

Lord Selkirk's Efforts to Establish a Settlement for Irish Catholics at the Red River

BY

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Like all colonizing schemes which began in Canada, one must look to conditions in the European countries whence the settlers originated for the background of the exodus. This is true of the Red River Colony and of the man who promoted it.

By the end of the seventeenth century the British Government had taken steps to break up the strong clan organization in Scotland. Formerly every clansman enjoyed the same rights to the soil as did his chief. He tilled it and raised cattle in proportion to his meagre requirements, exulted in his independence as only those who live on the land can, and was attached to his chief, the clan cause and the Stuart dynasty by a fierce loyalty. With the advent of house of Hanover to the throne of England, the policy of the British Politicians called for some radical change, even at the expense of shattering the Scottish social fabric of centuries. The enforcement of their design despoiled the clansmen of their right to the land and put the legal possession of the soil in the chiefs. This did not occasion any immediate hardship as the chiefs who had always accorded to their people a benevolent protection, left the former status of the clansmen unchanged. Their descendants, however, educated in the south of the Island and learning the material advantages to be derived by them personally from a highly commercialized agricultural economy began a process of "modernizing" rural life in Scotland. English and Lowland Scottish commercial people offered high rentals for the large tracts of rugged land covered with grass and heather, which were ideal pasture land for sheep. The education acquired by the new generation of chiefs had the effect of shifting the loyalties of their ancestors away from the illiterate and uncouth highland people and gave them a taste for the so-called better and more civilized life. To indulge their tastes they required money and as the Highlanders were unable to meet competitively the rentals offered by the commercial people, evictions followed, and in their wake wholesale social misery and destitution.

There seems little need here to detail particulars of social conditions in Ireland. The most significant political event in that hapless country was the abolition of the Irish Parliament in the Union of 1801. Politically both before

and after the Union, the march of events was significant, but the conditions of the masses of the people – the majority of them Catholics – was desperate. Social unrest only, is bred where the advantage of education and the consolation of religion are denied a people. Accordingly, Ireland was naturally a fertile field in which to recruit emigrants for North America.

Such was the condition of Scotland and Ireland during the career of Thomas Douglas, seventh son of the fourth Earl of Selkirk. He was born 1771. He was a contemporary of Napoleon and the Duke of Wellington. In his early youth the American Revolution had been staged. The spirit of the French Revolution, which found its way into most countries, made Scotland no exception. In young Douglas – well educated at Glasgow – well travelled with companions like Sir William Hamilton, the Scottish philosopher, – it stirred the spirit of reform and the desire for social welfare work. With six elder brothers, it was not expected that he would ever succeed to his father's Earldom, but one by one all of his brothers died and in the 26th year of his life he became the Earl of Selkirk with its estates and wealth to use as he saw fit. As Thomas Douglas, he was interested in the unhappy plight of his Highland countrymen and was anxious to promote schemes for their welfare. When he unexpectedly became the Earl of Selkirk, he was in a much better position to carry out such schemes.

Besides his early education and scholarly habits, Selkirk brought to man's estate a practical broad viewpoint on religious questions in a day when religious bigotry, especially anti-Catholic, anti-Irish bigotry, was rife.

He openly favoured the cause of the Irish Catholics in the House of Lords and disputed the matter with Lord Sidmouth, the confidant of George III and a militant opponent of Catholic Emancipation. Selkirk was the man of public affairs in Britain who read with enthusiasm the record of Alexander Mackenzie's exploits in British North America – who conceived visions of Empire – who was practical enough to see a possible solution for the want, lack of space and general destitution in the British Isles by settling people in the unexplored interior of Canada with its temperate climate and untouched limitless resources. People so settled, moreover, he felt could develop in an environment free from the religious strife then so rife in the old land.

The Selkirk Papers at the Canadian Archives in Ottawa contain several memorials written by Selkirk about 1802 when he was in his early thirties. They are coloured by his imperialism, his theories of social reform and to an extent by antipathy to the religion of the majority of the inhabitants of Ireland when they refer to the lot of those hapless people.

In a memorial (p. 13893) composed in 1802 Selkirk comments upon the danger to which he felt the Empire was exposed by the turbulent state of Ireland. It was his studied opinion, he stated, that the condition was not one for which military coercion was a cure. A policy should be devised which could keep the people busy and prevent them from brooding over traditions of ancient injuries. Education was one cure, but a necessarily slow one – too

slow if war should again break out on the continent.

The memorial went on to advocate emigration – not forced or haphazard, but a planned scheme – to establish a colony in North America expressly for Irish Catholics – a colony as he describes it “to suit their religious and national prejudices.” The proposal should be sponsored by the government and at the expense of the public.

But note the politician – the English Protestant aristocrat. – “Thus,” he says, “Ireland would be drained of all her most dangerous subjects.” He further suggests that the government should encourage Protestants from Northern Ireland and from England to settle in Southern and Western Ireland, to fill up the Catholic “blanks,” thus ensuring the loyalty of the country in times of emergency. Colonies, moreover, would be valuable acquisitions to the commerce of Britain. “Perhaps these very individuals (the present dangerous subjects) may in a situation where new advantages excite the latent seeds of industry, become valuable members of society and contribute as colonists to the wealth of the parent state, to which at home, they would be worse than useless.”

