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Letters of a Pioneer

ALEXANDER ROSS



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Letters of A Pioneer

ALEXANDER ROSS

Colony Gardens was a well known spot in early Winnipeg. It was the home of a man of mark, and of his sprightly and intelligent family.

Alexander Ross had been a trader in the Astor Fur Company across the mountains, had joined the Northwest Company, of Montreal, in 1813, and occupied a post in the Okanagan country, was at Nez Perces, in the Rockies, in 1821, when the Northwest Company and Hudson's Bay united, went on a great exploration for the united company, but was allowed four years afterward, to leave the Pacific coast to come to the valley of Red River and settle there.

He became the first sheriff of Red River, became the most trusted trader of the Selkirk settlers, and was as well, through his Indian wife, a potent force among the native people. To him it has been usual to trace the establishment in 1851, of the Presbyterian church in the Red River valley.

Alexander Ross wrote "Adventures of the First Settlers on the Oregon and Columbia Rivers" (1849), "The Fur Traders of the Far West" (1853), "The Red River Settlement" (1856).

Ross, William, James, Jemima, and Alexander Streets were all named after him or members of his family. Sheriff Ross died in 1856.

These are sufficient reasons for giving a few extracts from some of his letters.

The story of these letters is interesting. Last summer the writer had a call from a well known author, Ernest Thompson Seton, and his cultivated American wife. He mentioned that in lecturing in Canandaigua, N.Y., he had referred to Manitoba, when a Dr. H. H. Holmes accosted him and spoke of possessing letters of some relations and that these had friends in Manitoba. By the advice of Mr. Seton these were forwarded to the writer, and the following extracts may be of interest.

1. Written by Alexander Ross at "Fort Nez Perces, Columbia River, North Pacific Ocean, May 1, 1822," to "Mrs. Henrietta Rannie, Turriff, Aberdeenshire, Scotland," she being his sister, her husband's name John Rannie.

"MY DEAR AND AFFECTIONATE SISTER.

It is certainly with more pleasure than I can express on this page that I received your kind favor in last October, dated 'Turriff, 23rd March, 1821,' and along with that your dear portrait in miniature, executed in a style to do credit to the artist. This striking image of a person so dear to me shall soothe my mind in the greatest of troubles, and shall be preserved by your brother while he lives. Both your letter and your husband's were handed me at the same moment, nor can I tell which of them gave me the most satisfaction, particularly those parts respecting your family and affairs. Throughout your husband's letter there is a peculiar degree of good sense and discernment. The dull state of your affairs are under the control of Providence, it is common to all. Do not despair, my sister, as long as you both have health. God will always assist your honest endeavors. Everyone has trouble in bringing up their families. When it pleaseth God that I see you, I hope to find you as able to give, as needful to receive, but should it be otherwise, if I have but a single shilling, you shall have part of it. . . .

I would wish to recall our youthful hours, our harmless

pastimes, the follies and foibles of younger days, and the many thoughtless and innocent amusements, as well as agreeable hours we all spent on the flowery greens of Inchcask ! Why is fate so hard-hearted as to divide us so far apart, and subject us to so much trouble and anxiety in this terrestrial world of briars and thorns. . . .

EARLY ADVENTURES.

I shall now give you a brief outline of my own adventures. I had not left my father's house in 1804, two days, before I sincerely regretted my undertaking, but that false pride so peculiar to our country people, would not allow me to turn back, so I advanced, and as I advanced mourned my fate all the way to America and for some years afterwards. After living a year in Lower Canada, in the capacity of school-master, I found my purse, notwithstanding the strictest economy, to have sunk as low as two shillings and six pence in all, and although my father had given me an order to draw some money I never would do so. With this small pittance, therefore, I set out in 1805 for the Upper Province of this dissolute, extravagant and butterfly country. There I was something more successful, at least earned a livelihood in a genteel manner by teaching school, an occupation which I was not altogether calculated for. At the end of 1809 I had only saved about one hundred dollars in cash, and purchased about 300 acres of land, and this property still remains in Canada. In 1810 I embarked as an adventurer in a new concern, called the Pacific Fur Company, for this country. On the way thither we passed Cape di Verde Islands, Falkland Islands, Terra del Fuego, Magellan, Cape Horn, the southern promontory of America, Chili, Peru, Sandwich

