
Loyalists and the Fur Trade:

The Impact of the American Revolution on Western Canadian History

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As a child, I remember being very intrigued by the idea that, if you had any English ancestors (and I did), you were almost certainly related to William the Conqueror. This was not because William the Conqueror was a particularly prolific parent, but was based on the statistical miracle of family history. As you go back generation by generation the number of people to whom you are related increases exponentially – two parents and a handful of brothers and sisters become four grandparents and many uncles and aunts and cousins. Within a very few generations most of us are actually related to hundreds or even thousands of people. In this general family way the Loyalists made a demographic impact on all parts of Canada – not to mention Britain, the West Indies, the United States, (Liberia – Sierra Leone?) and a host of other countries – but are there any more direct Loyalist family connections to the early history of western Canada?

As any recent Canadian history textbook will tell you, the social, political, economic and cultural history of the Maritimes and Quebec and Ontario was shaped in fundamental ways by the arrival of Loyalist families fleeing the newly-created United States of America from 1776 onwards.¹ Recent Loyalist scholarship has become more and more interested in just how varied Loyalists were. Older school textbooks confidently asserted that Loyalists represented a kind of political, economic and cultural elite in the 13 colonies – a flattering notion for descendants perhaps, but one that we now know is incomplete. Today we know that Loyalists were a microcosm of American

¹ There are many such textbooks in use across Canada, one with a particularly strong social and demographic emphasis is Margaret Conrad, Alvin Finkel with Cornelius Jaenen, *History of the Canadian Peoples: Beginnings to 1867* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1998). This textbook carefully details Black and Iroquois Loyalists, Loyalist women, and discusses the evolution of Loyalist historiography in some depth. It makes no more than a passing and very general reference, however, to any influence Loyalists may have had in the fur trade. See pp. 198-99.

society, and Loyalists could be Iroquois, Afro-American, German-American, and Dutch-American as well as Scots or English. They were frontier farmers, urban tradesmen and ordinary soldiers as well as judges, merchants, political officials, titled nobility and Indian chiefs.² Many were men, but Loyalists were also women and children. As historian Janice Potter has noted, the families of men serving with Loyalist regiments or openly supporting the British often paid a heavy price for their husbands' and fathers' opinions.³

Even the most inclusive of recent Canadian history textbooks, however, make no mention of any direct Loyalist connection to western Canada, and according to most conventional views of Canadian history the Loyalist story ends somewhere between Toronto and Windsor. I would like to suggest, however, that there is a significant Loyalist connection to western Canada well before the large-scale emigration of Ontarian settlers to the region, with their better-known Loyalist ties, in the years after 1870. Most fur trade historians are well aware of the numbers of Loyalists and children of Loyalists who were involved in the fur trade. Even the museum in Williamstown, Glengarry calls itself the Nor'Westers and Loyalist Museum but - like Stan Rodger's "MacDonnell on the Heights" - when it comes to the general public "not one in ten thousand" knows this story. Most Canadians have no idea that many of those Scottish names in the fur trade are rooted as much in Glengarry and the muster rolls of Loyalist regiments as in the Scottish Highlands.

In order to understand the Loyalist fur trade connection it is important to have a little background. The main thread of this connection can be traced back to the troubled history of Scotland in the 18th century, particularly the defeat of the Jacobites at Culloden in 1746 and the Highland Clearances that undermined the clan system by substituting the raising of sheep for the raising of soldiers. The result was the emigration of thousands of Scots to North America in the mid 18th century. When these Scottish emigrants arrived in

² A good brief summary of the evolution of historical writing on Loyalists in Canada can be found in Ibid. pp. 205-06. American scholars re-evaluating the events of the Revolution have done some of the most interesting work on Loyalists in recent decades. Much of this work has been published in *William and Mary Quarterly*. Needless to say, few American historians have concerned themselves with Loyalist connections with the fur trade.

³ See Janice Potter-MacKinnon, *While the Women Only Wept: Loyalist Refugee Women in Eastern Ontario* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993).

