upper Yukon River and that they did not expect the British to impinge upon their territory from that direction. The British, on the other hand, exhibited the interloper's natural wariness of being caught where they had no right to be, and were apprehensive

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<sup>99</sup>Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid., p. 183.

of Russian activities west of the Rocky Mountains. John Bell's 1845 exploratory probe to the Yukon River brought him across the 141st meridian, which according to the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1825, formed the boundary between British and Russian America. Murdock McPherson informed Governor Simpson that "The 'Youcon' where Bell saw it is unquestionably on Russian Territory." But violations of boundaries and other niceties of international law existed only when the victimized party was aware of the interloper's activities. Sir George Simpson himself expressed this view in a June, 1844 letter to Robert Campbell.

You seem to have been anxious to have proceeded down to the sea, that, however, I think at present unnecessary, & would be impolitic, as it would bring us into competition with our Russian neighbours, with whom we are desirous of maintaining a good understanding. . . .<sup>101</sup>

The Hudson's Bay Company had no qualms about exploiting Russian territory, but it did so discretely, restraining its operations, so as to keep the Russians unaware.

The Company's strategy in exploiting the upper Yukon was in many ways similar to its policy in the western United States. In the Oregon country the British shared joint occupancy with the United States. But the Hudson's Bay Company, with its depot at Fort Vancouver, dominated the region. In order to maintain this status quo, and insulate the Company's Columbia District, Governor Simpson dispatched bands of roving trappers to the regions south and east of the Columbia District to wipe the country clear of fur bearing animals. This served two

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<sup>101</sup>H.B.C.A., Governor Simpson--Robert Campbell, June 3, 1844, D. 4/31 fos. 49.

valuable functions. It created a barren no-man's-land which discouraged American Mountain Men from working their way into the district, while at the same time it allowed the Company to quickly withdraw a large amount of furs from a territory over which it had no superior rights and had no guarantee of maintaining within its grasp.<sup>102</sup> In the Yukon the Hudson's Bay Company had no legal rights whatsoever, only the Contract of 1839, which indicated the Russian's willingness to compromise. John Lee Lewes reflected the English attitude toward the Yukon frontier in a 1840 letter.

Our Lease with the Russians /sic/ sevens' /sic/ Years' /sic/ more will be expired and who can tell if they will be willing again to renew it with us. We should therefore in the meantime with spirit and activity work up the Country bordering on their terretory /sic/, plenty of Beaver is in that part of the Country.<sup>103</sup>

The Company meant to exploit the Yukon River Valley, to reap what furs it could out of the area, until such time as the Russians were able, or disposed, to police their own territory.

In the decade of the 1840s, particularly during the latter years, the Mackenzie District's expansion into the Yukon became increasingly important to the Hudson's Bay Company. In spite of the success of the Company's frontier policy, American agricultural settlement of the Oregon country was eroding British control of the Columbia Valley. In 1845, the Company shifted their district headquarters from Fort Vancouver, north of the 49th parallel, to Fort Victoria on

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<sup>102</sup>Sir George Simpson, Fur Trade and Empire: Sir George Simpson's 1824 Journal, ed. Frederick Merk (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. xxvi.

<sup>103</sup>Glazebrook, ed., The Hargrave Correspondence, p. 321.

Vancouver Island. A formal treaty between the United States and Great Britain, a year later, gave to the Americans control of what had formerly been the Honorable Company's most profitable district. In other areas of Rupert's Land and Canada the fur trade was weakening, as missionaries, and in some cases even farmers, began to expand their "civilizing" operations. Old fur traders like Chief Factor Lewes could only shake their heads:

. . . to the south our trade is on the wane, retrograding before Priests and I wot not wot, bidding fair at no very distant period to a total extirpation, the North is now our only strong hold, and in it McKenzie's River, is not the place of the least importune /sic/. . . .<sup>104</sup>

The Yukon Valley was the last frontier, save for the Arctic Archipelago, left on the North American continent. At a time when the Hudson's Bay Company's strongholds were under siege, the Yukon, thought to be the Colville River, held the promise of expansion.

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<sup>104</sup>Ibid.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE HONORABLE COMPANY ON THE YUKON RIVER: THE ESTABLISHMENT OF FORTS SELKIRK AND YUKON

It was with feelings little short of disgust that Robert Campbell studied his outfit of trade goods for the winter of 1845-46. Even those articles most important in opening a new area, tobacco and gunpowder, were lacking. He had hoped for more substantial supplies, but with Murdock McPherson again at the helm of the district, he was not surprised with the meager amount he received. Frustrated and angry, Campbell dashed off a quick letter to Governor Simpson.

I cannot conceive what can be the object of extending trade to these parts, when, though we have opposition to contend with, we are without the staple articles in chief demand for trade. Than such proceedings nothing can be more absurd, and impolitic, and which can only end in involving us in trouble with these Savages.<sup>1</sup>

Campbell was prepared to use his influence with Governor Simpson to get the trade goods he needed. What effect going behind the district commander's back, as it were, would have on his relations with Murdock McPherson Campbell did not care; the battle lines between them had already been drawn.

That season the Frances Lake post enjoyed as good a trade as its supply of goods allowed. Young William Hardisty commanded the post,

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<sup>1</sup>Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Winnipeg, Canada, Robert Campbell--Sir George Simpson, September 12, 1845, D. 5/15 fos. 69d-70. Hereafter this collection will be referred to as H.B.C.A. Grammatical and spelling errors are reproduced verbatim.



while Campbell spent much of the winter at Pelly Banks. Campbell had carefully extended his operations toward the Pelly River, which he thought would best be exploited from a trading post at the junction of that river with the Lewes River. Each summer since 1844 he had sent Kitza, Lapie, and his other Indian retainers to hunt along the Pelly. "This paved the way for opening trade relations," Campbell wrote in his autobiographical journal, with the Indians of the Pelly, "who were only too glad to get serviceable articles of which they were utterly destitute."<sup>2</sup> In the summer of 1846 he sent some of his men from Frances Lake across the divide to Pelly Banks to build a permanent post there.

The Pelly Banks post was a well built fort with a stockade, store, and dwelling house. It was a difficult post to maintain. After the year's outfit was brought up by boat via the Liard and Frances Rivers to the Frances Lake post, it had to be cached until winter, when, with dog sleds, it would be hauled to Pelly Banks.<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note that it was Robert Campbell who introduced the Yukon to the use of the dog sled, which since the tales and ballads of Jack London and Robert Service, has become a symbol for the area in popular culture.

Campbell spent the winters of 1845-46 and 1846-47 at Pelly Banks. He was in poor spirits. Since 1837, for almost ten years, he had been involved in the arduous service of pioneering new country for the Company. His rewards for this service had been meager. In 1838 he had been made a clerk in the Company, and on a number of occasions

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<sup>2</sup>Robert Campbell, Two Journals of Robert Campbell (Chief Factor, Hudson's Bay Company, 1808 to 1853), Autobiographical Journal 1808-1852, Later Journal 1852-Feb. 1853, ed. J. W. Todd (Seattle: Privately printed, 1958), p. 77.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

had received Governor Simpson's personal approbation. His efforts at Dease Lake had resulted in no appreciable gain for the fur trade, while at Frances Lake what limited success he enjoyed was bought with years of hardship and hunger. Murdock McPherson's tight-fisted management he regarded as personal harassment. During the long winter's virtual solitude, it is little wonder that Campbell, assaulted by such thoughts, slipped into melancholy. In March of 1846 he wrote Sir George Simpson that he wished to

. . . have once an opportunity of exercising my address elsewhere, here everything about my name is become stale and constant difficulty have all but overcome my ardour.<sup>4</sup>

A few weeks later Campbell tendered his resignation from the Company, effective in the spring of 1847.<sup>5</sup>

Sir George Simpson, however, had no intention of letting his best frontier officer withdraw from the field. Annoyed by the bickering between Campbell and McPherson, the Governor had already moved to give Campbell the freedom of action and supplies he needed. In June of 1845 Simpson advised McPherson that

Mr. Campbell's extraordinary exertions in the cause of Discovery in that quarter are beyond all praise, and as no one can so well understand the difficulties he has to contend with, I have to beg that, all his views and wishes in reference to the mode and means necessary for carrying our intentions into effect be met, as far as the resources at your disposal may admit.<sup>6</sup>

This order, which seemed to give Campbell "Carte Blanche" at the

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<sup>4</sup>H.B.C.A., Robert Campbell--Sir George Simpson, March 29, 1846, D. 5/17 fos. 235.

<sup>5</sup>Clifford Wilson, Campbell of the Yukon (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1970), p. 86.

<sup>6</sup>H.B.C.A., Governor Simpson--Murdock McPherson, June 3, 1845, D. 4/32 fos. 114d.

district depot, had one snag in it. The final phrase said that Campbell could have all that he wanted "as far as the resources at your disposal may admit"; thus, McPherson still remained the judge of what could or could not be spared.

Nonetheless, Simpson assumed that he had solved Campbell's cause for complaint in the summer of 1845. He was therefore quite irritated when he received Campbell's 1846 letters of despair and proposed retirement.<sup>7</sup> But Campbell was not at fault; he does not seem to have received Simpson's orders. This was quite unusual. Campbell was normally kept posted on the Company's wishes by both personal letters from Governor Simpson and official dispatches from the district commander. McPherson, however, kept mum about Campbell's expanded authority, nor did the explorer receive a personal notice from the Governor. Campbell was aware that all correspondence, private and otherwise, had to be channeled through Fort Simpson. He suspected that McPherson was tampering with his mail, but was wise enough not to act upon mere suspicion.<sup>8</sup>

Instead, in the summer of 1847, Campbell made the six hundred and thirty mile journey to Fort Simpson, to personally supervise the allotting of his outfit. It was a risky trip on the ever dangerous Liard, especially for the small canoe that he and Lapie were forced to use. But Campbell had better luck with the rapids and whirlpools of the Liard than he did with Murdock McPherson. The Mackenzie District

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<sup>7</sup>H.B.C.A., Governor Simpson--Robert Campbell, June 3, 1846, D. 4/34 fos. 93d.

<sup>8</sup>H.B.C.A., Robert Campbell--Sir George Simpson, August 23, 1847, D. 5/20 fos. 134.

commander refused to honor any of Campbell's requisitions. All of the posts received small outfits of trade goods from McPherson, but Campbell thought that his was the smallest, a circumstance he found particularly unnerving because he claimed to have seen trade goods "lying idle in the Depot."<sup>9</sup>

Robert Campbell's need for a larger trade outfit was particularly pressing in the summer of 1847 because he planned to expand the Company's business to the banks of the Yukon River itself. He had obtained Sir George Simpson's permission to build a new trading post at the forks of the Lewes and Pelly Rivers, in the summer of 1848. Campbell thus needed supplies for three posts, Pelly Banks, Frances Lake, and the proposed post on the Yukon. When McPherson refused all his requests, Campbell wrote to the Governor.

I have done all, but gone upon my knees to Mr. McPherson, begging a small addition to the very small outfit he has given me. But my entreaties backed as they are by your instructions avail nothing. . . . The carte blanche you kindly granted me for carrying the Company's business through, though it procures me nothing here, would any else where be the ne plus ultra. But in plain private truth I believe, that, jealous of your kindness, and favors to me, has turned some of my best friends to be my subtle enemies--should this be the case, I regret and forgive it most sincerely.<sup>10</sup>

This, however, was a somewhat futile gesture; the Governor would not receive the letter for months. There was nothing for Campbell to do but restrain his anger, return to Pelly Banks, and make do with what he had.

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<sup>9</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, p. 78.

<sup>10</sup>H.B.C.A., Robert Campbell--Sir George Simpson, August 23, 1847, D. 5/20 fos. 133-134.