Islands, where the memorable Captain Cook was killed, and, after sailing across the North Pacific Ocean, landed here in 1811, where we, according to our original plan, endeavored to establish a fur trade among the natives. But such a train of melancholy and tragical misfortune followed as would be even too shocking, if not too long, to relate. Our ship was taken by the Indians, twenty-three of our people murdered on the spot, eight drowned and the others deprived of every resource, had to struggle between hope and despair for three years, when the small remains made their way across the continent to Canada. I alone, of this small but adventurous band, stood my ground, determined either to succeed or die in the attempt. When a new company happened to come to the country, called the 'North West Company,' I joined it in 1814, nearly as barehanded as when I left Canada. Since that period, however, I have been more successful. But that company is now extinct, and ended last year. I, still unwilling to leave the field of action empty-handed, have joined the company which succeeded the North West Company, "The Honorable the Hudson's Bay Company," trading from London to Hudson Bay. I intend leaving this country, however, this ensuing year; indeed, my health demands it. I have had lately a severe trial of sickness, nor am I yet well, so far from it that I intend to set out in two days hence on a journey of 400 miles to see a doctor, and not sure of meeting one then. Such is the country I live in. . . ."

WAS MARRIED.

In 1813 Alexander Ross married his Indian wife in British Columbia. She was the daughter, it is said, of a chief of the Okanagans. Old residents of Winnipeg will remember "Granny Ross," who died about 1886.

He continues the letter: "I have in this country three children, Alexander, Peggy and Isabella; the oldest is now nine years old and can read and write well. You will have a long letter from me next spring if God spares my health. I have written this scrawl small, in order to be enclosed in your husband's letter. Remember me to all your little, dear family. May God bless you. Farewell, and believe me to be, with compliments to all the family,

"My dear and loving sister,

"Your affectionate brother,

"ALEXANDER ROSS."

FROM THE FOOTHILLS.

FOOT OF ROCKY MOUNTAINS,

HEAD OF COLUMBIA RIVER,

February 4, 1824.

MY DEAR BROTHER AND SISTER.

An opportunity now offering for persons in this country to address their friends in Scotland, I avail myself of the chance. Your letter dated from Turriff, the 23rd of March, 1821, was the last I have had from you, and from my father I have had none since January, 1819. Since that period this is my third to you, and to my father, whom I also write at this time, it is my fifth since I had any from him. Consider then, how anxious I must feel to hear from one and all of those who are so dear to me. . . . It is necessary for letters coming to this country that they reach London in February, or they will run the risk of being a year longer on their passage thither. . . . I left Fort Nez Percés, where I had been for nearly six years, stationary I may say, and proceeded to the head waters of the great Columbia, be-

ing upwards of 1,100 miles in length, being then so far on my way out of this country. From thence, however, my business called me in another direction, so here you see me at the foot of the great Rocky Mountains, or backbone of America. You will, no doubt, wish to know where my next tack will be. It is then briefly this, I am to leave this place in a day or two at the head of fifty men during one year, for the purpose of exploring for the Honorable the Hudson's Bay Company, all the southern parts of the Rocky Mountains, and to try and open a trade with the following Indian tribes, viz., the Snakes, the Misstipps, the Sarsees, Corbeaus, Gros Ventres, Cheyennes, Peigans, Blackfeet, Blood Indians and others yet unknown. The nature of such a voyage, and the danger attending it, can only be known by those who have been for a series of years dealing with rude and bloodthirsty savages. If God spares my safe return, I will be able to give you an interesting detail. Arduous as the undertaking is, I do not despair, therefore, I hope my friends will keep courage, I expect to get safe back. I expect to go yet and see you all alive and well. . . . Many young gentlemen from Scotland are in these parts. It is a true saying that Scotchmen are all over. They get letters pretty regular, I alone am neglected, but what did I say? I do not mean neglected, my letters have miscarried. Have you got any acquaintances in London? By that means our correspondence might be much more regular. When this comes to hand do not fail to let my poor, aged parents know that I am well. . . .