North America they often chose to settle in areas where they had prior kin and clan relations, or a major a patron to assist them in re-establishing themselves in a new land. Sir William Johnson acted as this patron for many emigrating Scots and it was through Johnson and his family that connections to the fur trade and thus to western Canada were often forged. Johnson assisted with the emigration of many Highland Scots and placed them as tenant farmers on his lands located on the Mohawk River in what is now upstate New York. In effect, he took on the role of a clan chieftain.⁴

One of the young men Johnson adopted as a protégée was Simon McTavish, the son of a retired officer in the Fraser Highlanders. Another young man Johnson assisted was Normand MacLeod, who by 1776 was working as a fur trader at Detroit. Johnson also gave work to James Phyn and Alexander Ellice, also Scottish emigrants, getting them to supply trade goods to military posts in the Great Lakes area. Phyn and Ellice established a trading company under their names in Schenectady in the early 1770s. All these individuals - with their Johnson family connections - would later play major roles in the Canadian fur trade.⁵

Sir William Johnson died in 1774, and his son, Sir John Johnson, inherited the family lands, businesses, and government sinecures. John Johnson had the same political and social ideas as his father, which meant he was not popular among the growing “revolutionary” party in New York. In 1775, as hostilities broke out between Britain and the rebellious 13 colonies, the Johnson estates were invaded by American troops under General Philip Schuyler. Johnson and many of the adult men among his tenants fled to Montreal where he was given a commission to raise a “loyalist” regiment from among his supporters. Johnson’s regiment was the King’s Royal Regiment of New York, also

⁴ The best general discussion of William Johnson’s role in introducing their tenants and other protégées into the fur trade is Heather Devine, “Roots in the Mohawk Valley: Sir William Johnson’s Legacy in the North West Company” in Jennifer S.H. Brown, W.J. Eccles and Donald P. Heldman (eds.), *The Fur Trade Revisited: Selected Papers of the Sixth North American Fur Trade Conference, Mackinac Island, Michigan, 1991* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1994) pp. 217-42.

⁵ All of these individuals have been the subjects of numerous scholarly studies in addition to entries in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, various dates). The key to using the *Dictionary* is that individual biographies are included in volumes based on date of death. See also, R. Harvey Fleming, *Phyn, Ellice and Company of Schenectady* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1932), volume 4 in Contributions to Canadian Economics Series; R. Harvey Fleming, “McTavish, Frobisher and Company of Montreal,” *Canadian Historical Review*, vol.10 (1929) pp.136-52, and general studies of the early Montreal-based fur trade.

known as the “Royal Greens”, and one of the most distinguished of the Loyalist regiments that fought in the American Revolution. Another loyalist regiment that recruited heavily from the Johnson estates in New York was the Royal Highland Emigrants.⁶ At the end of the war in 1783, many of the veterans of these regiments settled in what is now eastern Ontario in series of settlements along the St. Lawrence River and Lake Ontario in Lennox, Addington, Stormont, Dundas, and perhaps most notably Glengarry counties. These veterans and their families had developed strong ties of kinship and support out of their shared experience with both the Johnson family and service with Loyalist regiments that would have significant consequences for the fur trade. They also had ties with some of the individuals mentioned earlier who had set themselves up as fur traders in the early 1770s with Johnson support and encouragement.

By the early 1770s Montreal had emerged as the main center for administering the fur trade in eastern North America, but it was not without competition. A number of substantial fur trade companies operated out of the colony of New York prior to 1775-76 using the old Hudson and Mohawk River routes pioneered by Dutch, English and Iroquois fur traders. Most of this trade was focused on the region south, rather than north and west, of the Great Lakes in what was sometimes called the Illinois Territory. This trade was run from a series of trading centers such as Detroit and Michilimackinac, most of which were located in what would become American territory. In response to rising political tensions a number of fur traders and fur trade companies began re-orienting their efforts towards the North West and relocating their business operations to Montreal from 1775 onwards.

The restructuring of the fur trade in early 1770s produced a group of very prominent individuals who might be termed early or “proto” Loyalists. Like the “Late” Loyalists they were more economic refugees or even opportunists than political refugees. By some definitions they may not all qualify as “official” Loyalists, but they did leave what would become the United States of America in the first years of the war based on a

⁶ Heather Devine’s article gives a good short summary of William and John Johnson’s careers. William Johnson has been the subject of several full biographies, including Milton W. Hamilton, *Sir William Johnson, Colonial American 1715-1763* (Port Washington N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1976). Fourteen volumes of Sir William Johnson’s papers have also been published. See *The Papers of Sir William Johnson* (Albany: University of the State of New York, 1921-1965).

canny sense of where their fur trade interests lay. There had been Montreal-based fur traders operating in the North West prior to 1776, but it is no coincidence that the end of the American Revolution and the creation of the North West Company occurred more or less simultaneously.