Accompanying Campbell as he journeyed up the Liard was James Green Stewart, a young clerk assigned to aid in the move to the fork of the Pelly and Lewes Rivers. Stewart's service was especially needed because William Hardisty, Campbell's assistant at Frances Lake, was ill and had to be sent back to Fort Simpson. If Hardisty recovered in time, McPherson promised to return him to Campbell in the spring. Campbell himself was in poor health. He was suffering from breathing problems and severe coughing. Far from medical attention his only recourse, short of retiring from the district, which he did contemplate, was to write to the Company's surgeon at York Factory and describe his symptoms. The surgeon informed Campbell early in 1849 that what he suffered from was probably not as serious as the latter had feared. Rather than consumption, or some other potentially fatal illness, Campbell probably suffered from a mild form of asthma.<sup>11</sup>

Physically failing and mentally worn from his dispute with McPherson and the worries attendant to preparing to expand to the Yukon, Campbell retired to his winter quarters at Pelly Banks. Winter for Campbell was usually a struggle for survival, a time of grim austerity. But this second winter Campbell spent at Pelly Banks was one of marked contrast to what he had known at Dease or Frances Lakes. Hunting was better along the Pelly River than it was at Frances Lake, as was the fishing. Campbell had discovered that Finlayson Lake was an especially good fishing ground, with large numbers of plump whitefish. Because Pelly Banks was located on the river, Campbell was able to continue his morning baths.

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<sup>11</sup>H.B.C.A., Robert Campbell--Sir George Simpson, March 28, 1848, D. 5/24 fos. 506d.

This practice I kept up until the ice got too thick. As the season advanced our cook would knock at my door to tell me the hole was made in the ice ready for me. I would then run down with a blanket round me, dip into the hole, out again, & back to the house, my hair frozen stiff before I got there. . . . After a good rub down I would dress, & no one who has not tried it can have any idea of the exhilarating glow produced on the whole system by this hydro-pathic treatment.<sup>12</sup>

It is no wonder that Campbell complained of coughing.

Campbell kept his men busy during the winter. He had brought with him in the autumn a boat builder from Fort Simpson. He was put to work with the engages on the craft that Campbell would need for the spring journey. By the beginning of May they had completed a York boat, a skiff, and some canoes.<sup>13</sup>

In March a group of reinforcements arrived with the mail packet from Fort Simpson. Among them was Pierre Chyrsologue Pamburn, Jr., the half-breed son of Chief Trader P. C. Pamburn of the Hudson's Bay Company. Pamburn was assigned by McPherson to assume command of Frances Lake and Pelly Banks. Campbell had hoped that Hardisty would have been well enough to manage those posts, but he had yet to recover from his infirmity. Campbell was critical of the selection of Pamburn; he had seen the latter's management of Fort Halkett and described him as

. . . well-known to possess neither the judgement /sic/ nor the foresight nor the energy requisite at a remote & isolated charge like that, where everything so much depended upon his own efforts.<sup>14</sup>

McPherson, on the other hand, regarded Pamburn as one of the best clerks

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<sup>12</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, pp. 79-80.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

in the district.<sup>15</sup> Campbell sought to balance Pamburn's managerial deficiencies by giving him detailed instructions on how to provision the Frances Lake and Pelly Banks posts.

As soon as the ice left the Pelly River Campbell embarked for the Lewes River. His little flotilla included James Stewart, eight engages, and a contingent of Indian hunters, including Kitza and Lapie-- all aboard a crazy collection of craft: a York boat, a skiff, canoes, and dragging in tow a raft of cut planks for erecting the new trading post. The journey was uneventful until they were within fifty miles of the forks of the Pelly. They then began to encounter large groups of Indians, gathered to greet the fur traders.<sup>16</sup>

When Campbell was near the spot where a hostile Indian party had threatened him in 1843, he noticed another band of Indians. The Hudson's Bay men stopped and began to distribute tribute tobacco among the Indians, a customary gratuity and a symbol of peace. One of the Indians stepped forward with a large bundle of furs and presented them to Campbell. The hunter explained that five years before he was among the Indians that had planned to ambush Campbell's camp. Since that time, due to the explorer's great "medicine," he had been rendered lame in one leg. Now the Indian

. . . was sorry for what he had done in ignorance of our intentions & that he wished me to restore the use of his leg. I declined to

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<sup>15</sup>John Rae, John Rae's Arctic Correspondence with Hudson's Bay Company on Arctic Exploration, 1844-1855, ed. E. E. Rich, (London: The Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1953), p. 170.

<sup>16</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, p. 80.

take the furs without payment, & postponed the "cure" for the present.<sup>17</sup>

Campbell continued his journey and without further incident reached the forks of the Pelly, the beginning of the Yukon River proper, on the first of June, 1848.

Waiting there for the traders were the Northern Tutchone, or as Campbell called them, the "Gens de bois." Work was immediately begun on the new post, which was to be named Fort Selkirk. The site selected was on a narrow tongue of land with the Pelly River on one side and the Lewes River on the other. Campbell remarked that the site reminded him of Prairie du Chien in Wisconsin. The Tutchone, who knew only skin tents and brush lean-tos, were impressed by how swiftly the Hudson's Bay men, armed with iron nails and stout mallets, erected the permanent log structures. Campbell made a further impression when the lame Pelly River Indian, this time supported by his hopeful-eyed wife, children, mother, and father, again asked to have his leg cured. Campbell, with nothing to lose but a little time, and the redoubled respect of the surrounding Indians to gain, took out his little medicine chest and attempted the cure. Whatever he did proved successful, and the Indian was returned to his former agility, while Campbell was re-knowned as a great healer.<sup>18</sup>

During the summer of 1848, as work proceeded on the fort, Campbell began to solidify his position with the Tutchone. The traders were impressed with the friendliness and strict honesty of the Indians. Bundles of trade goods and tools were left unguarded about the post,

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., pp. 81-82.



and nothing was found missing. In fact, when an article had been lost, the Tutchone would travel, often for miles, to return it. The only thing which prevented Campbell from cementing his position was the "paltry" outfit of trade goods which he had with him. He was forced to trade very tightly, taking only certain furs and then only the best quality. The customary gifts that the Company used to establish good relations also had to be curtailed.<sup>19</sup> Still, considering the means at his disposal, Campbell must have been pleased with his summer's work; Fort Selkirk had been established.

Early one August evening, when the day's work about Fort Selkirk was winding down, the fur traders heard the sound of singing and chanting drifting down from the Lewes River. The English were a bit bewildered but the Tutchone knew immediately what was afoot, and they warned Campbell that a Chilkat trading brigade was approaching the fort. They advised him to hide all the Company's tools, trade goods, and anything else that was not nailed down, because the Chilkats were notorious thieves.<sup>20</sup>

The Chilkats, members of the Tlingit tribe, were the robber barons of the aboriginal trade network. They were not at all pleased to find Campbell and his men so comfortably situated at the site of their traditional rendezvous with the Northern Tutchone and other tribes. But as Campbell noted, the Chilkat's motto was "might is right," and with the fur traders at full strength and supported by the interior tribes, the Chilkats knew that the time was not ripe to show their anger. The Chilkats merely went on with their trade, for

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

Campbell's pathetic outfit had been all but used up, and the Tutchone had plenty of furs left to barter. Campbell, too, was willing, under the circumstances, to agree to free trade, and took the opportunity to study his opponents.

Ironically, the Chilkats had acquired their trade goods from the Hudson's Bay Company steamer Beaver. That ship, the first steamer on the Pacific, operated out of the Columbia Department, and traded furs along the entire northwest coast. The goods that the Chilkats brought inland were, however, not to be compared with the quality of Campbell's outfit. Many articles were broken, others had been badly worn from use by the Chilkats. But even second-hand articles were valuable to the interior tribes who normally had no other source of supply. After a few days of trading, the Chilkat, rich with profits, pressed their furs into heavy leather packs, weighing between one hundred and two hundred pounds, and set off on the long march back to the coast.<sup>21</sup>

Robert Campbell may have underestimated the Chilkat Indians. Because they behaved relatively **peacefully during his first encounter** with them, contenting themselves with merely stealing a few items from the fort, he did not apprehend much danger from them in the future. In fact, he took advantage of their visit to Fort Selkirk to open up a correspondence with Captain Dodd of the Beaver. The Chilkats expressed "awe" at the "mysterious form of speaking" embodied in a letter, and for a slight fee faithfully carried it to the intended party.<sup>22</sup> Campbell even entertained hopes that the Chilkats would show him their

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 83.      <sup>22</sup>Ibid.

trail through the Coastal Mountains to the sea--a route that he hoped might someday be used to supply the Yukon River fur trade.<sup>23</sup> Campbell, in his official correspondence, emphasized only the bright spots of his new charge. Perhaps he simply did not realize the strength of the Chilkat trade network, or the determination of those Indians to maintain their ascendancy. In any event, the visit of the Chilkat traders was a foreshadowing of the strife and frustration which lay ahead for Robert Campbell.

With the founding of Fort Selkirk the Hudson's Bay Company was firmly established in the heart of the Yukon River Valley. The trade of the fourth largest river in North America was within the Company's grasp. Unfortunately, Campbell was not given the support and freedom of action necessary to exploit full advantage of the area. Fort Selkirk and its two support posts, Frances Lake and Pelly Banks, should have been given the status of a separate district from the Mackenzie, with Campbell's needs supplied directly from the main depot at York Factory. Instead, all of Campbell's supplies had to first be approved by Murdock McPherson, whose opposition to Campbell was only thinly veiled. This administrative flaw retarded the development of the Yukon trade.

#### Alexander H. Murray and the Founding of Fort Yukon

Robert Campbell's success on the upper Yukon River was mirrored by the northern division of the Hudson's Bay Company's westward pincer

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<sup>23</sup>H.B.C.A., Robert Campbell--Sir George Simpson, September 14, 1848, D. 5/22 fos. 665.

movement. On the twenty-seventh of June, 1847, Fort Yukon was founded at the forks of the Porcupine and Yukon Rivers. Commanding the Fort Yukon operation was Alexander Hunter Murray, a senior clerk in the Honorable Company.

Born in 1818 at Kilmun, Argyllshire, Scotland, Murray chose the fur trade as his passport to wealth in America. But unlike most of the Hudson's Bay Company's officers, Murray took his internship in the business not in Canada or Rupert's Land, but in the United States. He served with the American Fur Company for a number of years on the Missouri River before, in 1845, joining the English company.<sup>24</sup> Murray was an educated man and a skilled observer. During his short tenure in the Mackenzie District he made a number of sketches depicting the habits and dress of the Kutchin Indians. Sir John Richardson thought so much of these drawings that he included them in his two volume work, Arctic Searching Expeditions: A Journal of a Boat-Voyage through Rupert's Land and the Arctic Sea. Murray also gave Richardson many details concerning the natural history of the Yukon area.<sup>25</sup> Murray's one drawback was his undiplomatic attitude toward his subordinates. It is not clear whether he had an authoritarian nature or merely a hot temper, but Dr. John Rae of the Honorable Company observed that

Mr. Murray is evidently an excellent manager and a very interested person, but unfortunately his men will not stay any length of time

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<sup>24</sup>Alexander Hunter Murray, Journal of the Yukon, 1847-48, ed. Lawrence J. Burpee (Publications of the Canadian Archives No. 4, Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1910), p. 1.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., pp. 9-10.

with him. This is a sad drawback at so distant a post, it being requisite to keep two or three additional men in the District for the purpose of changing.<sup>26</sup>

It was, however, that same resolute character which made him valuable in opening up new territory.

