

Donald McKinzie

The Key of the North West

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DONALD MACKENZIE: THE KING OF THE NORTHWEST.

The mind of the aging man turns to the scenes of his youth and early prime. When he meditates upon the eternal eventualities, memory carries him back to his native heath, and his reflections are eased by the hope that his ashes will mingle with the soil which gave him birth.

But Donald MacKenzie does not sleep the deep sleep at Inverness, the capital of the MacKenzie clan in Scotland and where the future King of the Northwest found his birth place on June 15, 1783.

He does not rest at Fort William, now the leading grain port at the head of Lake Superior, but one century ago, the capital of the North West Fur Company, no less than the center of the commercial enterprise, and the social and political intrigue of the vast Hudson's Bay territories.

And is there a tomb to mark for him a resting place at thriving Winnipeg? No, the man who had his Seat at the then Fort Garry, and who by virtue of his Governorship ruled the vast Provinces now known as Manitoba, Alberta, and Saskatchewan, does not sleep under the soil over which he reigned for eight years as a Governor of His Majesty's Hudson's Bay Company.

Donald MacKenzie sleeps the Celestial Sleep in Evergreen

Cemetery, just at the foot of Mayville Hill and overlooking the waters of Lake Chautauqua.)

The Regents of New York State once required the reading of Washington Irving's "Astoria" for purposes of high school study. There I gleaned my first knowledge of Donald MacKenzie. Later I became interested in the development of Western Canada; my studies of and trips through that region, brought home to me the name "MacKenzie" on many occasions. But one must go a long way from home to get the real importance of news events. (The London Times) publishes an obituary column which is distinguished throughout the world for its discriminating freedom from funeral platitudes, and its devoted effort to chronicle the achievements of those who have passed from the King's service by death. During the early part of 1912, I found at the bottom of an article devoted to a deceased Peer of the Realm, the following item:--

London Times
"Our Mayville, New York, correspondent informs us that Henry MacKenzie, one of the surviving sons of Donald MacKenzie, the Canadian Explorer, is dead at that place."

(This item connected my travels in Canada with my previous high school reading. Moreover, it impelled me to study the career and to seek to visualize the personality of a man cast in a large mould. I accepted the invitation of President Charles M. Dow to prepare this paper on "Donald MacKenzie: The King of the Northwest" because I felt that many of our fellow citizens have had but a vague conception of the deeds of this Hero.)

To be born in Scotland, to achieve fame in Oregon and Manitoba, and to live for eighteen years in Chautauqua County, breaks

the links of personal history.

It has been my task to connect some of the links in the historical chain of Donald MacKenzie's life. The MacKenzies have written their names in large letters over the map of Canada. The habit of Dominion historians and biographers of referring to their particular MacKenzie by his last name only, has deepened the confusion in proportion to the books published. But in view of the fact that the record of the MacKenzie clan is distinctive in the history of Scotland and Canada, I shall trace out the career of Donald MacKenzie by a process of exclusion, just as I have been compelled to do in the verification of certain biographical data for the purposes of this paper.

(Thus Donald MacKenzie must not be confused with Sir Alexander MacKenzie, who hailed from the same region of Scotland, and whose explorations placed the MacKenzie River upon the map of Canada in 1789.)

(Nor with Kenneth MacKenzie, who looms large in the "History of the American Fur Trade", by Chittenden, and who in his trading and explorations traversed a large portion of the same territory covered by Donald in his American trip to the Pacific Ocean.

(James MacKenzie was a Governor of the King's Posts in Quebec Province. (Henry MacKenzie served as Secretary of the Northwest Company at Montreal;) and (the premier member of that competitor of the Hudson's Bay Company was Roderick MacKenzie.) These men were first, second, and third cousins of each other.) (They played) a leading part in the lives of each other, (some as friends and others as the executives of rival fur and trading companies.) Between their

friendships and their rivalries, (they placed the name of MacKenzie in the history of North America, beyond erasure.)

