

THE DESPATCH OF TROOPS
TO RED RIVER, 1846, IN RELATION
TO THE OREGON QUESTION

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PREFACE

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CHAPTER I

THE STORMY ORIGIN OF SETTLEMENT AT RED RIVER

This thesis is concerned with an investigation into the hitherto little discussed relationship between the settlement of the Oregon Boundary Question and the arrival of British Troops at the Red River Settlement. The Oregon Question has received much attention and the development of trouble at Red River has been explored, but little has been done to show the relationship that existed between them.¹ However, before examining the nature of these crises, it is necessary to take a cursory glance at the geography of the Canadian West, the early history of the colony at Red River and the background of the Oregon dispute.

The term "Canadian West" as used here refers to the prairie area which to-day is located in the three prairie provinces. This region is flanked on the west by the Rocky Mountains, on the north and east by the Laurentian Shield, and on the south by the Mississippi-Missouri Valley. In fact, the prairie region is an extension of this inland plain. The Laurentian Shield overlaps the present provinces on the north and east; about two-thirds of Manitoba, one-third of Saskatchewan and one-sixth of Alberta form part of it.

Because of the barriers imposed by the Rockies and the Shield,

¹The exceptions to this are: A. S. Morton, Sir George Simpson (Toronto, 1944) and C. P. Stacey, "The Hudson's Bay Company and Anglo-American Military Rivalries During the Oregon Dispute," Canadian Historical Review, vol. 18, June, 1937, pp. 281-300.

the easiest entry into the Canadian West is from the south. However, the first whites reached the west by following a difficult passage, which skirted the southern part of the Shield. This paradox is explained by the fact that the first whites to arrive in the west came in search of furs. Because the Laurentian Shield was a natural home for fur bearing animals, the traders pushed further and further into it until the plains were reached.

From the appearance of whites in the west, it was the scene of fur trade rivalry. Just as French traders were pushing westward into the Shield area, the Hudson's Bay Company, also interested in the fur trade, began to establish posts on Hudson Bay. Because the Bay offered a cheap water route, compared to the difficult passage of the Shield, the Hudson's Bay Company had a considerable advantage over its French rivals. For this and other reasons, it was able to sell its goods to the Indians at lower prices than the French. The French answer to this was to push around the south of the Bay in order to intercept the flow of furs from the Indians of the hinterland to the English posts on Hudson Bay.

As the French pushed westward from Canada, they had to live in close contact with the Indians for increasingly long periods and gradually they adopted many Indian habits. In time, much intermarriage between French and Indians took place. When, finally, the French broke through the Laurentian barrier into the prairie west, they had been modified by their long contacts with the Indians, and many French voy-

ageurs decided to stay in the west, living in native fashion. Therefore, when France finally lost Canada in 1763, a new group of considerable size had developed. This group, of mixed French and Indian blood, known as *métis*, while concentrated in the west, was also located at strategic spots along the route from Canada.²

After the English conquest of Canada, English fur traders from the colonies to the south moved north and began to use Montreal as their headquarters. Soon the English traders had taken over the organization developed by the French and were pushing along the French routes into the prairie west.

The Hudson's Bay Company, with the economic advantage conferred upon it by its monopoly of the Bay route, for many years was content to sit on the shores of the Bay.³ It was only in the past years of French occupation of Canada that French competition was beginning to force the Bay officials to consider pushing into the hinterland.⁴ However, the

²This is but an extremely brief indication of Marcel Giraud's account of the development of the French half breed. Marcel Giraud, Le Métis Canadien (Paris, 1945), pp. 293-379.

³Giraud finds that the chief reasons why a large Anglo-Indian group did not develop were, that the Hudson's Bay Company remained on the shores of the Bay for a century and also Company policy tried to minimize the contact between Company servants and the Indians in order to lessen the danger of Indian hostility. Despite these factors a small Anglo-Indian group did develop.

⁴This question is examined by A. S. Morton, A History of the Canadian West to 1870-71, (London, n.d.), pp. 239-42. Morton comes to the conclusion that after 1750, the Hudson's Bay Company was faced with a crisis due to French competition. The decision to advance into the interior was put off until the victory at the conclusion of the Seven Years War temporarily eliminated the necessity of pushing inland.

Seven Years War and the conquest of Canada gave the Company a respite. But with the new organizations of Montreal combining Anglo-Scot financial talent and organizational ability, with French understanding of the Indians, the Hudson's Bay Company soon found that the 'pedlars' from Canada were much more formidable rivals than the French alone had been. As a result, the Company was forced to abandon its policy of sitting on the Bay and to erect posts inland.