My dear brother and sister,

Your ever loving brother,

ALEXANDER ROSS.

Address me as formerly, or as follows, viz.:

MR. ALEXR. ROSS,

Columbia River.

McTAVISH, FRASER & Co.,
 No. 2 Suffolk Lane,
 Cannon Street,
 London.

(Cont. of address.)

Requested to be forwarded via Liverpool to Canada.

EN ROUTE EAST.

HEIGHT OF LAND, ROCKY MOUNTAINS,

April 24, 1825.

MY DEAR BROTHER AND SISTER.

. . . . I have come thus far on my way from the great Pacific Ocean and am now steering my course for the Atlantic. The Rocky Mountains, or Back Bone of America, is truly a great sight. We had to pass them in the customary manner, on snow shoes. My destination is Red River, a colony settled in Hudson Bay by the late Lord Selkirk. This colony is said to be thriving. In my next I shall give you a full account of it. . . . The bearer of this is Alexander Kennedy, Esquire, of said Company, who has also in charge a small package for my parents, containing, viz.: 1 snuff horn, 10 lbs. snuff, 10 lbs. tea. This gentleman will not go further north than Edinburgh, but will from there forward the above articles. On it is written:

MR. ALEXANDER ROSS, *Farmer*,

Layhill, Parish of Dyke,

By Forrés.

. . . . Oh ! by the bye, I had almost forgot to tell you that I have received the books you sent me, and when did I receive them, do you think?—but yesterday ! After a lapse of so many years, I was particularly grateful to put my hands on them.

My dear brother and sister,

Your ever affectionate brother and humble servant,

ALEXANDER ROSS.

Another letter is from William, son of Alexander Ross. William's wife (Jemima), now Mrs. Coldwell, is still living in this city.

SOME MARKET QUOTATIONS.

RED RIVER SETTLEMENT,

October 10, 1855.

MRS. HELEN HOPWOOD.

DEAR COUSIN—I must beg a thousand pardons for neglecting to write to you for so long a period. You will have supposed that I have altogether forgotten you, but such is not the case. . . . We are at present all in good health. My father and mother, sisters and brothers, all are enjoying good health. . . . My brother James paid us a visit this summer from Toronto, during the vacation after a two years' absence. You may imagine how happy we were to see him again amongst us in health and in good spirits. He has returned again for three or four years. The probability is that you will see him in London again before long. When he left us he was inclined to leave the University of Toronto and proceed to Cambridge or Oxford. In that case you will see him. He had not as yet decided, but intended to write us as soon as he had made up his mind. He will no doubt be much gratified to find you in London, where he will be a perfect stranger. . . . You mention in one of your letters that you thought "living" was much cheaper in Red River than it is in London. I will give you our market prices, and you will be able to judge the difference. I might further state that there are no fluctuations in our prices. Since Red River was first settled in 1815 the Hudson's Bay Company has been chiefly our purchasers, and, in fact, they only afford a market for our surplus produce. No rivals to contend with

them. We have been obliged, through dire necessity, to give them our produce at their price, but, to their credit, I may say, that they have uniformly paid an equivalent price, viz., beef per lb., 2 1-2d.; pork, 3d. to 3 1-2d. per lb.; hams, 6d. per lb.; eggs, 6d. per dozen; fowls, 2s. per pair (domestic), wild from 4d. to 1s. per pair, according to scarcity; cheese, 6d. per lb.; butter, 7d. to 8d. per lb.; wheat, at 3s. 6d. per bushel; barley, flour (first quality), 14s. per cwt.; second quality, 11s. 6d. per cwt.; pemmican, 3d. to 4d. per lb.; dried meat, 2 1-2d. to 3d. per lb. The two latter are what we call plain provisions—are made out in the wild prairies out of buffalo meat, and brought into the settlement by hunters who follow that occupation year after year. Our grease also comes from that quarter, sells from 4d. to 6d. per lb., according to scarcity or plenty. A good pair of oxen costs about £14. Cows sell at from £3 10s. to £5, according to size; horses from £16 to £35 each. Hay 4s. per load of 800lb. The shearing of an acre of wheat costs 7s., mechanic's wages range from 4s. to 5s. per day, common day laborer at harvest seasons from 30s. to 50s. per month.