(This Roderick MacKenzie was the correspondent of Sir Alexander MacKenzie and the cousin of Donald.) The romantic explorations of Alexander were being told by proud Scotchmen about the time the youth of Donald was getting under way. (Then Roderick MacKenzie was writing home to Glasgow and Edinburgh, as well as to Donald,) telling of the opportunities for young Scotchmen in seeking the vast fur wealth of the Canadian Northwest. Thus the wander lust of the young man was stirred, and (in 1801, Donald MacKenzie, then seventeen years of age, left Scotland for Canada,) where he entered and remained in the employ of the North-west Fur Company for eight years.) During these eight years he received his collegiate training by clerking, trapping, and trading, by exploration and adventure, and by playing a man's part in defending the accumulations of the fur season against the plunder spirit of primitive outlaws and angry Indians. He was a famous man, even in his youth, in this primitive country, and this prestige of the wilderness soon brought him into positions of responsibility.

(The career of Donald MacKenzie, as a factor in the making of North American history, must be timed from the day he connected himself with John Jacob Astor.) The limits of this paper compel me to spare you the details; but the (New York Legislature incorporated the American Fur Company on April 6, 1808.) (The dashing and enterprising John Jacob Astor longed to tap the wealth of the wilderness to invest his profits in the lands of the Metropolis.) (His broad mind conceived the idea of establishing a line of trading posts, connecting the Missouri with the mouth of the Columbia River on the

Pacific. He not only foresaw the commercial possibilities, but he perceived, as his letters to the President and Cabinet officers show, the need of asserting American title to the American Northwest. Rival fur and trading companies were claiming ownership on behalf of their respective governments and without thought of the present international boundary line. (Mr. Astor made overtures for peace, and proposed to consolidate his venture with first one and then the other of existing companies. (Meeting with no success, he decided to offer positions to the best men of the Northwest Fur Company.)

Alexander M'Kay, who had accompanied Sir Alexander MacKenzie in his 1789 and 1793 expeditions.; Duncan M 'Dougal, Donald MacKenzie, and Wilson Price Hunt, of New Jersey, were finally associated with Mr. Astor under a new named corporation: ("The Pacific Fur Company".))

(The Astor party outfitted at Montreal,) the emporium of the Fur Trade. It crossed the Rocky Mountains in 1810, (exploring and establishing trading posts enroute, and finally arrived at the point to be known as Astoria, at the mouth of the Columbia River.) Washington Irving described Donald MacKenzie at this period of his prime as "excelling on those points in which the others were deficient; for he had been for ten years in the interior and valued himself on his knowledge of wood-craft and the strategy of Indian trade and Indian warfare. He had a frame seasoned to toil and hardships; a spirit not to be intimidated, and was reputed to be a (remarkable shot,) which of itself was sufficient to give him renown upon the Frontier."

Once the Pacific Fur Company party had fixed its capital at Astoria, leading members were delegated to establish additional posts at distant points. It was the policy to pre-empt

good trading grounds, as well as to win the ultimate support of the United States Government by pushing the boundary line far north. Donald established the most distant post from Astoria on the Shahaptan. His trading settlement was considered an encroachment upon the territory of earlier and rival companies. He was burdened too by constant fights with Indians in that region. (Supplies did not arrive and the opposition of the rival companies increased. Donald went to the nearest trading post of his associates for conference.) While in consultation with Messrs. Clare and Stuart, a partner of the North-west Company, John George M'Tavish, arrived from the region of Lake Winnipeg, bearing the news that war had been declared between the United States and England. He added the true or false information that an English ship had been sent to seize Astoria. MacKenzie determined to break camp and return to Astoria. There s conference between the Astoria coterie ensued during the summer of 1812. It was decided to abandon Astoria. M'Dougal and MacKenzie argued for abandonment in view of all the circumstances, while less influential partners were against immediate departure. But the will of the stronger men prevailed, and the return was made over the Rockies in several parties. While Washington Irving speaks in terms of personal praise of Donald MacKenzie, he reflects the attitude of his patron, John Jacob Astor, in severely criticizing the position of M'Dougal and MacKenzie in persuading the co-partners to abandon Astoria. (This critical view of the decision of MacKenzie and associates finds favor in the "History of the Lewis and Clarke Expedition", published by direction of the United States Government in 1842.) The Historian Ross takes a sounder view of the decision

of MacKenzie, and he is inclined to look at the vexatious question from the standpoint of the whole issue, rather than to determine it from the viewpoint as to whether Mr. Astor lost money and suffered in prestige. (There can be no question but what the decision of MacKenzie in relation to Astoria was a source of long resentment; but after the war of 1812, Mr. MacKenzie joined with Mr. Astor in seeking to impress upon the United States Government the need of renewed efforts in the Oregon region.) (The abandonment of Astoria did not mean the downfall of the entire Pacific Fur Company project. In fact Hunt and MacKenzie laid the foundations for the large Astor fortune on that very trip over the Rockies.)