These relocated fur traders include some absolutely critical figures in the development of the Canadian fur trade, and several individuals we have already met as protégées of the Johnsons. Normand MacLeod was trading at Detroit when he joined a local militia under Henry Hamilton to attack Vincennes in 1778. When the war ended, he relocated to Montreal and became one of the main partners in the Montreal-based firm of Gregory, MacLeod and Company in 1783. This company initially was the main rival of the North West Company before it was absorbed into the North West Company in 1787. The Phyn and Ellice partnership relocated its operations to London and Montreal in 1775, although James Ellice, a younger brother of Alexander Ellice was left in Schenectady after 1775 to look after the firm's remaining New York interests. James was subject to "heavy suspicion" and "close confinement" because of his and his family's supposed Loyalist sympathies, until he too was able to relocate to Montreal. Phyn and Ellice Company supplied trade goods to many inland traders as partners in the XY Company, rivals to the North West Company, and then after the union of those two companies as partners in the North West Company.⁷

Ellice family members distinguished themselves through several generations in the fur trade. For example, Alexander Ellice's son, Edward Ellice was closely involved in negotiating the merger of the North West and Hudson's Bay Companies in 1821 and his son, also Edward Ellice, became a Deputy Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company

⁷ The various companies and individual traders that eventually coalesced into the North West Company are described in Harold Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970) particularly Chapter 8, pp. 166-262. A shorter overview can be found in W. Stewart Wallace's "Introduction" to *Documents Relating to the North West Company* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1934). In particular pp. 11-13 and 16-20 detail how Gregory, MacLeod and Company and Phyn and Ellice Company came to join the North West Company as partners. In addition, Wallace includes a lengthy "Biographical Dictionary of the Nor'Westers" as an appendix to this collection of documents. The individual entries for MacLeod, Edward Ellice, and James Phyn outline their Loyalist connections. Much of this material also appears in W. Stewart Wallace's *The Macmillan Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1978). This is the 4th edition of this book, revised, updated and expanded by W.A. McKay. Many of the biographies have been superseded by fuller entries in the more recent *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. Short Biographies are also found in the various editions of the *Canadian Encyclopedia*, now available on-line at www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com.

and a member of the British Parliamentary committee that investigated the operations of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1857 – the report of which laid the groundwork for the transfer of the Hudson's Bay Company's territories to Canada a little over a decade later.⁸

The main protagonist among these “early” Loyalists however has to be Simon McTavish, Sir William Johnson's protégée. McTavish was one of the first Detroit traders to refocus his activities on the North West and one of the first North West traders to enter into partnership agreements with other traders to pool capital and share risk. He was a leading partner in the first versions of what would become known as the North West Company, and by 1787 he was effectively the CEO of that firm and reputedly the richest man in Montreal. He ran the North West Company until 1804, and he clearly never forgot his Johnson family ties or his connection to their loyalist supporters. Like the Johnsons, he dispensed patronage and support to family and friends and it was during his time in charge of the North West Company that many Loyalists and sons of Loyalists found employment with the North West Company.⁹

Jennifer Brown has summarized the North West Company's personnel policy as “partners, kinsmen and friends.” The company's success was “... largely based on personal and familial associations shared, reinforced, and built up in the process of emigrating from Scotland and finding new footholds in North America.”¹⁰ Loyalist ties meshed neatly with this emphasis on kin and friendship, and not surprisingly many individuals with Loyalist backgrounds found their way into the fur trade. The very detailed biographies of individual fur traders in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* reveal many of the more prominent of these Loyalist fur traders, but it should also be remembered many other individuals with Loyalist backgrounds also went to work for fur

⁸ See Wallace, *Documents*, entries for Alexander, Edward, James and Robert Ellice, pp. 437-38. These entries give a sense of the close family connections that often prevailed in the early Montreal-based fur trade companies. Various Ellice family members also appear in different volumes of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, and the family is the subject of J.C. Clarke's “From Business to Politics: the Ellice family, 1760-1860” (D.Phil. thesis, Oxford University, 1974).