The 'pedlars' found that it required considerable capital to overcome the disadvantages of the long route from Montreal, thus small individual enterprises were amalgamated into larger, more financially stable concerns. By the close of the eighteenth century, the process of consolidation was almost complete. The opening years of the new century saw intense competition, amounting almost to private warfare between the great Montreal companies, the North West Company and the X Y Company, for the domination of the southern route and the rich fur areas of the Athabasca region. Finally, in 1804, the members of the X Y Company were absorbed into the rival concern, and the North West Company was able to direct its attention to the destruction of its northern rival, the Hudson's Bay Company.

Declining profits during the first decade of the nineteenth century, made the Governor and Committee of the Hudson's Bay Company aware of the increasing competition of the Norwesters. In order to meet this increasing competition, in 1810-11, a general reorganization of the Company took place. Part of this reorganization was the proposal of one

of the stockholders, Lord Selkirk, to found a colony in the Company's territory.⁵ Selkirk was aware of the high cost of shipping food to the posts of the Company, and if activities were to be expanded, these foods costs would rise. At the same time, Selkirk was genuinely worried about the condition of the people in certain of the economically depressed areas of Scotland. He, therefore, suggested that the Company make him a grant of land, upon which he could settle emigrants from Scotland who would be able to contribute to the food supplies of the inland posts. In this manner, not only would the posts be provided with a cheap food supply, but, in addition, some of the economic distress of Scotland would be relieved. The plan was approved, the grant made, officials for the Settlement appointed and the recruiting of the emigrants commenced. Thus was born the colony to which the Oregon crisis was to bring a British garrison. It had a stormy infancy.

The Norwesters heard of these plans with anger. They had been convinced that, despite the advantage of the Bay route enjoyed by the Company, they would soon drive it out of business. Now, the Company was not only reacting to their challenge, but reacting in a manner that posed a direct threat to them, for the colony planned by the Company lay right across the Norwesters' route to the rich northland. Consequently, the Norwesters regarded the projected colony as an attempt by the

⁵Ibid., p. 532-3. Morton shows that at the time of the grant, Selkirk was not one of the major stockholders, as has been sometimes stated.

Company to interrupt their trade routes.

The opposition of the North West Company to the colony was shown even before the colonists left Scotland. The Norwesters used family connections to discourage would-be emigrants. The most horrible tales of life in the west were circulated. These manoeuvres failed to thwart the Company and, on July 26, 1811, the advance party of settlers, numbering 70, left Scotland for Red River under the command of Miles Macdonell.

The party was forced to winter at York Factory and the following year, though much reduced in size,⁶ reached the junction of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers on August 30. Though the opposition of the North West Company was soon evident, the greatest hardship the party suffered was from a shortage of food. Because of this, it was decided to winter at Pembina River, in order to be near the wintering ground of the buffalo.

The party went down to Pembina River, where they built Fort Daer and where, too, they were joined by the second group of colonists late in the year. While the buffalo were fairly near, the settlers proved to be poor hunters, and had to purchase much of their food from the half breeds and Indians in order to avoid starvation.

In the summer of 1813, further efforts were made at the Forks, but in the fall the settlers had to return to Fort Daer. It was there on January 8, 1814, that Miles Macdonell issued his famous "Pemmican Embargo." Up till then, while the hostility of the Norwesters had been

⁶Chester Martin, Lord Selkirk's Work in Canada (Oxford, 1916), p. 43.

shown in many ways, they had not made a concerted attack upon the colonists.

The Norwesters, however, reacted violently to this Embargo. They did not see it as a measure designed to protect the settlers from starvation, but as an insidious attack upon their company.⁷ The long supply lines from Montreal necessitated a reliance upon some local source of food if the company was to show a profit. Macdonell's Embargo, therefore, was an attempt to deny the North West Company the use of pemmican to provision their western posts. If the Embargo was enforced, the North West Company could not operate.

The Norwesters held a meeting at Fort William in June, 1814 and worked out a plan, not only to defeat the Embargo, but to destroy the colony.⁸ Duncan Cameron and Alexander Macdonell of Fort Gibraltar were chosen as the chief agents and instructed to enlist the métis as active allies. This they succeeded in doing by appealing to the métis as the heirs of the Indians and "Lords of the Soil", to protect their own interests by preventing the settlers from usurping their title to the land. By this appeal and by flattering them as the "New

⁷While there is little doubt that Macdonell proclaimed the Embargo in order to protect the settlers, it is also quite evident he knew that by doing so, he was asking for trouble. His instructions from Selkirk told him to avoid arousing the Norwesters. J. P. Pritchett, The Red River Valley, 1811-1849 (New Haven, 1942), pp. 129-131. In actual practise, Macdonell modified the Embargo to permit the brigades of the North West Company to secure pemmican. Morton, Canadian West, pp. 557-8.

⁸The wintering partners of the North West Company had reached a rough compromise with Macdonell, but the Montreal partners insisted upon the destruction of the colony. Pritchett, Red River Valley, pp. 147-8.