Similar and other ideas are expressed in another memorial to Lord Sidmouth (p. 13875), then Lord Privy Seal in the English Cabinet. The memorial was composed four years later and bore the date of November 19, 1806.

It comments on the discontent of the Irish Catholics and the peril to Britain of a dissatisfied Ireland. It emphasizes the importance of increasing the Protestant part of the population by encouraging Catholic emigration to America and Protestant immigration from Northern to Southern Ireland. It recognizes the poverty of the majority of Irish Catholics and their seeming inability to improve their condition in the face of the local situation obtaining in Ireland. It points to the extensive immigration from Ireland to New York, Philadelphia and Washington and suggests that the stream be diverted to British territory. It states that “the population in question is not of the best stamp but is too considerable to be neglected and would be a great acquisition to some of the colonies.” From a small beginning a successful colony would grow by the addition of friends and relatives of the pioneers. Throughout, it is Catholics who should be encouraged to emigrate, and five or six Catholic priests might be engaged in the government service. Selkirk recognizes the necessity of providing facilities for the practice of Catholicism in any colony founded, and should the experiment be successful in Canada, Irishmen in the United States might be induced to cross the border.

Another memorial (p. 13864) purporting to have been prepared by R. L. Edgeworth, is also among the Selkirk papers. Its tenor is somewhat similar to the above.

Apparently Selkirk did not secure the co-operation he hoped to receive from his petitions to the authorities, for he threatened at one stage (in January, 1803) to acquire land in the western United States and to promote emigration

in that direction (p. 13847). This threat can only serve to emphasize the fact that Selkirk was at heart a reformer, genuinely interested in emigration for the distressed of the British Isles. The decimation of the Catholic population in Ireland might have been an attractive idea to the British politicians of the day, but it does not seem to have been Selkirk's motivating thought.

Selkirk did not succeed in having the government adopt his idea of sponsoring emigration at the expense of the public purse. But the government gave him to understand that there would be no opposition to the scheme should it be promoted by private enterprise and this despite the need of men for the Napoleonic War then being waged by England. Accordingly, he set out alone on his enterprise.

Selkirk's first work in furthering his aims was the equipment and despatch of three ships to Prince Edward Island in 1803 and Selkirk himself accompanied the settlers, 800 in all.

Selkirk spent a year travelling in Canada and the United States and in the following summer (1804) he met a party of about 111 emigrants at Kingston who were on their way to a tract of land, 950 acres in extent, which had been purchased by Selkirk. It lay near the Lake St. Clair district and went by the name of Baldoon Farm. (Kent County now includes the whole tract.) Sickness arising from unfamiliarity with the climate carried off some 40 settlers. Apart from this the party thrived until about 1812 when the Americans all but obliterated it.

During his visit in Montreal, Selkirk became interested in the West after meeting and talking with some of the partners of the North-West Company – Joseph Frobisher and Simon. McTavish. The impressions of the West and its possibilities thus gained, he carried home to England, where events were to weave for them a place destined to effect the future history of the then rugged colony.

The chief – perhaps the only – interest in the West which the North West Company had was the lucrative fur trade. In this the Company's only rival was the Hudson's Bay Company, properly known as the "Governor and Company of Adventurers of England trading into Hudson's Bay." It was incorporated by Royal Charter of Charles II in 1670.

At this time, the energy brought to the fur trade by the partners and servants of the North-West Company, founded in 1783, who dealt with the Indians in the manner of horse traders, was gradually eliminating the competition offered by the older Company. In England, Selkirk began to look into the business of the Hudson's Bay Company. Profits had been non-existent for years and shareholders were apathetic about the future of the Company. Selkirk, however, was impressed with the wide powers contained in the charter and took the trouble to secure the best legal advice in London, as to its value. He was assured the Company could rightly claim title to all land drained by the rivers which were tributary to Hudson's Bay. If the Company owned it, he argued, the Company could establish settlements on

it. Accordingly, he and his friends began to buy all the stock they could. They succeeded, in acquiring about 33%. By his marriage to Miss Wedderburn-Colville in 1809, he formed a further alliance with a family of Hudson's Bay Company stockholders and the control of the Company was his. Meantime news of his project reached the ears of the English partners in the North-West Company. They began to purchase stock to defeat Selkirk's colonizing scheme. Their effort, however, was of no avail. In a general court (shareholders' meeting) in London in 1811, a plan to plant a colony on the Red River was adopted.

In passing it should be noted that the North-West Company partners feared Selkirk's scheme because they felt that with his genius for organization, the competition which the old Company would offer would reduce their own profits. Selkirk, however, was not primarily interested in the fur trade. On one occasion he wrote his wife that it was a business "which I hate from my heart."