Governor Simpson personally selected Murray for the Yukon assignment, no doubt because of his previous fur trade experience in the United States. Murray left for Fort Simpson in the summer of 1845. For the first part of his journey he took passage with the Company's famed Athabasca Brigade, a flotilla of York boats which annually traveled from Norway House, near Lake Winnipeg, to Portage La Loche. Among Murray's fellow travelers were Chief Trader Colin Campbell, the commander of the Athabasca District, and his two daughters, both of marriageable age.<sup>27</sup> While many passengers found the trip to Portage La Loche rather dull, with the low relief of the Canadian Shield presenting scenery of monotonous similarity, Murray enjoyed himself and found the northern vistas engrossing. The natural beauty which particularly held his attention was seventeen year old Anne Campbell. When Murray noticed her attempting a landscape sketch he offered the benefit of his own drawing experience. Murray and Miss Campbell spent the rest of the journey in each other's company, talking about the scenery, sketching, and most of all, each other. However, Murray's thinly disguised romance did not escape the eye of Bernard Rogan Ross, who edited a short-lived fur

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<sup>26</sup>Rae, Arctic Correspondence, p. 141.

<sup>27</sup>H.B.C.A., Alexander Hunter Murray--Sir George Simpson, November 25, 1845, D. 5/15 fos. 446.

trade gossip sheet, the Athabasca Journal and English River Inquirer.

The Inquirer sarcastically noted:

Signoir Murray takes this opportunity of returning his sincere thanks to the Nobility, Gentries and Public for the support he has received since he commenced to give lessons in Landscape drawing. He begs leave here to state that he still continues to teach that valuable branch of education and will attend any hour for the purpose of sketching from nature. Fees, as formerly, Gentlemen, 10/6 pr. lesson; Ladies, gratis.<sup>28</sup>

The Inquirer was wrong on one point--Alexander Hunter Murray would not be giving any more lessons in landscape sketching. Anne Campbell had decided to engage his services permanently and before they reached Fort Chipewyan marriage had been agreed upon.<sup>29</sup>

Murray and his fiance were married when they reached Fort Simpson. There was, however, neither a minister nor a justice of the peace present at that far-removed locale. In similar circumstances at sea, the captain of a vessel may perform the marriage ceremony. In Rupert's Land the same custom prevailed, but in keeping with the Company's commercial nature, a contract between the two parties was signed before Murdock McPherson, commander at Fort Simpson, who then pronounced them man and wife.<sup>30</sup>

The newlyweds' honeymoon was spent descending the Mackenzie River. The purpose of the voyage, however, was not romantic. Murray was being sent to the Peel River post to follow up John Bell's 1844 journey to the Yukon River by establishing a trading post on that river.

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<sup>28</sup>Bernard Rogan Ross, "Fur Trade Gossip Sheet," The Beaver (Spring, 1955), pp. 17-18.

<sup>29</sup>H.B.C.A., Alexander Hunter Murray--Sir George Simpson, November 25, 1845, D. 5/15 fos. 445.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

John Bell had already laid the groundwork for this extension by constructing an outpost at the end of the portage across the Richardson Mountains. This post, known as Lapierre House, served a dual purpose. It was located in fine caribou hunting country and could provide meat and leather for the Peel River post. Lapierre House also served as a half-way house for goods being shipped across the mountains from Peel River and destined for the Yukon.<sup>31</sup>

The Murrays wintered at the Peel River post. Early in the spring, Alexander Hunter Murray took Anne to Lapierre House, over the ice, via a dogsled. This spared Mrs. Murray the rigors of the march across the mountains. It is difficult to see why Murray did not use this same method to haul all the supplies meant for the Yukon as well. Later this became standard procedure. When Robert Kennicott visited Lapierre House in 1861 all transport was conducted during the winter.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps John Bell did not have enough dogs and sleds on hand to attempt such a large operation.

It was June of 1845 when Murray again set out for Lapierre House, this time with the trade outfit meant for the Yukon. No sooner did he exchange the "customary adieus" with John Bell and the population of the Peel River post, than Murray realized what a difficult route the portage trail was during the summer. The engages familiar with the trail told him that the name of the first stage of his journey was the

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<sup>31</sup>H.B.C.A. Murdock McPherson--Governor Simpson, July 7, 1846, B. 200/b/21 fos. 2d.

<sup>32</sup>Robert Kennicott, "The Journal of Robert Kennicott, May 19, 1859--January 20, 1862," The First Scientific Exploration of Russian America, and the Purchase of Alaska, A.J. James, ed. (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University, 1942), p. 28.

"slough of dispond." The knee-deep muck and mosquitoes convinced Murray that the appellation was appropriate.

After three hours on the trail Murray left the majority of the party under the supervision of Alexander Mackenzie, a Company clerk. Murray and two other men, a voyageur known as Manuel, and Tarshee, an Indian hunter, continued ahead with lighter burdens than the **portage** crew. Murray recorded in his journal that he wanted to reach Lapierre House ahead of his men "so as to have my letters answered and things in order, so that the voyage might not be delayed on that account."<sup>33</sup> But the fact that his bride of only a few months was waiting at the outpost may have been a greater encouragement to rush ahead.

Manuel, Tarshee, and Murray continued on the trail until ten in the evening. They could find no high ground to sleep on, so they each picked out one of the tufts of grass and moss which rose above the tundra and made it their bed. Morning found each of them sleeping in a pool of swampy water, as their grass beds had gradually sunk during the night. They marched until noon, reaching the firmer rocky ground of the mountains. With the heat of day upon them, Murray elected to call a halt, take a short nap, and proceed on the march during the night--taking advantage of the midnight sun. In this manner the party made good progress and Murray expected to reach Lapierre House by the end of the next day. However, a short distance from the post the portage trail crossed over the Little Bell River. Normally this was easily forded but the water was rather high that spring and the river's

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<sup>33</sup>Hunter, Journal of the Yukon, pp. 21-22.



strength was fortified. Murray could not use a raft to cross the river because of the large blocks of ice still drifting down the stream. Manuel volunteered to attempt a crossing. Armed with a wooden staff to aid his footing, he waded into the river. Two-thirds of the way across, the current became too much for his legs, which were numbed by the cold, and he was swept off his feet. Swimming for his life, Manuel made the far shore safely.<sup>34</sup>

One of the party was now across the Little Bell, but at the expense of his gun, toque, and nearly his life. Murray profited from Manuel's effort. He threw a rope across the river which Manuel used to help pull Murray across safely. Tarshee, the Indian, watched these proceedings disapprovingly; to him it was obvious that the river was not meant to be forded there. He marched a short distance upstream, found a broader, shallower crossing, and reached the west bank with considerably less trouble.<sup>35</sup>

Delayed by this adventure at the Little Bell River, Murray did not reach Lapierre House and his waiting wife until the next day. Murray had been particularly anxious to rejoin his wife for more than romantic reasons. He had not received word from the outpost for some time and the Rat Indians (Crow River Kutchin), especially their leader, Grand Blanc, had threatened to prevent the Company from extending the trade to their rivals to the west.<sup>36</sup> Murray found the post safe but the Indians had refused to deliver messages to the Peel River post or

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 27.

help collect provisions for the journey to the Yukon.

Murray remained four days at Lapierre House, preparing his expedition. On June eighteenth the Hudson's Bay men shoved off "with three cheers for the Youcon." The majority of Murray's men, and all of his supplies, were jammed into the Pioneer, a large wooden boat built at Lapierre House especially for the journey. Murray's entire crew were armed with rifles and ammunition "in case of meeting with hostile Indians etc." It was for this reason that Anne Murray, pregnant with her first child, was left at the little outpost in the care of a Kutchin woman. She would not see her husband for over a year.<sup>37</sup>

Not only was Murray anxious about the potentially hostile actions of the Eastern Kutchin middlemen, but he was also concerned with possible friction with the Russians. He knew that the Yukon River was in Russian territory. Murray had even been warned while at Lapierre House that the Indians of the Yukon had been visited by the Russians the summer before. As he drifted down the Porcupine River he kept watch for a potential site to build a post on the English side of the boundary "should it so happen, that we are compelled to retreat upon our own territory."<sup>38</sup>

After a journey of a week, Murray reached the Yukon River. As the boatmen rowed the Pioneer out of the slack waters of the Porcupine River they were impressed by the strength of the Yukon's current. Using all of their strength, the voyageurs pulled the boat two miles up the

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid., pp. 30-31.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 35.

river before coming across the entrance to a small lake, which seemed to offer a fine campsite.

Murray was particularly unimpressed by his first glimpses of the Yukon. He wrote in his journal:

. . . I never saw an uglier river, every where low banks, apparently lately overflowed, with lakes and swamps behind, the trees too small for building, the water abominably dirty and the current furious.<sup>39</sup>

What made the scenery even more drab were the myriads of mosquitoes which filled the air. Murray was a veteran of the mosquito country of the lower Mississippi Valley, but he was unprepared for what he encountered on the Yukon:

. . . we could neither speak nor breathe without our mouths being filled with them, close your eyes, and you had fast half a dozen, fires were lit all around but to no avail. Rather than be devoured, the men fatigued as they were, preferred stemming the current a little longer, to reach a dry spot a little further on. . . .<sup>40</sup>

The fur traders fled to their boat, routed from their first camp on the Yukon.

The next morning, the twenty-sixth of June, Murray located a suitable site for a post--on the Yukon River about three miles upstream from the mouth of the Porcupine River. The traders set to work at once, constructing temporary bark shelters, and cutting timber for a permanent fort. Trade was also begun immediately. Murray suffered from the same problem which would haunt Robert Campbell, a lack of trade goods. To stretch his supplies Murray accepted only beaver, marten, and fox

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., pp. 42-43.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 49.

pelts--the most valuable furs.<sup>41</sup>

The local Indians, the Yukon Flats Kutchin, were not at all adverse to this policy. They had long been exploited by Indian middlemen and were thankful to at last have direct access to the source of the trade goods. The Eastern Kutchin, since the opening of Fort Good Hope, and more importantly, the Peel River post, had done extensive trading with the Yukon Flats band. To the south the Han Indians, supplied by Tutchone and Tagish middlemen, and by occasional visits to the Peel River post, also enjoyed commercial superiority over the Yukon Flats people. They also had trade contacts with the tribes lower down the Yukon River, who received their goods from the Russians at Nulato or from across the Bering Sea in Siberia.

In addition to these trade contacts the Yukon Flats Kutchin told Murray that they recently had made contact with other white men from lower down the river. These whites, whom Murray naturally assumed were the Russians, were described to him as

. . .being all well armed with pistols, their boat was about the same size as ours, but, as he thought, made of sheet iron, but carrying more people. They had a great quantity of beads, kettles, guns, powder, knives and pipes, and traded all the furs from the bands, principally for beads and knives, after which they traded dogs, but the Indians were unwilling to part with their dogs, and the Russians rather than go without gave a gun for each, as they required many to bring their goods across the portage to the river they descended. The Indians expected to see the Russians here soon, as they promised to come up with two boats, not only to trade but to explore the river to its source.<sup>42</sup>

Although Murray did not realize it, this Indian report should not have

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 45.

been taken at face value. Historical documentation affords no supporting evidence of Russian penetration of the Yukon as far east as the Porcupine River in the 1840s. Even Lieutenant Zagoskin did not come within three hundred miles of the junction of the Porcupine and the Yukon Rivers. Due perhaps to some confusion through interpreting the Kutchin language, Murray heard a second-hand account of either Zagoskin's voyage of the lower Yukon, or Robert Campbell's 1843 journey down the Pelly River. The important thing, however, was that Murray believed the report was correct and during his first year on the Yukon he was ever apprehensive of the Russians suddenly making an appearance.