But it must not be inferred that MacKenzie and his friends accepted in silence the Washington Irving version of the betrayal of Astoria. The Astoria moneys and portable properties were delivered to Mr. Astor in New York by MacKenzie, and the home view of this debatable question may be gleaned from an obituary tribute appearing in the Mayville Sentinel the week of his death. "Washington Irving in his Astoria", writes the Editor of the Mayville Sentinel on January 25, 1851, "has in his own happy style narrated a few of these adventures, which in one of the most important transactions of his life, relative to the betrayal of Astoria, he has done him great, but undoubtedly undesigned injustice. To him, and to him alone, was Mr. Astor indebted for all that was saved from the ruin which treason had wrought."

But the days of personal vexation are over for both men. (The Astoria episode adds to the fame of both Astor and MacKenzie. The trip over the Rockies and the assertion of American title to the mouth of the Columbia laid the foundation for the otherwise dubious 54° 40'

fight in later years.) (It is true that the contest well might precipitated another war between the United States and England.)

(The part which our Scotch Hero, and subject of the King of England, played in laying this foundation was recognized by Daniel Webster when he visited MacKenzie at Mayville for the purpose of securing data for the diplomatic contest which culminated in the settlement of the boundary dispute in a manner satisfactory to the United States in what is known as the Webster-Ashburton Treaty.)

(Beckles Willson, a protege of Lord Stratheona, in writing the "History of the Hudson's Bay Company" in 1900, pays an unwitting tribute to the services of Astor and MacKenzie, when he says, " This brings us to the whole point involved in the American contention, which deprived Great Britain of a vast territory to which the United States possessed no shadow of right. --- A year before the amalgamation of the rival companies, the Northwest Coast for the first time engaged the attention of the American Government, and what came to be known as the Oregon question had its birth. The States possessed no title to the Country, but a strong party believed that they had a right to found by occupation a legitimate title to a large portion of the territory in question. A bill was introduced in Congress for the occupation of the Columbia River region. (It is curious to reflect that the restoration of Fort George (Astoria) by the British was one of the strong arguments used at that time.")

I departed from the consecutive tracing of MacKenzie's career for the purpose of picturing such distant (but dependent and related events as the trip over the Rockies in 1810, and the Webster-Ashburton Treaty of 1842.) (It is evident that MacKenzie realized that he had participated in a history-making enterprise, despite the charges and counter-charges of treason and bad faith. This

conclusion is attested by the repeated efforts of MacKenzie to renew the interest of Astor after the war of 1812, and the latter attempt to induce the President of the United States to afford proper diplomatic and military support for this continental enterprise. But MacKenzie re-entered the employ of the North-west Fur Company as a confidential agent. He was a leader in the fight between that Company and the Hudson's Bay Company for exclusive trading privileges in the Canadian Northwest. The fight was just as keen as the pre-war contest between the trading companies of England and Germany for the exploration of Central Africa. The commercial battle raged in various forms and at distant points in the wilderness for a decade. Then the usual thing happened. The rival companies consolidated. They signed a deed poll, realizing that co-operation between outsiders is better than competition, in exploiting the natives of the wilderness. The development of Western Canada dates from the day that the rival companies perceived that the untapped wealth of that region was so enormous that competition for an unquestioned surplus was futile.)

The amalgamation of the two companies provided the high water mark of opportunity for the career of MacKenzie in Canada, just as the founding of Astoria marks the distinctive feature of his American achievements. His experience and skill were recognized; his name was powerful in the wilderness. (He became a Chief Factor of the Hudson's Bay Company. He journeyed from the Pacific Coast to York Factory in 1822, and the same year he was appointed Councillor of the Governors of the Company's Territories. When Governor Bulger departed, he was sent to the Red River settlement to supervise the Company's affairs and to seek an adjustment of the long standing differences between the Scotchment and the natives. (In June 1825, he was appointed Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company, and at 42 years of age.) he became

the commercial and semi-political ruler of a region, now divided into three Canadian Provinces, and as large as a major European state in extent.