POPULATION IN 1855.

We have at present a population of 5,974 souls, divided into three distinct religious denominations. The upper part of the settlement is entirely settled by Roman Catholics, numbering about 2,100 souls, the middle part of the settlement is settled by the Presbyterian community numbering about 780 souls, the lower settlement is inhabited by Episcopalians (3,094). The former have two churches and one cathedral, presided over by a bishop and a staff of priests and lay brothers, with a convent attached to the cathedral, and from

15 to 20 nuns (grey nuns or sisters). The Presbyterians have two places of worship, and only one minister to superintend the religious wants of the community. The Episcopalians have six churches, with a bishop and eight clergymen. The Roman Catholic priests and Anglican church are entirely supported by societies in London and France. The Presbyterians support their own minister and schoolmaster, the only self-supporting community in the settlement.

There are twenty windmills and eight watermills scattered through the settlement. The settlement extends from the lower to upper end, about sixty miles. The H. B. Co.'s depot is about the centre of the settlement, and is called "Fort Garry."

You will, by the description I have given, form a pretty good idea of our settlement and the cheapness or cost of "living." Land per acre sells at from 7s. to 10s., and the building of a good, substantial house costs from £200 to £500 sterling, an ordinary farmer's house costs from £60 to £100.

INDOLENT INDIANS.

There are a great number of Indians still hovering about the settlement. They are indolent and lazy vagabonds; who live upon the inhabitants by pilfering and cheating, but otherwise very peaceful, unless when furnished with spirits, when they become very troublesome. However, the law is very stringent with regard to giving or selling the article to any Indian. The missionaries have not done much to civilize or Christianize the Indian.

. . . . The mode of transacting business is thus with us: We get out our goods once a year, leaves London about the 1st of June in the Hudson's Bay Company's ship and reaches York Factory about the 10th of August, then it is

transported 700 miles inland at the rate of 20s. per 100 pounds, and reaches Red River about the 1st of October. The Hudson's Bay Company grant us bills of exchange payable at the Hudson's Bay House, London, thirty days after sight. The cost of transport, you see, is great, and in order to make any profit we would require to get our goods pretty cheap at home. The goods for our market are principally coarse and of the cheapest kind, as people here have not generally much notion of finery, as for instance, prints, cord trousers and other kinds, Rouen shirts, common striped shirts, woollen stuffs, cottons, handkerchiefs, silk and cotton, blankets, dresses for women (not made), etc., etc. Since writing to you last one of my sisters, Henrietta, has married to our beloved pastor, Rev. John Black, and had a son about five months ago. There remains but one sister, she is the youngest, 17 years of age, and a brother, about 13 years, besides James, who is in Canada. All the rest have married and are doing well.

Your affectionate cousin,

WILLIAM ROSS.

ARRIVES FROM THE WEST.

In 1825 the fur trader gave up his position and came from the Rockies down the Saskatchewan to Lake Winnipeg. He then went to the meeting of the Hudson's Bay Company's officers at Norway House. In his work, "The Fur Hunters of the Far West," pp. 228-233, Ross gives an account of the meeting and of the gift to him of 100 acres of land, on what is now the site of the City of Winnipeg.

In the neighborhood of Norway House there is a small river, which, according to report, was entered during the time

of the French by a trader of the name of Perrault, about the year 1740, and named by him Pointe du Nord. It was afterwards called Riviere aux Brochet, or *Pike River, from the abundance of these fish found in its waters; from which circumstance, also, the first establishment here was named Fort Broshet, and bore that name until a few years ago, when it was changed from Fort Brochet to Norwegian Point. A number of Norwegians were hired by the late Earl of Selkirk, and were sent to that point for the purpose of clearing the woods and making a winter road to York Factory, but the project was found to be impracticable, and was, therefore, abandoned; hence the place was called Norwegian Point and from Norwegian Point the factory is called Norway House.