He also did not trust the Han Indians. They inhabited the Yukon River above Murray's post and were not pleased to see the Yukon Flats Kutchin trade the majority of their furs to the Hudson's Bay Company. They were accustomed to having their way with the less numerous Yukon Flats band and acted as if they expected the same deference from the fur traders.<sup>43</sup> They inspected Murray's encampment, going where they pleased, asking for one thing, then another. Murray lost his rather short temper when two of the Han started browsing through the trader's tent. He "shoved one of them out by the shoulders, and the other followed of his own accord in double quick time."<sup>44</sup> The Indians responded with a thinly veiled threat. The Russians, they said, ". . . were once the same, they would not give them what they wanted, but they (the Indians) killed a number of their people and pillaged one of their Forts on the coast, and ever since that they had been

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 61.

refused nothing."<sup>45</sup> Murray was unshaken. He reminded the Han that "we were a different people from the Russians and not so easily frightened, we were always prepared against enemies." Murray also instructed them in a basic **tenet** of the Hudson's Bay Company's policy: "We did not mean to give away our goods for nothing. . . ." <sup>46</sup>

On July first construction was begun on the permanent post which Murray had been ordered to name Fort Yukon. Fearful of Russian and Indian hostilities, a fear which might have been accentuated by Murray's previous experiences along the turbulent Missouri River frontier among the warlike Plains tribes, he elected to build a true fortification. Many Hudson's Bay Company posts, though called forts, bore little resemblance to military structures. Fort Yukon, however, was an elaborate affair. Formal bastions were placed at each corner and united by a fourteen foot wall of squared timber. Even the dwelling houses were bullet proof and fitted out with loop holes for combat.<sup>47</sup>

The work went slowly at first. Murray's men, though hard working fellows, were hardly accomplished woodsmen. Many were recently engaged from the Orkney Islands, off Scotland, and were "green hands" with axes and mauls. For a while they succeeded in doing as much damage to themselves as to the trees--each day a cut or temporarily lamed engage graduated from the school of hard knocks, a bruised but wiser

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid. It is doubtful that the Han Indians ever participated in a skirmish with the Russians. They no doubt were referring to the Tlingit Indians, who often fought with the Russians in the first decades of the nineteenth century.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

carpenter. When their work was finally completed they had a fort which Murray thought was the "best and strongest (not excepting Fort Simpson) between Red River and the polar sea. . . ." Behind Fort Yukon's battlements the fur traders were confident "the Russians may advance when they please."<sup>48</sup>

Although Murray was relatively new to the Mackenzie District he was well aware of the interest which had been aroused by the identity of the Yukon River. While at Fort Simpson he had studied some of Robert Campbell's journals. Murray tried to piece together what Campbell had discovered with what the Indians at Fort Yukon had told him, and what the Company thought it knew about the Colville River. In a plot of sand that Murray kept especially for that purpose, the Yukon Indians traced the course, which they themselves knew only from other tribes, of the Yukon River westward. But initially Murray was unable to accept this information. He believed too firmly that the Yukon was the Colville River. "Had I not known where the Colville was, and gone by their account, I should have placed the mouth of the Youcon much farther west. . . ."<sup>49</sup> It was only later, after continued conversations with the Indians, that Murray accepted the Yukon as separate from the Colville River, and that it made its way to the Pacific Ocean.

Murray was less confused by the geography of the upper Yukon. He hypothesized that the Yukon and Lewes Rivers were the same, but mistakenly failed to assign the Pelly River a large role in the river

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid., pp. 66-67.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 78.

system.<sup>50</sup> With the aid of only a compass and a homemade astrolabe Murray attempted to correlate this information into a new map of the northwest. This map, which has been lost to posterity, was given to Sir John Richardson who used it to make his own map of Arctic America. The map, however, shows neither the Lewes nor the Pelly joined with the Yukon, and the Yukon itself flowing, correctly, into Norton Sound and not on the course of the Colville. Whether these were Murray's or Richardson's changes is unclear.<sup>51</sup>

The Search for Franklin and its effect  
on the Exploration of the Yukon

Dr. John Richardson, who had served as Sir John Franklin's second in command during the latter's two arctic coast explorations, was again in the Mackenzie District in the summer of 1848. Richardson had been drawn back to the far northwest by one of the most futile and romantic chapters in arctic exploration, the search for the lost Franklin Expedition. Sir John Franklin set out on his final exploration in May of 1845. His two ships, the Erebus and the Terror, were ordered to attempt the elusive Northwest Passage. The expedition was last seen in July of 1845, sailing west toward Lancaster Sound. After that point the details of what befell the expedition are obscured. It is known that the ships were beset by ice in the fall of 1846 and that they remained imprisoned until the starving and scurvied crew abandoned

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid. pp. 75-76. In his journal Murray confuses the Pelly with the Lewes River and when he describes one he means the other.

<sup>51</sup>Sir John Richardson, Arctic Searching Expedition, A Journal of a Boat Voyage through Rupert's Land (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longman, 1851): see map.



them in 1848. The seamen then began a doomed march down the arctic coast toward the Back River. The entire expedition perished.<sup>52</sup>

Though it was not until 1853 that the first evidence of the expedition's fate was discovered, concern for Franklin began to surface late in 1846, and when no dispatches arrived by the fall of 1847 the British Admiralty sent out three expeditions to ascertain his fate. Dr. John Richardson was given command of a boat expedition which was to proceed through the interior of Rupert's Land to the Mackenzie River and then search the coast between the mouth of that river and the Coppermine River.

The Hudson's Bay Company played an important role in Richardson's and the other Franklin search expeditions to follow. This arctic manhunt, although unsuccessful in relieving the Erebus and Terror, was a boon to geographic knowledge. Each search expedition played its role in expanding the map of arctic America. However, the search for Franklin did nothing to aid the Hudson's Bay Company's program of westward expansion and exploration. If anything, the burden of men and supplies that the searchers placed on the Mackenzie District retarded the efforts of the fur trade explorers.

Richardson and his exploration crew arrived in the district in July of 1848. It was his plan to proceed immediately down the Mackenzie River to the sea. Richardson felt that he would be able to search his assigned territory in one field season. In this he was correct. The coastal journey from the Mackenzie River's mouth to the Coppermine River

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<sup>52</sup>For a good general account of the Franklin search expeditions see Leslie H. Neatby, The Search for Franklin (Edmonton: M.G. Hurtig, 1970).

was efficiently conducted. No sign of Franklin's Expedition was encountered, nor was any new coastline added to the map, because the area had been previously charted in 1826 by Richardson himself. The Doctor's expedition was aided by John Rae, a physician and explorer of the Hudson's Bay Company, and John Bell, who handled most of the logistical work.<sup>53</sup>

Having completed his assignment in the summer of 1848, Richardson wintered at Great Bear Lake, and left Rupert's Land in 1849. That very summer the Mackenzie District traders were asked to aid another exploring expedition--Lieutenant J.S. Pullen's Royal Navy search team. Pullen was an officer on the H.M.S. Plover, which searched the arctic's coast from the Bering Sea to Wainright Inlet. At the latter point the Plover launched a boat expedition to search the coast as far as the Mackenzie River. The Royal Navy assumed that the boat crews could winter in the Mackenzie District and return to Britain via Rupert's Land in the spring. Unfortunately the Hudson's Bay Company was not notified, and the Mackenzie District was unprepared to offer any assistance.<sup>54</sup>

Lieutenant Pullen and his crew, although they found no clues as to Franklin's fate, performed their difficult assignment admirably. But when the two whale boats of seamen arrived at the Peel River post the fur traders were at a loss what to do. The post commander, Augustus R. Peers, was away from the post and his subordinates did their best to make the explorers comfortable. It was obvious to even Pullen that the

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<sup>53</sup>Richardson, Arctic Searching Expedition, pp. 143-144.

<sup>54</sup>Rae, Arctic Correspondence, p. liv.

meager food resources of the Peel River post--which so often faced famine under even normal conditions--could not support the Royal Navy men for very long. He relieved the situation somewhat by embarking in one of the boats for Fort Simpson, where he spent the winter. Mate William H. Hooper and four other sailors remained at the post a short time longer. When Peers returned to the Peel River post he persuaded Hooper to remove the remaining explorers to old Fort Franklin on Great Bear Lake.<sup>55</sup>

Relations between the Royal Navy men and the fur traders do not appear to have been warm. The naval explorers do not seem to have appreciated the limited resources of the Mackenzie District, and were not pleased with the fact that the fourteen sailors had to be distributed among several different posts and over eight hundred miles. Chief Factor John Rae, who commanded at Fort Simpson in the winter of 1849-1850, wrote to Sir George Simpson that

. . . both Pullen and Hooper are vastly civil to me, yet for some cause or other which I cannot divine, and which they themselves would probably be at a loss to explain, they have an evident dislike for the Company or those connected with them.<sup>56</sup>

Rae's reaction to this was angry. He observed, with some justice:

These selfsufficient donkies come into this country see the Indians sometimes miserably clad and half starved, the causes which they never think of inquiring into, but place it all to the credit of the Company quite forgetting that 10 times as much misery occurred in Ireland during the last few years, at the very door of the most civilized countries in the world, than has happened in the Hudsons

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<sup>55</sup>W.J.S. Pullen, "Pullen in the Search for Franklin," The Beaver (June, 1847), p. 22.

<sup>56</sup>Rae, Arctic Correspondence, p. 174.

Bay Cos. Territories during the last ½ century.<sup>57</sup>

But in spite of what Rae suspected, neither Pullen nor Hooper were impolitic enough to publish any of their criticisms upon their return to England.

However, that return was delayed. In June of 1850 the Royal Navy men were on their way to York Factory when they received new orders from the Admiralty. Pullen was directed to retrace Dr. John Richardson's route, and search again the arctic coast east of the Mackenzie River. The Admiralty suspected that if the Franklin Expedition had abandoned its ships the men might try to follow the coast to the Mackenzie River and its trading posts. Pullen accepted the unexpected assignment and set out with two boats for the coast. Pullen's second boat journey cleared out the district's supply hosue. Rae gave the explorers close to forty-five hundred pounds of provisions and "a carte blanche on all our other resources. . . ."<sup>58</sup> All of this at a time when Forts Yukon and Selkirk were short of the supplies needed to establish the Company's presence in the Yukon. Other posts in the District were also short of supplies. In fact while Pullen and Hooper were criticizing the Company, fur traders were starving to death at Pelly Banks.<sup>59</sup>

Pullen's second coastal search yielded no evidence of the lost expedition and by the end of the summer he was back at Fort Simpson. After another uneasy winter with the fur traders, the Royal Navy men returned to England.

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid., pp. 175-176.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., pp. 130-131.

The Hudson's Bay Company continued its role in the search for Franklin, but in a more independent fashion. Chief Factor John Rae, who had already led two previous arctic exploring expeditions and had assisted Richardson in 1848, was to go on to command the Company's 1851 and 1853-1854 search teams. Rae was a new breed of arctic traveler, not unlike Thomas Simpson, or for that matter, Robert Campbell. He traveled light and therefore swiftly, calling upon the resources of the country to supply his wants. His hardy determination, skill, and efficiency acquired by his years in the Company's service as a fur trader and physician, made him what Franklin, Back, and Pullen could not aspire to; he was a professional arctic traveler. It was Rae's traditions which endured to produce men such as Nansen, Cook, Peary, and Amundsen. The details of Rae's explorations, directed as they were at the eastern arctic, are outside the scope of our study. It will suffice to say that it was Chief Factor Rae who uncovered the first news of the fate of Franklin's expedition.