Nation", Cameron and Macdonell succeeded in rousing in the métis, what Giraud calls their 'national pretensions'⁹ or, more accurately, a group consciousness. At the instigation of the Norwesters, the métis adopted a flag and asserted their claim to the soil.

On June 11, 1815, the Norwesters led the métis in an attack upon the Settlement. Miles Macdonell was captured and sent off to Fort William. Some of the settlers were persuaded to leave for Upper Canada, others who showed signs of wanting to remain, were ordered to abandon the colony and on June 26, a party of half breeds set fire to the buildings of the colony.

The refugees went north to Jack River, where they remained until the arrival of Colin Robertson, who was leading a Hudson's Bay Company expedition into the Athabaska country. He persuaded the refugees to return to the colony. When Robertson and his party arrived, they found that things were not as bad as they had expected and all set to work to restore the colony. Shortly after, they were joined by a new group of settlers just out from Scotland, under the command of Robert Semple, who had recently been appointed Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company territories in America. A good harvest and a decline in the visible opposition of the Norwesters revived the spirits of the colonists, and they celebrated the resurrection of the fort and the rebirth of the colony.

⁹These 'national pretensions' were rather rudimentary, for the métis wanted to model their nation on that of the Sioux. Giraud, Le Métis Canadien, p. 552.

Meanwhile, Lord Selkirk had reached Montreal where he heard of the attack of the Norwesters. He applied for military protection for the colony, but through the influence of the Norwesters, this was refused. However, Selkirk heard that some of the men of two disbanded regiments, the De Meuron and De Wattville, were available for employment. Thus, Selkirk was able to enlist about 100 men and four officers of these regiments¹⁰ to go to Red River as soldier-settlers and arrangements were made for them to accompany Selkirk to the colony in 1816.

In the northwest, while on the surface it appeared as though the opposition of the Norwesters to the colonists had ceased, in reality a more concerted attack on the colony was being planned. This attack, the Norwesters were determined, would destroy the colony for all time. Guthbert Grant had been sent to round up the métis from the Qu'Appelle River region and this group was to be assisted by reinforcements sent out from Fort William. The two groups were to meet near the colony and launch their attack in the early summer of 1816.

Robertson, anticipating a plot against the colony, seized Fort Gibraltar and took Duncan Cameron to Fort Douglas. Governor Semple seemed unwilling to continue Robertson's aggressive policy, and after a quarrel with Semple, Robertson departed for York Factory. Semple then made belated efforts to strengthen Fort Douglas and also tore down Fort Gibraltar.

¹⁰A few men of the Glengarry Fencibles also were enlisted by Selkirk. Pritchett, Red River Valley, p. 182.

The loss of the Norwesters' base at the Forks did not deter the métis from attacking the colony. On June 18, under the command of Grant, a group of fifty to sixty métis set out from Portage la Prairie for the Forks. Though they did not meet their reinforcements from Fort William, the band, in the evening of June 19, approached Fort Douglas.

Semple was fully aware that an attack was to be expected. Therefore, a watch had been posted, and as the métis approached, the alarm was raised. Semple collected a group of about twenty-six men, and not waiting for an attack on the post, set out to meet the painted horsemen. Before advancing very far, Semple realized that the métis were too strong for his group, so he ordered one man to return for a fieldpiece and reinforcements. Before they arrived, however, Semple ordered his men to advance once more.

As the settlers approached the métis, a few words were exchanged between the two groups, then suddenly, a shot was fired.¹¹ This seemed to be a signal, for immediately there was a rapid exchange, in which the settlers were worsted. Soon, the firing slackened as the métis realized that opposition had ceased. Occasionally a shout was heard as the métis killed one of the wounded. This was the familiar "Massacre of Seven Oaks" in which twenty-three were killed. Of these, one

¹¹Governor Semple, who by his foolishness contributed to the disaster, was one of the first to be killed. Alexander Ross, Red River Settlement (London, 1856), p. 37.

was a follower of Grant's, thus Semple and practically all his group were killed. Fort Douglas then capitulated and on June 22, the remaining settlers again set out for Jack River.

Meanwhile, on May 5, an advance guard of Selkirk's soldier-settlers, under Miles Macdonell, had left Montreal. Within six weeks, the remainder of the expedition including Selkirk, who had recently been appointed justice of the peace for the Indian Territories, set out for Red River.

On June 29, while a few miles from Lake Winnipeg, Macdonell heard of the second destruction of the colony. He returned east immediately. On July 25, he met Selkirk at Sault Ste. Marie and informed him of this latest disaster. Selkirk decided to deal with the Norwesters and set out for Fort William at once.