⁹ McTavish's emulation of the Johnson's use of patronage is the subject of Heather Devine's article cited above. His role in the formation of the North West Company is well described in both Innis's and Wallace's studies of the company.

¹⁰ See Jennifer S.H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980) pp. 35-42. Like Devine, Brown notes the influence of the Johnsons and McTavish in the early formation of the North West Company and in the recruitment of key personnel.

trade companies as canoemen, labourers, and tradesmen. The following represent just a small sample of fur traders with Loyalist connections – some are well known to most students of Canadian history, while others are less known, but still significant characters in the history of western Canada.

My first two examples of fur traders with Loyalist connections come from the well-known category. Simon Fraser was the son of Captain Simon Fraser of Bennington Vermont. Captain Fraser was a Loyalist officer and after being captured by American troops he was imprisoned in Albany where he died in custody. His family, led by his wife, Isabel Grant, resettled near Cornwall. A son, also Simon Fraser, was apprenticed to the North West Company in 1792 and by 1801 he was a partner in the firm stationed in the Athabaska District. When the North West Company began to expand its operations into the area west of the Rockies in 1805 Simon Fraser played a key role in establishing the first posts in New Caledonia in what is now the northern interior of British Columbia. Paralleling David Thompson's building of Kootenae House on the Columbia River system in 1807, Fraser set out to explore what was initially thought to be the upper reaches of the Columbia in 1808. Fraser's river turned out not to be the Columbia, but rather the aptly named Fraser River which he traveled down as far as its mouth – a remarkable feat when you consider the rather wild and dangerous nature of navigation on that river. The river was of limited value as a fur trade route, but Fraser's posts in New Caledonia marked a major expansion in North West Company operations equivalent to Thompson's better known and more celebrated Columbia River posts.¹¹

Another Loyalist son, who distinguished himself as a fur trader, explorer and author, also needs no introduction to most of you. Alexander Mackenzie, later Sir Alexander Mackenzie, was the son of Kenneth Mackenzie, who emigrated to New York in 1774 and shortly thereafter took up a commission with Sir John Johnson's King's Royal Regiment. Alexander seems to have been sent first to live with his aunts at Johnstown and then to Montreal to be educated. By 1779 he was working in the fur trade as a clerk for Normand MacLeod's company – a further Johnson connection if anyone

¹¹ In addition to his biographical entries in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* and W. Stewart Wallace's *Documents* mentioned above, the best biography of Simon Fraser probably remains the introduction to his journals. See W. Kaye Lamb (ed.), *The Letters and Journals of Simon Fraser, 1806-08* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1960).

needs any more of these. After the merger of Gregory, MacLeod and Company with the North West Company in 1787, Mackenzie became a partner in the enlarged firm and traveled north to Fort Chipewyan where he took charge in 1788. In 1789, of course, he embarked upon his epic journey to the mouth of the Mackenzie River and the Arctic Ocean, and in 1793 he followed this up with his journey west along the Peace River through the Rockies and down to the Pacific Ocean (along with Alexander McKay - a fellow son of a Loyalist).

Although best known for these explorations, in 1801 Mackenzie also published a highly influential account not just of his journeys but also of the fur trade, the history of the North West, and of Aboriginal groups in the region. He followed this up by leaving the North West Company and becoming the leading figure in the XY – or New North West Company – before the North West Company managed to absorb the XY Company in 1804. Taking all of his activities and accomplishments together, Mackenzie probably ranks with George Simpson as the most influential fur trader of all.¹²

A number of other very significant, but lesser known, Loyalists and children of Loyalists also served in the fur trade. For example, Angus Bethune was the son of the Reverend John Bethune, a Presbyterian minister and Chaplain to the Royal Highland Emigrants. Reverend Bethune settled at Williamstown in Glengarry after the American Revolution with his family. Angus Bethune joined the North West Company as a clerk in 1804. He worked with Alexander Henry the Younger and in 1810 he assisted David Thompson in the initial stages of Thompson's attempts to cross the Rockies to the Columbia River posts – a venture that led to the use of Athabasca Pass near Jasper to reach these posts. Bethune was then sent himself to the Columbia District and he was there in 1813 when the North West Company acquired Fort Astoria from the Pacific Fur Company – probably the high water mark of the power and influence of the North West Company. In 1814 he was made a partner in the North West Company and sent to Canton to manage the North West Company's lucrative trade in furs from the Columbia with China. He was also involved later in trading ventures in California and Russian

¹² As with Simon Fraser, Mackenzie is the subject of a *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* entry, a biographical sketch in Wallace, and several book length biographies. The most recent of these is Barry Gough, *First across the continent: Sir Alexander Mackenzie* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997).