There was one other sidelight to the Franklin search which might have affected the Hudson's Bay Company's program of westward expansion. In the winter of 1850-51, Lieutenant John James Barnard, temporarily attached to the H.M.S. Plover in the Bering Sea, visited the Russian-American Company post of Fort St. Michael. The Russian officers at the post were anxious to aid in any way they could the search for Franklin. They had received from their Indian trappers reports of a party of white men in the interior of Alaska. On the faint chance that this might be a reference to the Franklin party Barnard journeyed to the source of the reports, Nulato, the Russian's advance base on the

Yukon River. The white men that the Indians were speaking of were no doubt Alexander Hunter Murray's traders at Fort Yukon. Lieutenant Barnard, not aware of this, was in a position to unite the British explored upper Yukon with the Russian explored lower river. But he never got a chance to journey further upriver. Before spring arrived the Nulato post was attacked by hostile Indians and Barnard was killed.<sup>60</sup>

The net effect of the search for the lost Franklin Expedition on the Hudson's Bay Company's exploration of the Yukon was to sidetrack the Mackenzie District's limited resources away from the newly established frontier posts. The first years following the establishment of a post were critical in determining its success or failure. The local Indians had to be assured of the reliability of the trader to supply his needs. The Indians also had to be convinced to spend more time engaged in actual trapping than they had been accustomed to. This, however, was impossible to do if the posts were short of trade goods and supplies. For the Yukon posts, particularly Fort Selkirk and Pelly Banks, the Franklin search was most inopportune, and caused a good deal of hardship.

The Fur Trade on the Yukon River  
1849-1850

By the spring of 1849 Chief Factor Murdock McPherson and Robert Campbell were on anything but cordial terms. The feud over McPherson's frugal outfitting of frontier posts had degenerated into a personal struggle between the two. Campbell was angered by McPherson's subtle

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<sup>60</sup>Neatby, The Search for Franklin, pp. 220-221.

jabs at his abilities as a trader. He wrote to Governor Simpson,

I am glad to learn that Mr. McPherson though he regrets my hard luck, has been making favorable mention of my perseverance, as I was given to understand, that of late, his favorable mention of me was in like style as Antony did of Brutus.<sup>61</sup>

On McPherson's part he was no doubt tired of having all of his decisions regarding Campbell reported by the latter to Governor Simpson. McPherson's hand was not strengthened by the diminishing returns in furs that the district was producing under his administration.<sup>62</sup> It was therefore in the best interests of both McPherson and the district that the Chief Factor retire from the area where he had spent twenty-four years of his life. Dr. John Rae was given charge of the Mackenzie District.

It was, however, some time before Campbell and his men heard of the change of command. They were dependent upon the Pelly Banks and Frances Lake posts to relay supplies and communications. Campbell had no faith in either Pierre Pamburn, Jr. or John O'Brien, the clerks responsible for those posts. This opinion was confirmed in September of 1848 when Campbell sent James Stewart to Frances Lake for the winter's trade outfit. Stewart found both Frances Lake and Pelly Banks in a state of confusion. The supply boats from Fort Simpson had been late and the men had suffered from hunger. By the time things were straightened out ice was beginning to form on the Pelly River and Stewart was unable to forward his trade goods to Fort Selkirk.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>H.B.C.A., Robert Campbell--Sir George Simpson, March 28, 1849, D. 5/24 fos. 506d.

<sup>62</sup>Rae, Arctic Correspondence, p. 87.

<sup>63</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, p. 84.

The winter at Fort Selkirk, considering the dearth of supplies, and the trader's lack of familiarity with the region, might have been disastrous. But Robert Campbell was by now a master of living off the country and making ends meet. The men on the Yukon enjoyed a season of relative abundance as the fishery and the hunters produced more than enough provisions. The same could not be said for Pamburn's men at Pelly Banks and Frances Lake. They made insufficient use of the fishing lakes discovered by Campbell and were not careful in rationing their supplies. Nor was Pamburn able to advance the Fort Selkirk outfit, which, like the Pelly Banks outfit, each winter had to be carried from Frances Lake by dogsled across the divide. Worse than not even attempting this task, Pamburn made a complete mess of it. He hauled a small quantity of goods across to the Pelly River, but the majority were spread out over the trail or left at Frances Lake. When Campbell's men arrived in April to pick up their supplies they were able to salvage only a small part of what had been allotted them.<sup>64</sup>

These inefficiencies set the stage for the tragedy which occurred in the winter of 1849-50. Late in the summer of 1849 Campbell sent his assistant James Stewart and a group of engages to Pelly Banks to try to retrieve some of the supplies mishandled the winter before. When the salvage operation was completed Campbell's men, save for Stewart and another man, Andrew Flett, returned to Fort Selkirk. Stewart and Flett decided to wait for the annual supply boats from Fort Simpson in order to collect any letters or dispatches meant for their post. But

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 85.



John O'Brien, who had left Frances Lake to bring up the supply boats, failed to make his appearance. Stewart and Flett waited well into the winter season before they were forced to conclude that the supply boats would not arrive. The two men then began the long march back to Fort Selkirk. They stopped at the Pelly Banks post on their way west. P.C. Pamburn and his two assistants, though short of provisions, had plenty of gunpowder and fishing equipment, and rejected Stewart's advice that they should all retire to Fort Selkirk.<sup>65</sup>

Stewart and Flett, with no provisions for their journey, hoped their guns would keep them in food until they reached Campbell. But to hunt while on the march is a difficult task and the two traders spent many nights hungry. When they were at the end of their strength they noticed a cache along the frozen Pelly River. Breaking it open they found a small supply of fish. The cache was one of several that Campbell had ordered made when Stewart failed to return before winter. It was only this expedient which allowed Flett and Stewart--who looked like "mere skeletons" to their comrades--to reach Fort Selkirk alive.<sup>66</sup>

Campbell was thus forced to spend a second consecutive winter at Fort Selkirk short of provisions and trade goods. Although they missed their tobacco, tea, and flour allowances, Campbell and his men did not suffer the pangs of famine.

The same could not be said for the traders at Pelly Banks. Their situation, which was critical when Stewart had visited them, degenerated further in late November when through some act of carelessness

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., p. 87.

the post caught fire and burned. Eight hundred pounds worth of furs were destroyed, along with most of their supplies of gunpowder.<sup>67</sup> Pamburn gave his two engages (a French-Canadian named Dubois and an Orkneyman named Forbisher) the remaining furs as provisions, while he removed himself to one of the fishing lakes. Between the produce of his nets and gun Pamburn was able to scrape together enough food to keep his strength. The two engages, however, did not fare as well. In March of 1850 Dubois perished from hunger and exposure, and his companion Forbisher was reduced to cannibalism to try to keep himself alive. When Pamburn returned to the site of the post after a two month absence he was shocked to find Dubois dead, and before long suspected Forbisher of eating his companion. But instead of taking pity upon the wretched man, who was too weak to even cut wood for a fire, Pamburn again abandoned his subordinate to fend for himself.<sup>68</sup> Within a few days Forbisher also died. Pamburn would probably have followed him had not James Stewart returned to Pelly Banks in April of 1850.

Robert Campbell had dispatched Stewart (whom he described as "always ready for any enterprise") to undertake the long journey to Fort Simpson.<sup>69</sup> Fort Selkirk had not received any news or supplies since October of 1848. Even Campbell could not remain safely on the Yukon without more supplies. If Stewart was unable to return with sup-

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<sup>67</sup>Rae, Arctic Correspondence, p. 131.

<sup>68</sup>Lieutenant W. H. Hooper, R.N., Ten Months Among the Tents of the Tuski, with incidents of a Arctic Boat Expedition in Search of Sir John Franklin (London: John Murray, 1853), pp. 330-333.

<sup>69</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, p. 88.

plies for the Yukon by September of 1850 Campbell decided he would have to abandon Fort Selkirk. It would be too late at that time of year to journey to Fort Simpson, so he formed a contingency plan to float down the Yukon to its mouth, presumably in Russian-America, and throw himself at the mercy of his rivals. The future of the Hudson's Bay Company's operations on the upper Yukon rested upon James Green Stewart.<sup>70</sup>

P.C. Pamburn joined Stewart on his march. The most difficult section of their route was between Frances Lake and Fort Halkett. The spring sun made the deep snow heavy and wet, rendering each step, even with snowshoes, all the more difficult. Nor did they have any rations for the trail. Stewart was often forced to stop the march to hunt. By the time they reached Fort Halkett the Liard had lost its ice and was open for navigation. Upon reaching Fort Simpson, Stewart explained the urgency of Campbell's situation to Chief Factor John Rae. The district commander immediately stripped the depot of all available supplies and quickly sent Stewart back up the Liard with the promise of yet more trade goods in autumn.<sup>71</sup>

Stewart had already journeyed nearly one thousand miles to reach the district headquarters, but upon obtaining the supplies, he immediately set out on the return journey. The young clerk knew he needed every available day to push up the Liard, running fast with the spring flood, in time to head off the abandonment of Fort Selkirk. He arrived at Frances Lake in mid-August and sent an Indian runner ahead

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<sup>70</sup>Ibid.

<sup>71</sup>Rae, Arctic Correspondence, p. 131.

to inform Campbell that relief had arrived. Campbell received the good news on the twenty-third of August, just over a week ahead of the date he had set for quitting the Yukon.<sup>72</sup>

Campbell gathered his men together and set out for Frances Lake to aid Stewart in transporting the much needed supplies. During the journey Campbell suffered an accident which nearly cost him his life. Upon reaching Pelly Banks Campbell and his men abandoned their boats and began hiking across the Arctic-Pacific Divide. Halfway across the portage trail they reached Finlayson Lake, a shallow body of water about a mile wide. The trail continued on the far side of the lake so Campbell and his men embarked in a collection of abandoned rafts and canoes. In their haste Campbell and a French-Canadian guide, Marcette, selected a canoe with scores of leaks from bottom to stern. The wind was up and the water choppy on the lake. Before they got halfway across the lake the water coming into the canoe from the holes and over the gunnels from the waves succeeded in swamping the craft.<sup>73</sup>

Campbell and Marcette clung to the overturned canoe, at the same time kicking with their legs for shore. The lake, which in a few weeks would be frozen, was desperately cold and Campbell's muscles began to stiffen. The men in the rafts struggled to reach the far shore, while those who were waiting to cross helplessly watched their leader struggle. Kitza, Campbell's loyal Indian hunter, climbed to a hill above the lake for a better view. He kept his eyes on the red wool

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<sup>72</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, p. 88.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., p. 89.

toque that Campbell was wearing and every time he saw it he would shout to the other men, "see the Chief's head yet above water." It was only when Campbell's strength was nearly exhausted did he feel the lake bottom with his feet, and staggered ashore. The men who had crossed on the raft

. . . hugged us with joy, took off their warm shirts, put them on us & got a blazing fire kindled. . . . Poor Marcette who was the better swimmer, said that if I had gone down, he would never have come ashore alone.<sup>74</sup>

Warmed by such sentiments, as well as by the fire, Campbell rested only a short while before continuing to Frances Lake for his supplies.

#### Consolidation of Hudson's Bay Company Operations on the Yukon

The years which Robert Campbell spent at Fort Selkirk, 1848-1852, though often trying were among his most satisfying in the fur trade. It was a contrast to his years at Frances Lake and Pelly Banks, which had been marred by constant food shortages and unpleasant disputes with Murdock McPherson. In that period he often wrote Governor Simpson about quitting the Company service. One of the things which troubled him most was his sparse personal life. When Campbell left York Factory in 1834 Governor Simpson's last words to him were "Now, Campbell, don't you get married as we want you for active service."<sup>75</sup> The young trader seems to have kept this promise and resisted even taking an Indian wife--a la facon du pays. In 1847 he wrote Governor Simpson that he had made overtures (through the mail) to a young Scottish girl. However, as no further mention of this girl occurs in his correspondence,

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<sup>74</sup>Ibid.      <sup>75</sup>Ibid., p. 27.

it would seem that Campbell was unsuccessful as a suitor. It was shortly after this occurred that Fort Selkirk was founded, Murdock McPherson retired, and Campbell's spirits began to rise.