(His Governor's Seat was at Fort Garry, now Winnipeg, and there during eight years of rule, he approached the high tide of life.) I cannot enter into the many events in the life of a man charged with business responsibilities and the maintenance of civil order, in a wilderness. But I am indebted to this Club for this invitation, because it has compelled me to do what I have long planned to do in connection with my studies of Western Canada: to procure and examine the records of the Hudson's Bay Company in general and especially as bearing upon the Governorship of Donald MacKenzie. It is one thing to read a polished and complete governmental code such as Macaulay wrote for India and Root penned for the Phillipines; but it is another, and equally interesting, to read the records of men grappling with order and disorder in a wilderness, and making their government as the occasion arose. This is the revelation which has come to me in examining the legislative records of the Red River Colony and the Hudson's Bay Posts.

Thus in the legislative records, we find Donald MacKenzie under date of August 1826, addressing a memorandum to A. Colville, Esquire, Hudson's Bay House, Fenchurch Street, London, dealing with his difficulties in keeping order among certain Swiss colonists. On May 4, 1832, the records indicate that he is sitting in Council for the consideration and adoption of regulations, to protect the woods from fire. (In 1833 there are resolutions of the Hudson's Bay Council, assigning MacKenzie to the Fort William District, which indicates that he was preparing to wend his way down the Great Lakes to Chautauqua County. The records indicate an important meeting of the Council of the Red River Settlement in 1833, with Governor-in-Chief,

George Simpson, presiding, and the following minute is entered:

"A medical certificate being received from Dr. Hendry of Chief MacKenzie's ill health which renders it necessary for him to visit the civilized world to obtain the benefit of medical advice--

Resolved, that leave of absence be granted to Chief MacKenzie for the current year."

And thus Donald MacKenzie faded from his triumphs in the Northwest. He had handled the distressing situations which followed the Red River flood in 1826 and the tragedy of the flight of the Swiss settlers. "This benevolent gentleman", says the Canadian Historian, Gunn, in discussing MacKenzie's Governorship, "not only made use of the stores under his charge for the relief of the sufferers, but aided by the influence of his high position and personal character to induce others to join in the good work."

But now in the prime of life, he headed for civilization. He never returned to the region of his triumphs; and the story of his last decade in Chautauqua County is just as little known in Western Canada, as the record of his earlier achievements in the West is

not appreciated by the people of Chautauqua County. Just why he came to Chautauqua County is not known. (It is believed by many of the older settlers that while stopping at Fort William, he met a young geologist, Douglas Houghton, who described to him the splendors of Mayville Hill between the lakes.) Alexander MacKenzie of Toronto, who is now writing "Life of Donald MacKenzie" says that he came to the United States because he loved Republican institutions.

He spent the ebb tide of his life at Mayville from 1833 until his death on January 20, 1851. He became an intimate friend of Judge Peacock, the agent of the Holland Land Company, and he secreted

that gentleman in his house on the high ground, back of the Mayville Academy, when the infuriated tenants from Hartfield mobbed the land office.) William H. Seward, then a young attorney representing the Holland Land Company, and later Lincoln's Secretary of State, was sent to Mayville, remaining there for more than a year in adjusting the disputes between landlord and tenants. Peacock, Seward, and MacKenzie became cronies; (one wonders whether Donald in describing the contests between the English and Russian Companies for the fur trade of Alaska during the period of his Pacific Coast activities, turned Seward's thoughts to the possibilities of annexing that territory in later years.) Donald was the character of the Northern Chautauqua region, and he was the subject of numberless myths and gossip as to his deeds. But he came to Mayville to escape the excitement of his early career. (It cannot be said that he invited the intimacy of a large number of his fellow citizens: the records of Peacock Lodge of Masons do not indicate that he joined the Craft, but doubtless, in common with other leading spirits of the Hudson's Bay Company, he had become a member of the Ancient Brotherhood earlier in life.) He journeyed to Buffalo where his judicious mind made investments in that promising canal town; he worked on his memoirs but his wife found that writing did not add to the amiability of a man of deeds. She burned the half-finished manuscript. (He conducted a large correspondence, and leading men, from ^{travelling} the East to the West visited him. / (The venerable Obed Edson credits the story of the Civil War days that John Jacob Astor visited his former partner at Mayville. This gives color to the conclusion that after the dispute about Astoria, and a law suit, in which Donald secured judgment against Jacob, the men were friends in the last decade of life.)