Alaska. In 1820-21 he and Dr. John McLoughlin were selected to negotiate on behalf of the wintering partners some sort of agreement with the Hudson's Bay Company. This threat of a separate agreement between the HBC and the North West Company's wintering partners was, of course, a major factor in the larger North West Company actually coming to terms with the HBC on a merger in 1821. Bethune continued on as a Chief Factor with the reorganized HBC after 1821, running several Districts in what is now northern Ontario, but his career was never quite so prominent after 1821.¹³

There are several groups of brothers, sons of Loyalists, who entered the fur trade. For example, John and Colin Campbell were the sons of Alexander Campbell, a Loyalist and later MLA for Cornwall. John joined the North West Company in 1799 and became a wintering partner in 1804. Colin Campbell joined the North West Company in 1804 and spent most of his working career in the Athabasca District at several posts. He remained with the Hudson's Bay Company after 1821 and finally retired as a Chief Trader in 1853. Alexander MacKay (also McKay), the son of a Loyalist soldier and brother of two other fur trade employees, had an interesting and quite adventurous career after he joined the North West Company in the early 1790s. In 1793 he traveled as a junior officer with Alexander Mackenzie on Mackenzie's overland journey to the Pacific Coast and not long after he was made a partner in the North West Company. However, he left the North West Company in 1808 and in 1810 he became a partner in John Jacob Astor's Pacific Fur Company – a Loyalist son who returned to the United States – and helped found Fort Astoria at the mouth of the Columbia River in 1811 (shortly before Thompson arrived there). McKay was one of the Pacific Fur Company employees killed at Nootka Sound in the infamous Tonquin incident later that year, when a large group of Nootka Indians captured the ship and killed the crew before the ship blew up under mysterious circumstances.¹⁴

¹³ George Simpson described Bethune in 1832 as a “very poor creature, vain, self sufficient and trifling.” This was probably a harsh judgement, but it may partially explain why Bethune's career after 1821 was less distinguished. See the biography of Angus Bethune in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*.

¹⁴ Biographies of Alexander MacKay appear in Wallace, *Documents*, pp. 473-74 and the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. Alexander McKay's career with the Pacific Fur Company is detailed in several studies. The most recent work on the subject is Robert F. Jones (ed.), *Annals of Astoria: the headquarters log of the Pacific Fur Company on the Columbia River 1811-13* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1999). Like many others, the MacKay family connection to the fur trade continued into further generations: a son, Thomas McKay, served with the North West Company and later the Hudson's Bay Company. Although more difficult to trace, members of third and fourth generation Loyalist families do

The Dease family probably represents the most distinguished group of Loyalist brothers who served in the fur trade. John Warren, Francis Michael, Peter Warren and Charles Johnson Watt Dease together amassed about 70 years of service with different fur trade companies. All were sons of Dr. John Dease, who in addition to being related to Sir William Johnson acted as his personal physician. Dease was a Loyalist of course, and like most other Johnson family retainers he resettled in Upper Canada (initially it seems near Niagara and later Fort Mackinac) after the American Revolution.

Charles, the youngest son, served with both the North West and Hudson's Bay Company as a clerk. Francis entered the fur trade later in life after serving with some distinction in several War of 1812 engagements such as the capture of Michilimackinac in 1812 and the attack on Prairie du Chien in 1814. Like Charles, his fur trade career was relatively uneventful. John Warren Dease apparently joined the North West Company in the early 1800s and by 1816 he was in charge of the crucial Rainy Lake post that supplied the canoe brigades on their way to Fort William. After 1821 he was appointed as a Chief Trader and sent to the Columbia District to run Fort Colvile where he died in 1829.¹⁵

Peter Warren Dease had the longest and most distinguished career of all. He joined the XY Company in 1801 and then moved to the NWCo when the two firms merged. He served in the far northern Mackenzie District and was made a Chief Trader when the NWCo and HBC merged in 1821. In 1825-27 he was seconded by the HBC to assist Sir John Franklin's overland Arctic exploration. Although this expedition ran into difficulties, Dease emerged with great credit both for his knowledge of the North and his organizational skills. Sir John Richardson – one of the junior officers on the expedition – later noted that the expedition “owed much to Dease.” As a reward for his services, Dease was promoted to Chief Factor in 1828 and in 1831 was sent to manage the New Caledonia District. He was then called upon by Sir George Simpson to organize and lead a new exploration initiative in 1836-39 along with Thomas Simpson, George's impetuous cousin.

appear in fur trade personnel records.