According to oral tradition among the Southern Tutchone, Robert Campbell was given a girl of that tribe for a wife.<sup>76</sup> Campbell's journals, generally frank and factually accurate, are mute on this point. Of course, the autobiographical journal was written while the trader was in retirement and he was the respected father of several white children by his Scottish wife. He naturally might have been reticent about his past affairs out of respect for his family. Nor is it conclusive, one way or the other, because his official writings for the Company mention no Indian wife. Governor Simpson's advice on marriage might not have referred to an Indian woman, but Campbell after fifteen years' service in the Company was no doubt anxious to do nothing to hinder his chances for promotion. Besides, Governor Simpson, who rather coolly deserted his own Indian wife, referred to other trader's country wives as "his bit of brown" or "his bit of circulating copper," hardly a sign of approval.<sup>77</sup> Unless new documents come to light, there will be no way to conclusively address this point. It will suffice to point out that Campbell enjoyed good relations (perhaps intimately as well as commercially) with the Indians of the Yukon.

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<sup>76</sup>Catharine McClellan, "Indian Stories about the First Whites in Northwestern America," Ethnohistory in Southwestern Alaska and the Southern Yukon, Method and Content, ed. Margaret Lantis (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1970), p. 111.

<sup>77</sup>George Simpson, "George Simpson's Character Book, 1832," Hudson's Bay Miscellany, ed. Glyndwr Williams (Winnipeg: The Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1975), p. 158.

The Indians of the Yukon held Campbell somewhat in awe. Since he had "cured" the lame Indian when he first arrived at Fort Selkirk, the Indians attributed the trader with great shamanistic powers--something that Campbell did nothing to discourage. The most impressive display of his "power" occurred in the spring of 1851. While Campbell was at Pelly Banks supervising the loading of his trade goods, he heard an Indian woman scream. Looking to the river he saw the leather shirt of her son barely above the water. The boy's body was "submerged & apparently lifeless." Campbell pulled him ashore and stripped off his wet clothes. He rubbed the boy's body vigorously with a dry blanket, and "breathed hard into his mouth." How Campbell was acquainted with what is contemporary first aid procedure is impossible to say. But his instincts were sound and the boy began to breathe again. The boy's mother "was full of gratitude and wonder," as were all those present, who credited Campbell with having "brought him back to life."<sup>78</sup>

By far the most satisfying thing which occurred during Campbell's residence in the Yukon was his exploration of the Yukon River below Fort Selkirk. As early as the spring of 1843 he wished to complete the exploration of the Pelly and retire from the district.<sup>79</sup> But Governor Simpson had always withheld his permission for such a venture out of fear of colliding with Russian traders. However, by 1850 Sir George had received enough information from both Robert Campbell and Alexander Hunter Murray to trust Campbell's original supposition that the

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<sup>78</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, pp. 94-95.

<sup>79</sup>H.B.C.A., Robert Campbell--George Simpson, May 26, 1843, D. 5/8 fos. 286d.

Pelly River and the "Youcon" River were identical. Therefore, the Governor authorized Campbell to continue his explorations of the Yukon River, to have the honor of proving that his theory was correct.<sup>80</sup>

Robert Campbell's 1851 exploration of the upper Yukon was in many ways the climax of the fur trade's over-half-century struggle to breach the northern Rocky Mountains and exploit the fur trade of the Yukon. It is therefore somewhat ironic that this final exploratory journey was an easy rather matter-of-fact affair. There were none of the terrible canyons and rapids that John McLeod had faced on the Liard, or the hostile Indians that Campbell had endured in his early days--just a peaceful float down a great river.

The explorer waited until the Yukon cleared of ice, and in early June of 1851 set out down the river. Early summer in the far north is a season of almost perpetual light. Campbell made good use of this by traveling day and night, stopping only to cook food. The river increased its size the further north they went, with many large tributary streams falling in from the east and the west. The current was swift but steady and no serious hazards to navigation slowed his progress.<sup>81</sup>

At first the Indians he encountered had never before been in direct contact with white men and lacked even some of the most basic trade goods. But as Campbell neared the Arctic Circle the Indians spoke of a fort further downstream with white people like the explorers. Not long afterwards Campbell's boat came within site of the stockaded walls

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<sup>80</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, p. 93.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., p. 97.



of Fort Yukon.<sup>82</sup> It was a red-letter day for Robert Campbell; he had proven that the Pelly River, which he had discovered in 1840, and the "Youcon" River, discovered by John Bell in 1844, were the same. At the same time he completed the **exploration of the upper Yukon River** and united the Hudson's Bay Company's operations at Fort Yukon with those of Fort Selkirk, Pelly Banks, and Frances Lake.

Nor did Campbell waste any time exploiting the union of the Company's two spheres of operations west of the mountains. He remained only a single day at Fort Yukon, as a guest of his friend and former assistant, William Hardisty, before embarking up the Porcupine River. Campbell had long hoped to find an alternate route to the Liard River for the purpose of supplying the upper Yukon. The trader now proposed to cross over the portage to the Peel River post, ascend the Mackenzie River to Fort Simpson, there pick up the trade outfit for Fort Selkirk, and return to that post via the same roundabout route.

During his first day's journey up the Porcupine River, Campbell overtook Alexander Hunter Murray and a group of engages from Fort Yukon. They were taking their annual fur harvest to the Peel River post. Murray and Campbell, commanders of the Victorian Empire's Yukon march, traveled together across the Richardson Mountain portage to the Peel River. From there Campbell and his men headed up the Mackenzie River toward Fort Simpson. As they passed the various posts along the river, the explorers were the talk of the entire Mackenzie District. Campbell was greeted by friends whom he had not seen for years, and by

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<sup>82</sup>Ibid., p. 98.

wide-eyed apprentice clerks who had heard only reports of his adventures on the distant Pelly River. All were shocked to see his burly frame emerge from the wilderness after so long, and from such an unexpected direction as the lower Mackenzie River.<sup>83</sup>

Campbell eventually reached the depot at Fort Simpson. Chief Factor John Rae was not at the fort. He had been assigned to continue his search for the lost Franklin Expedition and Chief Trader James Anderson was given control of the Mackenzie. Anderson, however, was not at the fort, so Campbell filed his report with James Purden, the clerk in charge, and collected his outfit of trade goods. The long journey back to Fort Selkirk was marred by bad weather. Nevertheless, he reached the post on the seventeenth of October.<sup>84</sup>

Campbell had barely won his race with winter, but he felt that he had proven his point that Fort Selkirk was best supplied not by the dangerous Liard River route, but via the Mackenzie-Peel-Porcupine-Yukon River route. In past years Fort Selkirk had been denied its proportion of trade goods because of inefficiencies at Frances Lake and Pelly Banks. Campbell felt that the new route would alleviate these problems, and promise "for the first time it will have a fair chance to try what it can do in the way of Returns and I am in good hopes of a favorable issue."<sup>85</sup> It was on this note of optimism that Campbell began the winter.

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<sup>83</sup>Ibid., pp. 115-117.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>85</sup>Robert Campbell--Donald Ross, August 30, 1851, quoted in J.R. Kirk and C. Parnell, "Campbell of the Yukon," The Beaver (December, 1942), p. 24.

There were, however, factors at work which would have crushed those high spirits. Chief Trader James Anderson, who upon taking command of the district had made a thorough study of its affairs, was critical of the commercial value of Fort Selkirk. He wrote Eden Colvile,<sup>86</sup> Sir George Simpson's second-in-command:

We will now see what Fort Selkirk can do--I must own that notwithstanding Mr. Campbell's sanguine representations, I have my doubts on the subject. I fear it is too near the Coast--only about 8 days from Lynns Canal, whence I should suppose the natives could produce goods at a cheaper rate than we could afford to sell them--Hitherto from various misfortunes Selkirk has been a dead loss and that not a trifling one.

Anderson closed his letter with the observation, "I have a much higher opinion of Campbell's Zeal and Enterprise than his judgement."<sup>87</sup>

Anderson's objections to the Company's operations in the transmountain region, unlike Murdock McPherson's, were based upon facts, not prejudice. The combined outfits of Frances Lake, Pelly Banks, and Fort Selkirk for the years 1848 to 1850 resulted in a net loss of over fourteen hundred pounds.<sup>88</sup> The 1851 outfit, which Campbell was so sure would prove the worth of Fort Selkirk, amounted to £147.30 worth of trade goods. But the high cost of both transport (£87.17.6), and the wages of the post's staff and voyageurs (£387.0.0) increased the total

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<sup>86</sup>Eden Colvile was made governor of Rupert's Land in 1849. Sir George Simpson was the governor-in-chief.

<sup>87</sup>Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario, The James Anderson Papers, James Anderson--Eden Colvile, November 22, 1851, MG 19 A 29. Hereafter this collection is referred to as P.A.C.

<sup>88</sup>Harold A. Innis, The Fur Trade in Canada, rev. ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), p. 324.

expenditure to £622.0.6.<sup>89</sup> When Campbell was only able to show £238.10.4 worth of furs by the spring of 1852, Anderson felt justified in suggesting that the post be either moved or closed.<sup>90</sup>

The failure of Campbell's trade was not the result of his deficiencies as a merchant but of the commercial acumen of his Chilkat trade rivals. The Chilkat had again visited the Fort Selkirk area in the summer of 1851, while Campbell was away on his exploratory journey. They were bent on trouble and would probably have resorted to violence to evict the Hudson's Bay men had not a band of Northern Tutchone, under the leadership of Thlin-ikik-Thling and his son K'anan, unexpectedly arrived. The Tutchone knew that as long as Campbell's post remained, they would be free of the Chilkat's dominance. They broke up the intended attack and would have given the Chilkat's more than their share of violence had not James Stewart intervened on the side of peace. Thwarted in their aggressive intentions, the Chilkats were still able to strike a blow against the English before the end of the trade season. They utilized their commercial strength and bought up all the available furs, not only in the Fort Selkirk area, but for a hundred miles down the Yukon as well. Thus, when Campbell returned to his post in mid-October, many of the prime pelts were already lost to the Chilkats.<sup>91</sup>

There may also have been a drop in the number of the Tutchone

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<sup>89</sup>Ibid.

<sup>90</sup>p.A.C., Anderson Papers, James Anderson--Sir George Simpson, November 30, 1852, MG 19 A 29.

<sup>91</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, p. 109.

Indians able to trap for furs. The Indians of the Fort Selkirk region had been struck by disease, the corollary to European penetration of frontier areas. In the spring of 1851 Campbell noted a "contagious malady" among the Tutchone. He thought it was either a type of cholera or dysentery.<sup>92</sup> How many Indians perished is unknown.

In spite of these problems Campbell stuck to his belief that with time Fort Selkirk would prove profitable. An example of his prevailing good spirits can be found in his May 1, 1852 journal entry. He was awakened that morning by a magpie, a bird rarely found in the Yukon but common in Campbell's native Perthshire. The fur trader assumed the bird's presence was an omen. He wrote in his journal: "God grant it may be the forerunner of good tidings."<sup>93</sup> Only much later, when it was too late, did Campbell realize that the bird was the harbinger of defeat.

In May of 1852 Campbell again journeyed downriver to Fort Yukon and then to Lapierre House for his trade outfit. When he returned to Selkirk in July he found James Stewart directing the engages in the construction of a new fort. The original site of the post was subject to flooding in the spring when the ice on the Pelly River broke up. The work was fairly well advanced, and though the stockage was not completed, Campbell moved into the new fort.