Donald MacKenzie lived the conventional life of the wilderness.

The inter-marriage of Hudson's Bay Company agents with Indian women was a common event.) While this domestic system had the elements of individual romance, it was in part the basis of that collective tragedy which ensued when many half-breed children joined the Riel rebellion in the false hope that a successful revolt would establish their title to the lands of their fathers. (One surviving Indian child came to Mayville with Donald MacKenzie, and his Swiss wife, and white family.) I speak with no words of disparagement because in the Anglican churches of the Canadian Northwest, I have seen these Indian children of Scotch fathers leading in the choir service. Indeed, a situation which the Northwest accepted as one of the necessities of a primitive country was given some recognition on that eventful day in Buckingham Palace when Sir Donald Smith played the man, Banker, railroad builder, Hudson's Bay Governor, Canadian High Commissioner, Sir Donald Smith had married an Indian girl while in the Northwest. England was pressed during the Boer War and Sir Donald enlisted and equipped a regiment as Canada's immediate contribution. The English Cabinet desired to give him recognition and suggested to Queen Victoria that she elevate him under the title of Lord Strathcona. Then the gossips of London whispered to the Queen that Sir Donald had married the Indian girl according to the rites of the wilderness. The Queen proposed their remarriage in the Anglican Church, but Sir Donald declined to taint the first rite by admitting the need of a second; Victoria countered with the suggestion that the patent of nobility be granted to Sir Donald alone, but the latter insisted that it be issued to Lord and Lady Strathcona, and to the heirs of their body. These were the days when Canada was being made to feel her place in the Empire. The preparation for the War of Today and the necessities of

imperial politics impelled the Queen to grant Letters Patent to Lord and Lady Strathcona. That event ended for all time the taint to these relationships of the wilderness, which the communities of the latter in fact never shared.

The unsettled conditions in Continental Europe, following the French Revolution, caused the parents of Adelgonde Droze to bring her from Switzerland by way of Hudson's Bay to Fort Garry. She married Donald MacKenzie in 1825 and she shared with him the social responsibilities of his Governorship of the wilderness. It is believed that her taste for European life and studies was one of the motives which started the Governor towards civilization. The probate proceedings in the Chautauqua County Court on May 6, 1857, indicate that thirteen children were born of this union. Mrs. Jemina MacKenzie/ of Buffalo, Noel, Roderick, and Catherine, now dead, were born in Manitoba, and accompanied the family to Mayville. The other children were born at Mayville. William P. MacKenzie now lives near Hartfield overlooking Chautauqua Lake) (Donald MacKenzie was thrown from his horse at Silver Creek, returning from Buffalo. He lingered for six months but he did not recover his clarity of mind, nor that physical power, which with his more than six feet, and 300 pounds in weight, made him feared in the hand to hand encounters in the Northwest.) (He was buried on the high ground of his yard from which one looks down the Lake to the Chautauqua Assembly grounds. Later his body was removed to the Mayville Cemetery, where the Scotch father, the Swiss wife, and the deceased members of the family sleep in peace together. There, too, the Indian child of the wilderness rests with his Swiss step-mother.

I contributed to the Canada Magazine in 1912 an article on "The Last Days of Donald MacKenzie." As intimated in an earlier

portion of this paper, the departure of Donald from Fort Garry on a year's vacation, and his failure to revisit the scene of his achievements, left a blank in the record of his Northwestern career. The reprinting of portions of my article in the papers of Winnipeg and other cities, is indicative of the surviving interest of the Northwest in the final chapter of this man's career.

This leads me to a suggestion which will give this paper an air of practicality. The Scottish Society of Winnipeg, is one of the strong racial and cultural bodies of the Northwest. The Hudson's Bay Company is still a power in that region, and it now maintains many of the trading posts frequented by MacKenzie. Vincent Astor is the representative head of the family whose wealth was founded in part on the activities of MacKenzie and associates. While the Chautauqua County Historical Society is pledged to record the deeds of those who found birth, or a haven in these parts, Why not, therefore, a common movement to secure the co-operation of those organizations in an effort to erect two substantial memorial tablets, -- one at Winnipeg to portray the deeds of the Scotch Hero at Fort Garry, and the other at Mayville, to recall to Americans the memory of a King's subject, who aided in making possible "fifty-four forty or fight."