With his whole force, Selkirk landed a short distance from Fort William on August 12. The following day William McGillivray, one of the partners of the North West Company, was arrested, but when the other partners resisted arrest, the De Meurons, under Captain D'Orsonnes, seized the fort.¹²

During the winter, further steps were taken to weaken the Norwesters and to regain control of the area at the Forks. Early in

¹²Selkirk believed that from the evidence found at Fort William, he had sufficient justification for his actions. He found out later that he was greatly mistaken. An account of his later difficulties is to be found in Morton, Canadian West, pp. 594-600.

December, Miles Macdonell led a party on towards Red River, and on December 10, D'Orsonnes with twenty-eight men and two field pieces followed after him. The two parties joined up and, after the capture of Fort Daer on December 31, they advanced against Fort Douglas. During the night of January 10, 1817, the party gained an entrance to the fort, the Norwesters were called upon to surrender and without a sign of resistance, they did so.

News of the capture of Fort Douglas was sent to Selkirk at Fort William and the settlers who were wintering at Jack River. Some of the younger settlers immediately returned to the Forks, in order to prepare for the return of the rest of the group. When Selkirk heard of the capture, he determined to set out for the Red River as soon as possible, and he reached the Forks on June 21.

Selkirk, during his stay at Red River, did his best to make up for the former hardships of the colonists and to guard the settlement against any possible attack in the future. The old colonists were treated very generously, the ex-soldiers were established on the land and a treaty concluded with the Indians. In addition, a large experimental farm was planned, roads and bridges were laid out. When, after a three month's stay in the colony, Selkirk set out for the east, the settlement had been re-established and was in fact, stronger than it had ever been in the past. Thus, Selkirk was able to leave with the feeling that at last success was at hand.

Though Selkirk's fortunes declined rapidly from this date on-

ward, his visit to the colony marked the turning point in its existence. Though the struggle between the two companies continued, the scene of the major struggle shifted from the Red River to the Athabaska country, and the colony was left at peace. The colony continued to suffer, not from the antagonism of man, but of nature.

Finally, in 1821, the great struggle between the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company was ended, for in that year, the companies united into one; the new Hudson's Bay Company.

CHAPTER II

TRADE AND DISCONTENT AT THE COLONY

The union of the companies opened a new era in the life of the people at Red River Settlement. Trade rivalry, which had involved the colony in situations of danger, was over. The peace brought many changes, not the least of which was an increase in size.

Shortly after the arrival of Selkirk at Red River together with about one hundred soldier-settlers, a group of about forty French Canadians, accompanied by Roman Catholic priests, journeyed to the colony, As a result of the persuasion of the priests and the loss of employment because of the union, a large number of métis soon were led to settle in the colony. In addition, an agent of Selkirk had recruited a band of settlers in Switzerland, and they, numbering about 170, reached Red River in 1821.¹ More important for the long term growth of the colony, however, were the discharged servants of the Companies who settled at Red River following the union.

The two companies, in their great struggle, had hired many non-essential and non-productive men in order to overawe their opponents. There was now no need for these supernumeraries; moreover, there were many individuals who were essential to the efficiency of one company, but by the very union were no longer needed. Beginning in 1821, a large number of discharged employees of the former companies settled at

¹Pritchett, Red River Valley, p. 224. The Swiss did not stay long. As early as 1823, some were planning to leave. E. H. Oliver, ed., The Canadian North-West (Ottawa, 1914), pp. 228-9. After the flood of 1826, the remainder left the settlement. Ibid., p. 261.

the colony.

On March 27, 1822, Captain Andrew Bulger was appointed Governor of the District of Assiniboia,² Shortly after his arrival, Bulger remarked, concerning the colony:

By far the greater part of our population. . . are sunk in vice and depravity, and daring enough to despise our laws and openly to defy our magistrates. . . Even now, no one can be found to interpose and act as magistrate, to such a frightful height has the evil grown. . . Nothing but the presence of a military force to aid the civil power can prevent the country from becoming very soon a den of thieves, for no honest man will remain in it.³

Two years later, George Simpson, Governor of the Northern Department, wrote a long letter to Andrew Colville. In this letter Simpson gave his opinion regarding the various groups which comprised the colony. Because of their tractability, Simpson regarded the ex-servants as the best settlers, followed closely by the industrious Scottish, who "considered Red River as much their home as the land of their nativity formerly was...."⁴ The Meurons and Swiss "are wretched settlers", for Simpson found them improvident and lacking in industry. When he turned to deal with the métis, Simpson wrote at some length, showing that they were by far the most dangerous element in Red River Society. "I do most

²Oliver, North-West, pp. 218-9. Bulger received two appointments on March 27, 1822; one as Governor of Assiniboia which he received from the Governor and Committee of the Hudson's Bay Company; the other, as agent for Lord Selkirk's estate, from Andrew Colville, the Executor and Trustee of Selkirk's Estate.

³Ibid., p. 224.

⁴Pritchett, Red River Valley, p. 232.