While work was progressing on the fort, the Northern Tutchone remained in the vicinity of the post to help defend the traders if the Chilkats again made their appearance. In August, however, the guard

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<sup>92</sup>Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., p. 126.

was lifted as the Indians dispersed to conduct their summer hunts. At the same time James Stewart and a group of voyageurs were away from the fort on a trading trip downriver. Campbell was left to manage the fort with two engages and two Indians.<sup>94</sup>

It was at this time, with the trader's strength reduced and the Tutchone occupied with their hunting, that the Chilkats chose to again pay Campbell a visit. They were twenty-seven men strong and (as Campbell described) "bent on mischief." One of the Indians gave Campbell a basket and some letters from Company officers on the Pacific. One of the letters, from Captain C.E. Stewart of the steamer Beaver warned Campbell that the Chilkats had caused trouble on the coast and that they had promised to do more at Fort Selkirk. It was, however, too late for warnings. All Campbell could do was endure their insults and maintain a conciliatory demeanor. This worked the remainder of the afternoon, as Campbell stalled for time hoping that some of the Tutchone might arrive.<sup>95</sup>

That night Campbell posted his men on guard in the store and dwelling house. They locked the doors behind them and hoped for the best. The fur trader noted in his journal: "The night passed irksome enough--some of the infernal devils were on the move the whole night trying the store doors and windows."<sup>96</sup> Campbell would have kept his men in the buildings the next morning but for a lack of water and the fear that the Chilkats might resort to fire in an attempt to evict them.

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<sup>94</sup>Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., pp. 133-134.

The new day, the twenty-first of August, began as the one before had closed, with the Chilkats toying with the Hudson's Bay men.<sup>97</sup>

The intimidation ended and the plundering began when the Chilkats sighted a boat making for the fort. Campbell initially thought it was James Stewart and his voyageurs, but it was merely two Indian hunters. Upon seeing the Chilkats the hunters tried to veer away from the post, but ". . . the savages were yelling like fiends armed with guns and knives and as the Boat passed along the bank they rushed into the water and dragged it ashore. . . ." <sup>98</sup> They stripped the boat of its contents and began a general sack of the post. When Campbell tried to bar the door of the dwelling house, three rifles were leveled at his heart. One Indian boldly thrust his dagger at Campbell. The trader was saved when one of the fort dogs sprung to defend Campbell and stopped the blade with its chest. The dog's blood splattered across Campbell, who was helpless to resist. The Chilkats tore his pistol out of his belt. It was useless to the trader anyway; he knew that had one shot been fired, its only result would have been to signal a one-sided battle and "the certain destruction of our people."<sup>99</sup>

Campbell's men had by this time scattered for safety. He too made his way to the river bank, where he managed to float a boat and drift out of reach of the Chilkats. Moving down river Campbell and his men were reunited. Together they continued on down the Yukon, hoping to meet Stewart's party or a Tutchone hunting band. The next morning they encountered a group of the Tutchone, ten guns strong. The Tutchone

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<sup>97</sup>Ibid.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid.

<sup>99</sup>Ibid., p. 135.

were angered by the attack and set off with the Hudson's Bay men  
". . . to pay our Pillagers what we owed them."<sup>100</sup>

When Campbell and the Tutchone reached the remains of Fort Selkirk, they found the site deserted. Every item of value in the store or dwelling house was destroyed or stolen. Even the food which the Chilkats could not carry was scattered about the ground or otherwise despoiled. Frustrated and angry, Campbell wanted to launch an immediate pursuit of the marauders. The Tutchone, though, were not eager to engage a Chilkat band which outnumbered them two to one.<sup>101</sup> Besides, with Campbell's stock of trade goods destroyed, the Chilkats again became their only source of trade goods.

With his stock of trade goods stolen and his provisions ruined, Campbell had no choice but to abandon Fort Selkirk. On September 1, 1852 he divided his little command. James Stewart, who had arrived too late to render any remedial assistance, was ordered to conduct most of the men to Fort Yukon for the winter. Campbell himself was bound for Fort Simpson, where he hoped to receive supplies to reestablish Fort Selkirk and avenge himself on the Chilkats. With two men, Baptiste Forcier and Peter Pelly, he made his way up the Pelly River toward Frances Lake. He took the shorter but more dangerous Liard River route to the district headquarters.<sup>102</sup>

Campbell was forty-six days on the trail to Fort Simpson. His fragile bark canoe was sorely tested, not only by the rapids and canyons to be expected on the river, but also by large cakes of drifting

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<sup>100</sup>Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>101</sup>Ibid.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid., p. 137.



ice which threatened to close the Liard. At the depot Campbell laid his case before Chief Trader Anderson. He felt that the Company should reestablish Fort Selkirk because the post still held out the promise of a profitable future. He further argued:

. . . you will not allow a party of murderous villains--who took off a moment when we were alone, to inflict such a blow--to pass unpunished, but cheerfully afford us an opportunity to return it; and wash away the stigma the Indians will cast on the Character and Bravery of the Company's officers.<sup>103</sup>

These arguments, however, were in vain.

James Anderson felt that the cost of men and supplies needed to repair Selkirk's commerce and punish the Chilkats was too great. He sympathized with Campbell's frustration, but sympathy could not change the fact that the Fort Selkirk outfit had always been on the credit side of the balance sheet. Anderson did not understand that Campbell had been involved in a trade war, a war in which he seldom had the weapons with which to fight. He felt that Campbell's insistence on another try for Fort Selkirk was because ". . . his views have been so long and intensely directed to one absorbing object that they have become distorted and he can no longer see things in their true colors."<sup>104</sup> One color Campbell could see was red, and in a Highlander's anger he would not accept Anderson's decision. Even the fact that the Council of the Northern Department had finally promoted Campbell to Chief Trader did not allay his determination.

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<sup>103</sup>Report, Robert Campbell--James Anderson, November 4, 1852, quoted in C. Wilson, Campbell of the Yukon, p. 126.

<sup>104</sup>p.A.C., Anderson Papers, James Anderson--Sir George Simpson, November 20, 1852, MG 19 A 29.

In August of 1851 Campbell had applied for a leave of absence to visit his home in Scotland. He took advantage of that leave and as soon as the ice of the Mackenzie was thick enough, set out on showshoes for Governor Simpson's home at Lachine, near Montreal. The journey, which occupied a day more than four months, was an epic feat. Three thousand miles of it, from Fort Simpson to Crow Wing, Minnesota, were covered by snowshoe, setting a distance record which would stand for many years.<sup>105</sup>

Although Sir George Simpson was impressed with Campbell's march, he was not moved by the explorer's arguments. Simpson agreed with Chief Trader Anderson: if Fort Selkirk were reestablished, the Company would have to supply enough resources and men to not only successfully trade but also to inflict some punitive measure on the Chilkats. That was a burden that Simpson did not want to assume. Campbell was persuaded by the tactful Governor to forget the Yukon, and now that he was so close to Europe, avail himself of the opportunity to visit, after an absence of twenty-three years, his native Scotland.

In April of 1853 Campbell booked passage on the steamship H.M. S. Asia; he would never see the Yukon country again.

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<sup>105</sup>Campbell, Two Campbell Journals, p. 146. This remarkable journey caused J.W. Waddy, husband of Campbell's granddaughter, to note in the margin of the explorer's journal, "My God, what a man."

## CHAPTER X

### AFTERMATH

The decision not to reestablish Fort Selkirk was the first step in a general retreat by the Hudson's Bay Company from the upper Yukon and upper Liard River areas. Frances Lake had already been abandoned in the spring of 1851, and Pelly Banks followed soon after. In 1865 Fort Halkett was abandoned. Of the frontier posts established during Governor Simpson's thirty year expansion program only Fort Yukon and Peel River Post (or as it became known in the late nineteenth century, Fort McPherson) endured.

Was the Hudson's Bay Company's expansion into the Yukon just an expensive failure; and if so, what were the deciding factors which eroded the efforts of men such as John McLeod and Robert Campbell?

Governor Simpson and his explorers were correct in assuming that the upper Liard and Yukon River areas were rich in furs. Following the Klondike Gold Rush, the fur trade became an important industry in the Yukon. In the years 1927-28 alone, well over six hundred thousand dollars in furs were traded.<sup>1</sup> Such profits brought the Hudson's Bay Company back to Fort Selkirk, and the post was rebuilt in 1938. The Company's failure to fully exploit the area's fur resources in the

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<sup>1</sup>Adrian Tanner, Trappers, Hunters, and Fishermen: Wildlife Utilization in the Yukon Territory, Yukon Research Projects Series No. 5 (Ottawa: Department of Northern Affairs and Natural Resources, 1966), p. 11.

mid-nineteenth century was the result of three critical factors: the supply of trade goods, the rigors of competition, and the lack of any strategic policy toward the transmountain region.

In his arguments for abandoning Fort Selkirk in 1852, James Anderson stressed the high cost of transporting trade goods across the mountains to the Yukon River posts.<sup>2</sup> This was indeed a problem, but not the Company's only one, or for that matter, the most pressing supply liability. The type of goods brought into the Yukon was also an important matter. The Athabaskan Indian tribes of the Yukon interior, although anxious for certain European goods, particularly guns and powder, were most interested in trading for items of esthetic, symbolic and ritual importance. Of paramount importance in this regard were hyaque and glass trade beads.

Hyaque was the Indian name for dentalia, a type of shell found on the shores of the northwest coast. White in color and tubular in shape, hyaque was used as a medium of exchange among most of the Indians of the Pacific slope.<sup>3</sup> The Hudson's Bay Company's Columbia Department had easy access to a major source of these shells in the Nootka Sound region. A limited number of hyaque were brought into the Mackenzie District, but not enough to have a large effect on the trade. James Anderson tried to rectify this situation in November of 1851. In a

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<sup>2</sup>Public Archives of Canada, The James Anderson Papers, James Anderson--Sir George Simpson, November 20, 1852, MG 19 A 29.

<sup>3</sup>Sir George Simpson, Fur Trade and Empire: Sir George Simpson's 1824-1825, rev. ed., ed. Frederick Merk (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 96n.

memorandum to Chief Factor John Ballenden of the Columbia Department, Anderson pointed out that

. . . the HBC supply the Russian Am. Co. with large quantities of hyaque for their Northern Trade, strange to say, tho' urgent demands have been made for these shells by Mess<sup>r</sup> Murray & Campbell . . . we have not only been deprived of an essential article of trade for the Posts, west of the mountains, but have continued furnishing our Russian Rivals with arms to oppose us.<sup>4</sup>

To the Indians of the Yukon region, dentalia were a symbol of status.<sup>5</sup> Murray claimed that a box of hyaque shells "would be worth over two thousand pounds" at Fort Yukon, and that because the Company could not supply the Indians with shells, they were withholding some of their furs.<sup>6</sup>

Glass beads were another high demand item among the Yukon Indians. Like hyaque the beads were not supplied in sufficient numbers during the first years of operations at Fort Selkirk, Pelly Banks, and Fort Yukon. Both of these items were compact, light in weight, and cheaply obtained. The Company might have better established itself on the upper Yukon had these goods been available. Instead, bulky, less popular cloth items such as capots and blankets, which the Indians balked at buying, even as a last resort, were included in the trade

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<sup>4</sup>Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba. James Anderson--John Ballenden, November 30, 1851, B. 200/b/26 fos. 11. Hereafter this collection will be referred to as H.B.C.A.

<sup>5</sup>Catharine McClellan, My Old People Say: An Ethnographic Survey of the Southern Yukon Territory (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1975), pp. 317-318.