¹⁵ See Jennifer S.H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980) p.38 and Wallace, *Documents*, pp. 435-36.

This expedition was to complete the work of Franklin by mapping the two sections of Arctic coastline Franklin and others had not – from the mouth of the Mackenzie River west to Point Barrow and from the mouth of the Coppermine River east to the base of the Boothia Peninsula. Simpson and Dease achieved just that – in effect completing the mapping of the North West Passage although without actually completing the complete transit. Simpson, by writing an account of the journey and casting himself as the hero, managed to secure most of the initial credit, but subsequent scholarly analysis – notably by Ian MacLaren of the University of Alberta, has suggested that much – even most – of the credit should be ascribed to Dease whose organizational skills, knowledge and leadership ensured Simpson could succeed. Dease retired to the Montreal area not long after in 1842, but he had a central role in the discovery and mapping of the long elusive North West Passage.¹⁶

In short, the Loyalist connection with western Canada involves not just employees of the North West, Hudson's Bay, Pacific Fur and XY companies, but the management and formation of these companies, the development of trade policy and strategy - not to mention exploration and mapping of routes to the Arctic and Pacific Oceans and the North West Passage – an amazing legacy in and of itself.

Paralleling this involvement in the fur trade, Loyalist family members were also closely involved in the establishment and early history of Selkirk's settlement at Red River. In the years leading up to 1811 the Hudson's Bay Company was struggling financially and its share prices were depressed. Selkirk and some wealthy associates managed to gain effective control of the HBC by 1811, and they did two things. Selkirk's brother-in-law, Andrew Wedderburn Colville, an experienced businessman (and incidentally the man who later brought George Simpson into the fur trade) undertook a thorough reorganization of the HBC's operations known as the "Retrenching Scheme" that was designed to cut costs, raise revenues and generally get the HBC in shape to compete with the North West Company. This reorganization probably saved the HBC

¹⁶ In addition to an entry in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Peter Warren Dease's career as an explorer is detailed in several books on Arctic exploration. The most recent and probably most accurate is William Barr (ed.), *From Barrow to Boothia: the Arctic journal of Chief Factor Peter Warren Dease, 1836-1839* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002). See also I.S. MacLaren, "The HBC's Arctic Expedition 1836-1839: Dease's Field Notes as Compared to Simpson's Narrative" in Brown, Eccles and Heldman (eds.), *The Fur Trade Revisited*, pp. 465-79.

and made merger with the North West Company inevitable. The second part of the takeover was the grant of some 300,000 square kilometers (116,000 square miles) of land based on the old HBC Charter to Selkirk to form a settlement.¹⁷ Many historians see the reorganization of the Hudson's Bay Company and the creation of Selkirk's settlement as a crucial – perhaps THE crucial - turning point in the history of this region.¹⁸ It was not the first agricultural settlement of the Canadian west – recent archaeological work has shown that corn-growing agriculturalists were living in the Red River Valley in about 600 years ago near Lockport – but it was an important harbinger of change and Loyalists and the children of Loyalists were involved on all sides in this story

Selkirk's settlers were not Loyalists or of Loyalist background themselves, but the men in charge of the initial settlement and their major rivals with the North West Company all were. In fact the struggles of the early Selkirk Settlement have something of the feel of an elaborate and deadly argument within the Loyalist family. Selkirk chose Miles Macdonell to act as the first Governor of the new settlement. MacDonnell was the son of a Loyalist and brother of John McDonell,¹⁹ a North West Company officer and, ironically, the wintering partner in charge of the Red River District for the North West Company from 1799 to 1809. After Miles Macdonell left the settlement, Robert Semple, also the son of a Loyalist replaced him.²⁰

Some of the Nor'Westers in Red River with Loyalist ties include Duncan Cameron, John Cameron, Alexander McKenzie and Alexander Macdonell. Duncan Cameron settled on the Johnson estates with his parents in 1773 and in 1780 he joined a Loyalist regiment, probably the King's Royal Regiment. After the war he moved to Montreal where he found work in the fur trade, eventually joining the North West

¹⁷ These events have been the subject of analysis in many books and articles. A good short summary of these critical events can be found in Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: a History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984) pp.69-80.