During the year the place was, by accident, burned to the ground, and at the time of my writing it lay in ashes. Preparations were in progress for rebuilding it on a more extensive scale a little further down the river on a rocky point, near to the place called Play Green Lake. I should not be surprised if another name is given to the new establishment, for the people of this country are whimsical in giving new names to old places, and think little of changing them. Vegetation here dare hardly raise its head; the gleams of summer—if, in these forlorn regions, there be any summer—are rapidly chased away by the blasts of autumn, which again as rapidly flee before the storms of winter. The soil seldom produces anything to perfection.

Norway House is a place of considerable business and bustle during the summer season. It is the great inland revenue rendezvous of the fur trade in this quarter. Here the people and returns of all the trading posts belonging to the company, from Lake Superior on the south, the Rocky Mountains on the west, and the frozen ocean on the north,

*Commonly known in the troubles of 1813-16 as Jack Fish River.—G. B.

are collected together once a year, on their way to York Factory. Norway House would, therefore, be a fit place for a missionary station. Although people from all quarters muster here, yet none of those scenes of carousing and fighting, for which Fort William and other places were so celebrated, disgrace the meeting of friends. Peace, sobriety, and good order have put an end to those demoralizing scenes which formerly disgraced human nature in this country. There are likewise but few of the French-Canadians now in the service, those favorite children of the Northwest school.

This brings us to the fur trade, the all-absorbing pursuit in the country over which the company hold sway. These territories may be divided into four great sections—the northern and southern departments of Rupert's Land, the Columbia District and the King's Posts, as they are called; divisions each of them ample enough in extent for the territory of a crowned head. Once a year the governor-in-chief, as the superintending officer is styled, generally makes his tour through the greater part of these wild dominions, holding his annual council at the headquarters of each department, and assembling round him, on each occasion, the factors and traders, within convenient reach. There the business of the departments is investigated, and the requisite appointments are made; in short, it is there that the various arrangements are settled for conducting affairs at the different posts within their jurisdiction.

Few men in this country ever possessed such authority as does Governor Simpson, the company's present representative, and none, we believe, ever gave more general satisfaction. Courteous in his manners, and active in his habits; gifted in a high degree with the power of self-command, and above all, with a keen discernment of character, he appears eminently fitted by the union of these qualities for the commanding position which he so ably fills.

The extent of country over which Governor Simpson presides stretches from the Atlantic to the Pacific; there is no place in all the vast wilderness that he has not visited; every spot in it is known to him; there is scarcely a native but at some time or other has experienced his smile and his liberality. His fostering care has been over all.

It not infrequently happens that the council meets at other places as well as at headquarters; indeed, wherever it is convenient for the governor to attend. The council of the northern department was held at Norway House this year, instead of at York Factory. During the sittings, which only occupy a few days, no other business is attended to; but the council no sooner break up than matters of minor importance are looked into. Each factor, trader, and post master then sets about preparing and forwarding the business of his especial charge.

When the public business was over the governor sent for me, and I repaired to his room. He received me courteously, according to his custom. After some conversation, he adverted to the subject of my remaining in the country, and continuing my former pursuits. "If you remain in the service," said he, "you shall have entire management of the company's affairs in the Snake country guaranteed to you for a certain number of years, with a liberal salary." I tendered my thanks for his handsome offer, but declined accepting it, urging as a reason that I had already twice tried the fur trade, and had twice been disappointed in my expectations; and therefore, if experience was worth anything, I ought not any longer to reject its warnings; but above all, I urged as my strongest motive for leaving the service, the necessity of retiring to a place where I could have the means of giving my children a Christian education, the best portion I could leave them.

After a short pause the Governor observed, "Well, al-

though you are determined on leaving the service, I am still disposed to be your friend; what can I do for you?" I answered, "Your excellency has always been a friend to me, and if you are still disposed to add another favor to those I have already received, grant me a spot of land on Red River that I can call my own, and I shall be very thankful." "Your request shall be granted," said he, "and the company, in consideration of your exertions and success in the Snake country, are disposed to add something to it." On this occasion I had every reason to be satisfied. He sent for the chief accountant, and ordered him to draw up a deed for a hundred acres of land, free of all expense, which he handed to me, and we parted.

NOTE—This grant included from the Red River bank for two miles on the prairie bounded on the south side by William Avenue, and on the north side by Logan Avenue, in the City of Winnipeg.