<sup>6</sup>Alexander Hunter Murray, Journal of the Yukon, 1847-1848, ed. Lawrence H. Burpee, Publications of the Canadian Archives No. 4 (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1910), pp. 72, 67.

outfits.<sup>7</sup>

The Company's failure to successfully anticipate the special demands of the Yukon Indians was aggravated by the presence of the intertribal trade networks. Indian traders posed an alternative to the Hudson's Bay Company's pioneer posts. Not only were the Chilkats and other middlemen able to supply hyaque, beads, and other traditional goods, but they were often joined to interior tribes through commercially advantageous marriages.<sup>8</sup> The Company, in spite of its experience at Dease Lake in 1838-39, did not view the Tlingit traders as legitimate rivals. In the mid-nineteenth century it was Company policy to challenge any and all competitors in its territory and to accept the expenses of a trade war for the eventual advantages of monopoly. However, George Simpson never launched a concerted effort against the Chilkats. Campbell was never given the means to drive them from the field. Perhaps the reason for this, ironically enough, was that the Chilkat themselves were customers of the Hudson's Bay Company, supplied by the steamer Beaver on the Pacific coast.

This anomaly of supplying the very competitors who drove them from the Yukon area reveals the overriding reason for failure of the Hudson's Bay Company's expansion campaign. Throughout the thirty year effort, the Company executives never mapped out a coherent plan for exploiting the fruits of westward exploration. In 1789 Sir Alexander MacKenzie heard of a large river valley to the west of the MacKenzie

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>8</sup>McClellan, My Old People Say, pp. 506-507.

mountains. In the 1820's Sir George Simpson broadly directed his field officers to expand westward to reach that new territory. Seldom, however, were the means in terms of men and trade goods allotted to accomplish this task. Exploration, therefore, proceeded slowly, constrained by the leash of economy. Whether the Company wished to find a route to the Pacific, establish a new district west of the mountains (like New Caledonia to the south), or merely expand the MacKenzie District never was decided. The explorers received little general guidance and even less support from the Company as a whole.

Only the rivalry with the Russian-American Company temporarily gave the explorers a concrete goal--the Skike River. That, however, was only for the short period between 1834-1839. After that there was only the vague objective of reaching the elusive Colville River. Neither Sir George Simpson or the members of the Company's Cordon Committee attempted to incorporate the activities of Robert Campbell or John Bell into the overall picture of the Hudson's Bay Company's operating in western America. They did not articulate, for instance, any plan to develop the Yukon Valley's fur trade to compensate for the loss of the Columbia River to the United States in 1846. Rather, they viewed the explorations only in the narrow perspective of the MacKenzie Valley trade. The accomplishments of men like Robert Campbell were valued only in their relationship to the general accounts of the district. When expansion did not show a short-run profit, it was ended.

Following the sack of Fort Selkirk, the Chilkats regained their commercial hegemony over the southern Yukon. Their trade with the Tutchone and Tagish continued as it had in previous decades, as if Campbell

had never seen the Yukon. As the nineteenth century progressed, their trade was again threatened by the white men, this time from the coast. The Tlingit tried to keep white men out of the Yukon interior by controlling the passes through the Coast Mountains. This policy was successful until the Klondike Gold Rush in 1898 when hordes of miners swept past the Chilkats and flooded into the Yukon, destroying by weight of numbers the old aboriginal trade system.

The Hudson's Bay Company, with its sole base at Fort Yukon, also tried to maintain its position in the area. Fort Yukon grew to become one of the Company's most profitable posts. The post collected \$6,000 worth of furs in 1868 alone.<sup>9</sup> Such profits, however, did not last for long. In 1863 the Russians finally roused themselves enough to investigate the British post in their territory. The spy, Simpson Lukeen, had the honor of joining the British-explored upper Yukon with the Russian lower Yukon. In spite of the proof of British trespassing that Lukeen brought back to Fort St. Michael, the Russian-American Company failed to initiate even a protest against the Hudson's Bay Company's post.

The Americans, after the Alaskan Purchase in 1867, were not quite so understanding. After diplomatic protests failed to produce a British withdrawal from Fort Yukon, the United States War Department dispatched Captain Charles W. Raymond, a military engineer, to ascertain the true location of the post. In the summer of 1869 Raymond arrived

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<sup>9</sup>H.B.C.A., John Wilson--William Tolmie, August 27, 1869, A 1/85 fos. 21-22.



at Fort Yukon and conducted a series of observations which established that the post was over a hundred miles inside United States territory. Raymond raised the American flag and took possession of the post. It was a much more polite eviction notice than the one that Robert Campbell had received from the Chilkats, but the result was the same. The Company quit the fort and established another called Rampart House up the Porcupine River. In 1889 this post was also found to be within American territory and the British again moved, this time into their own territory.<sup>10</sup>

Although Sir George Simpson's plan of establishing a rich fur district west of the Mackenzie Mountains failed, the process of expansion yielded rich by-products. The most important of these was the increase in geographic knowledge which resulted from the fur trade explorations.

In 1853, when Robert Campbell returned to Great Britain on leave, he reported to geographers and mapmakers the findings of the Hudson's Bay Company's explorers in the far northwest. In particular, he met with the cartographers of the famous Arrowsmith firm, whose maps chronicled the exploration of North America. Campbell's data filled in a vast empty space of map. The area west of the Mackenzie River had been occupied by little but conjecture and even the irrepressible, though apocryphal, concept of "Cook's River" found life there. Arrowsmith's 1854 map of British America, based on the Company's explorations,

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<sup>10</sup>B. D. Lain, "The Fort Yukon Affair, 1869." The Alaskan Journal 7 (Winter 1977): 15-16.

changed that. The great rivers of the northwest, the Peel, Liard, Stikine, Porcupine, the headwaters of the Yukon, the Pelly and Lewes rivers, were all accurately laid out.

The explorations of the Hudson's Bay Company sketched out a blueprint from which the development of the far northwest could proceed. Men like Robert Campbell, John Bell, and John McLeod provided the first information concerning one of the most resource-rich areas of the continent. George Dawson and R.G. McConnell of the Canadian Geological Survey continued the Hudson's Bay Company's work, inventorying the specific resources of the Yukon region. It was these scientific surveys, guided by the maps and notes of the fur trade explorers, which opened the door for the Gold Rush stampedes of the late nineteenth century.

Following his leave of absence in 1853, Robert Campbell returned to the Mackenzie District. He was stationed at Fort Liard from 1853-55. While there he was grieved by the deaths of many of his old companions. Kitza, who with Lapie, had been Campbell's assistant for fifteen years, died in the fur trader's arms. Gauche, the "prophet" during the 1843 exploration of the Pelly River, died in 1854.

In 1855 Campbell was given charge of the Athabasca District, where he proved himself an able administrator. Campbell married Eleonora C. Stirling, from the village of Comire, Scotland, in August of 1859. In the spring of 1860 Eleonora gave him a son, the first white boy born on the continent's Arctic slope. Campbell was promoted to the rank of Chief Factor in 1867. Disappointment, however, continued to stalk him. His wife died of typhoid fever in 1871 while the family was

visiting Europe. Upon his return to Canada two months later, Campbell was unjustly reprimanded by Chief Commissioner Donald Smith for his handling of Company affairs during the Riel Rebellion. This injury, on the heels of his wife's death, drove the trader to tender his resignation from the Company, an action he had considered for some months. It was with some bitterness that Campbell ended his forty-one year career in the Hudson's Bay Company.

Campbell retired to a ranch near Riding Mountain National Park in the present province of Manitoba. He was made a member of the Royal Geographic Society in 1872. The hardy explorer died in 1894. He was eighty-six years old.

John Bell, who had explored the fur trade's northern approach to the Yukon River, never achieved the prominence of Robert Campbell. Though Bell was stationed in the Mackenzie District for twenty-five years he was never fond of the posting and always hoped to be stationed south of Portage La Loche. As early as 1837 he felt he was "being doomed to pass my best days in this dismal and secluded part of the country, without any prospect of change."<sup>11</sup> Bell felt that his service as assistant to Sir John Richardson's Franklin Search Expedition would be rewarded with a transfer south. But as he was leaving the district with Richardson he received orders sending him back north.

From 1849-1850 Bell was at Fort Liard. He also rendered considerable assistance to John Rae in his management of the district. Finally in 1851 Bell received a posting in a milder climate. For two

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<sup>11</sup>G. P. De T. Glazebrook, ed., The Hargrave Correspondence, 1821-1843 (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1938), p. 253.

years he commanded the Cumberland District, along the lower Saskatchewan River. Then from 1853-1855 he was head of the Athabasca District. Bell's tenure at Fort Chipewyan, the district headquarters, was less than successful. When he turned over command to an old comrade, Robert Campbell, its affairs were rather disorganized. Bell then enjoyed a year's leave before he was given charge of the Company's post at Sept-Iles, on the St. Lawrence River. Sept-Iles was as close to large cities such as Quebec, as Bell's former post at Peel River had been to Fort Simpson. He remained in this pleasant situation until 1860 when he retired from the Company's service.

John Bell had been married to the daughter of another fur trader-explorer, Peter Warren Dease. His wife bore him at least two daughters. Upon retirement Bell moved to Saugeen, in the present province of Ontario. He died in 1868 at the age of sixty-nine.

Alexander Hunter Murray and his wife Elizabeth remained at Fort Yukon until 1851. While there, Mrs. Murray gave birth to three daughters, the first white children born in arctic America. It was concern for his family which made Murray anxious to be transferred to a less isolated post. The Company facilitated this and for the next few years Murray was stationed at various posts along the United States border. In 1856 he was promoted to the rank of Chief Trader. Murray always remained very proud of his role in the establishment of Fort Yukon, the Company's most removed post. In 1861 Mrs. Murray and he supplied valuable data concerning the Indians of the northwest to pioneer anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan.

Murray retired from the Hudson's Bay Company in 1867. He lived

for seven years on a small farm along the Red River until his death in 1874. He was only fifty-six years old.

For Sir George Simpson, Overseas Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company, the destruction of Fort Selkirk was the end of a thirty year era of Company-sponsored explorations to expand the fur trade. Expeditions such as Chief Trader Anderson's and Dr. John Rae's Franklin Search teams continued, but no longer did the Company have a terra incognita in which Simpson could envision new and prosperous fur trade districts. The Governor himself suffered declining health, though he tried to maintain his brisk schedule and firm grasp of Company affairs. This active nature is illustrated by Simpson's comment: "it is . . . strange that all my ailments vanish as soon as I seat myself in a canoe."<sup>12</sup> The Governor's body, however, could not keep pace with his feisty spirit. In 1860, while returning from a business trip, Simpson suffered an attack of apoplexy. Six days later he was dead.

The "Little Emperor," as Simpson was known, was a complex man. He was capable of extreme pettiness and gave many examples of a harsh, callous nature. At the same time he could play the role of a friend, counsellor and mentor, as he did for Robert Campbell. Above all, Simpson was a man of continental vision. He saw North America as a geographic unity, whose various parts were open to his firm's commerce. That Sir George Simpson's plans for the Yukon region did not bear fruit and that his attitude toward exploration was inconsistent does not detract from the fact that he was one of the great Empire builders of

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<sup>12</sup>John S. Galbraith, "The Enigma of Sir George Simpson," The Beaver (Spring, 1976):9.

the nineteenth century, an era made for men such as Simpson, Murray, Bell, and Campbell.

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APPROVAL SHEET

The dissertation submitted by Theodore J. Karamanski has been read and approved by the following committee:

Dr. Robert W. McCluggage, Director  
Professor of History, Loyola

Dr. James L. Penick  
Professor of History, Loyola

Dr. Franklin A. Walker  
Professor of History, Loyola

The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval by the Committee with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

11/16/79  
Date

Robert W. McCluggage  
Director's Signature