¹⁸ See J.M. Bumstead, *Trials & Tribulations: the Red River Settlement and the emergence of Manitoba, 1811-1870* (Winnipeg: Great Plains Publications, 2003) for an assessment of the historical significance of this settlement.

¹⁹ Until the 1830s McDonell spelled his name this way. He later switched to Macdonell like his brother.

²⁰ The various Macdonells and their connections to Red River are detailed in Wallace, *Documents*, pp.464-66. J.M. Bumstead has noted the degree to which hostility towards Miles Macdonell was based on a sense that he was somehow disloyal in agreeing to assist Selkirk's scheme and thereby hurt the interests of other Loyalists working for the North West Company. See J.M. Bumstead, "A Tale of Three Settlements," *The Beaver*, Outfit 72 no. 3 (June/July 1992), esp. pp. 38-39.

Company and becoming a partner. He was in the Red River District in 1814 where he took a leading – perhaps the leading role in opposing Selkirk and Miles Macdonell’s plan. John Dugald Cameron was born at Sorel in 1777 where his family had relocated while his father fought with the British in the American Revolutionary War. He started work as a junior officer in the mid 1790s and by 1811 he was put in charge of the Winnipeg River District for the North West Company. He was deeply embroiled in the Selkirk story. He helped the settlers trying to leave Red River for Upper Canada in 1815 by providing transport, but he was never really held responsible for the violence that erupted at Seven Oaks in 1816. Alexander McKenzie was a cousin of the more famous Sir Alexander Mackenzie. His early life is shrouded in some mystery but his father is believed to have been a tenant on the Johnson estates and a Loyalist like so many others. Alexander found work with John Richardson’s firm – another Johnson connection through Phyn and Ellice Company – that led him into the XY Company’s service. He joined the North West Company when it absorbed the XY Company and in 1815 he was sent to Red River to help undermine Selkirk’s settlement. A number of historians have suggested that he played an important role in convincing MacDonell and most of the settlers to leave Red River in 1815. He too was later arrested, tried and acquitted for his supposed part in the violence of 1816. Finally Alexander Macdonell, a cousin to Miles, was also an officer stationed at Red River from 1809 to 1814. Initially his relations with Miles were cordial, but over time they became quite strained and he too was actively involved in opposing the settlement.²¹

For his part, Selkirk also looked to individuals with Loyalist backgrounds to lead his settlement. As mentioned earlier, his choice as the first Governor of Assiniboia was Miles MacDonell. It is not clear if Miles’s candidacy for the job was helped by having a brother who had lived at Red River for nearly a decade or not, but he also had other qualifications as well. He too had immigrated with his family to New York in 1773 (his father was “Spanish John” MacDonell) and been caught up in the Revolutionary War. The family relocated to Canada and starting farming in a Loyalist community on the

²¹ All of these individuals have entries in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. Just to confuse matters another Alexander Macdonell, who may have been a relative as well, acted as Semple’s second-in-command at Red River in 1815-16. He helped re-establish the colony in 1817 and served as Governor for several years.

upper St. Lawrence River at Riviere aux Raisins. Unlike his brother, Miles did not seek work in the fur trade; instead he worked as a farmer and then officer with the Royal Canadian Volunteer Regiment in the 1790s. He seems to have come to Selkirk's attention in the early 1800s, in part through his efforts to raise a force of Glengarry Fencibles to help defend Upper Canada. In 1810 Selkirk brought him to Britain to help plan the new settlement scheme at Red River.

Selkirk's choice of MacDonell to head his settlement scheme no doubt seemed a good selection, but as an expatriate Scot he may not have known Highlanders quite as well as he thought and his background as a Loyalist opposing the interests of other Loyalists raised the stakes of the quarrel. The Nor'Westers were incensed by Selkirk's plan for several reasons. Certainly an agricultural settlement athwart the main NWCo supply and transport route to Fort William was a threat to its operations. The land grant to Selkirk also had legal implications and it was not popular with the North West Company's Metis employees and hunters who were settling in the Red River area either. From the time the first of Selkirk's settlers left Scotland for York Factory until MacDonell was convinced to abandon the settlement in 1815 – after passing his infamous Pemmican Proclamation that supposed to prevent the export of pemmican from Red River – the North West Company and its employees made a concerted effort to undermine the settlement.

Having left Red River in 1815, Miles Macdonell was not around for the climactic moment at Seven Oaks, but his shadow was a long one cast over those events. Instead the actual leadership of the settlement had passed to yet another Loyalist – MacDonell's replacement as governor of Assiniboia – Robert Semple. Intriguingly Semple was not a Scottish Loyalist with ties to the Johnsons but he was the son of an English Loyalist who had returned to Britain after the Revolution. Semple had then embarked on a reasonably successful career as a merchant before Selkirk hired him to replace MacDonell. It was Semple who tried to intercept the party of Nor'Westers and Metis crossing Frog Plain just north of the Forks with supplies of pemmican on June 19, 1816 and Semple and 20 men were killed in the ensuing gun battle. Ironically the Nor'Westers and Metis won the

battle but arguably they lost the war since the settlement did not disappear, and the violence led directly to the merger of the HBC and North West Companies in 1821.

There are other Loyalist and Revolutionary War connections to the early history of western Canada. Given both the numbers of Iroquois Loyalists and the numbers of Iroquois hired to work in the fur trade – from the 1790s to 1821 roughly 1 in 16 of the men hired by the Hudson’s Bay, North West and XY companies in the Canadas were Iroquois – it is almost certain that there were Iroquois as well as Scots Loyalists and their children who found work in the fur trade.²² Well over a thousand men made their way west under these contracts, while equivalent or perhaps even larger numbers moved west, not under contract, but as so-called “freemen” to hunt and trap for the fur trade. Without detailed family histories, it is impossible to determine what direct Loyalist connections there may be among these people, but this could be a very fruitful area of new research.

The fur trade also provided employment to former soldiers in British regiments and German mercenary regiments such as the Hessians who served during the American Revolution, and to their children. A good example of the latter is Michel Klein or Klyne who worked at Jasper House for many years, and careful study of fur trade personnel records would undoubtedly turn up many more such individuals. There also were a number of military engagements during the Revolution that involved fur trade company employees and posts. These include the capture of several posts in the Great Lakes area, and perhaps most notably the destruction of the Hudson Bay Company posts, Prince of Wales’ Fort and York Factory, in 1782 by a French naval expedition sent to support the American cause and strike a blow against British commerce.

I have only one other Loyalist connection to draw attention to, but it may well be the most significant of all in terms of the history of what would eventually become western Canada. The vast majority of the Loyalist employees of the Hudson’s Bay,

²² A good summary of Iroquois employment by fur trade companies can be found in Jan Grabowski and Nicole St-Onge, “Montreal Iroquois engages in the Western Fur Trade 1800-1821” in Theodore Binnema, Gerhard J. Ens and R.C. MacLeod (eds.), *From Rupert’s Land to Canada: Essays in Honour of John E. Foster* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2001) pp. 23-58. One interesting possible candidate as a Loyalist or son of a Loyalist among the Iroquois, who came west, is “Tete Jaune” or “Yellowhead” for whom the highway and pass are named. Yellowhead was the nickname of an Iroquois called Pierre Bostonais. The name “Bostonais” is the equivalent of the generic term “Yankee” and indicates that Yellowhead or his family came originally from the American colonies – probably New England.

North West, XY and Pacific Fur Companies married in the “custom of the country” and had families in western Canada.²³ Their descendents are now scattered broadly throughout the Metis and First Nations communities in western Canada and the northern United States. So to return to my original observation about the fascinating connections of family history - there are probably a great number of Aboriginal people who may be as closely related to William the Conqueror as I am - if anyone cares to follow this genealogical path to its logical conclusion.

²³ The subject of fur trade marriages and families is one that has attracted considerable scholarly attention. In addition to a growing body of literature on fur trade genealogy, two studies remain central to this field Jennifer S. H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood* and Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society 1670-1870* (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer, 1980).