A general court of the Hudson's Bay Company granted to Selkirk 116,000 square miles of land bounded roughly by the Red River on the West and Lake of the Woods on the East, by the head waters of the Mississippi on the South and Lake Winnipeg on the North – land now lying in Manitoba, Minnesota and North Dakota. His deed was dated June 13, 1811.

Selkirk then set out organizing for a settlement. Land would be cheap – almost free; passage arranged. Religion was not a qualification for acceptance. The governor of the new territory chosen by Selkirk was Captain Miles Macdonell, a United Empire Loyalist from the Mohawk Valley, an officer in the Royal Canadian Volunteers, a man whom Selkirk had met in Canada. Macdonell was a Catholic. He started his work by looking for recruits in the West of Ireland. Other agents performed similar tasks in Scotland.

The instructions (p. 168) which Selkirk issued to Macdonell for the establishment of a colony at the Red River are detailed and voluminous.

All men, whether intended for the settlement or the Company's commercial establishments, are to sign contracts... for three years... at the stipulated wages. If two hundred or more appear at (the appointed meeting place at) Stornoway, Macdonell is to select forty, and in any case not less than thirty for the Red River... The selection should be made to establish an extensive local connection in the home land... i.e.... people should be taken from a variety of districts rather than from one in particular. Of the Irish, twelve or fifteen may be sufficient, including the tradespeople. The rest may be Highlanders. (Apparently the Scotch were thought to be the best type to found a colony.) The rest of the Irish and Scotch... would be for the company's commercial posts...

Three ships were equipped to carry about 125 emigrants to Canada. The sailing was not uneventful. The agents of the North-West Company put customs obstacles before the emigrants, and succeeded in having several recruits desert. The flotilla finally sailed late in July, 1811, with a complement of 105 emigrants, most of whom were for the fur trade, and the balance for the settlement. Late in September, 1811, they landed on the shores of Hudson's Bay near the mouth of the Nelson River.

Miles Macdonell's first reports (p. 40) to Selkirk after the arrival refer particularly to the Irish in places. He says "The Irish bands were not more troublesome than the others. The people from Glasgow were at first the most turbulent and dissatisfied." Thirty men of the company, he has chosen for the settlement (p. 44).

He also comments upon a priest named the Rev. Charles Bourke, for whom he had not a very high regard.

"I am not fully satisfied with the Rev. Charles Bourke and could wish to know what character he bore in his own country. Your Lordship must get every information concerning him from the Bishop of Killala... [The Rev.] Mr. Bourke tells me he came away without the leave of his Bishop who was absent in Dublin at the time. A report must be made of him to the bishop at Quebec as he now belongs to that diocese. He is very zealous for the increase of our colony; assures me that he can get thousands to come out from the County of Mayo; has written very encouraging letters to his own relations there; and writes letters for almost every one of his flock to their former friends in the same encouraging strain. He wishes to become a shareholder in the Company."

This, I should think, makes the Rev. Fr. Bourke a distinct advantage to Selkirk and his company, at least as an advertising agent.

Bourke even broke into public print to defend the colony and Selkirk in the *Inverness Journal*. A correspondent styling himself "A Highlander" and supposed to be a propagandist of the North-West Company sent a letter to the paper's editor attacking Selkirk, his colony, his contracts, and his treatment of settlers. The letter appeared in June. Bourke's reply is dated June 6th, 1811, and was published September 6th, 1811. Bourke's statements were strong and of a nature to encourage others to sign up and emigrate. The reply of "A Highlander" proceeded to attack Bourke as "an agent of Selkirk," and one who had no knowledge of the conditions in Selkirk's colony.

Apparently one William Auld, employed in the Company's fur-trading work at Hudson's Bay, was not in sympathy with the idea of a settlement, as indeed was the case with most of the commercial men in the company's employ. Auld, however, did not always write the same accounts to Selkirk as he did to Governor Macdonell. In the result the Irish suffered.

An encampment apart from York Factory was chosen by Miles Macdonell

and here under his command shelters from the long winter were prepared. The tedium and monotony of winter engendered ill-feeling, which was heightened by the breaking out of scurvy. Orkneymen, intended for the fur trade, did not incur the favour of the Governor. The Glasgow men – whom he termed “rascals” – were also an occasion of annoyance. The Irish, too, gave him trouble, particularly at New Year’s when they staged a fight on the occasion of some festivity arranged by the Scotch in honour of the feast traditionally observed in the Highlands. Its seriousness is exaggerated by some of the colony’s opponents, but it served to discredit the Irish further in Selkirk’s estimation. William Findlay, the camp physician, was insubordinate, and the local magistrate, one Hillier, placed him in solitary confinement. His fellow countrymen from Glasgow set fire to his prison, rescued him, and defied the Governor for several months, refusing to live with the other emigrants. Finally they were subdued by the Company officials, apologized, and rejoined the other settlers.

Some of the reports of the winter’s doings bear repeating. Miles Macdonell, writing from the Nelson Encampment to William Auld on April 18th, 1812, and later on May 4th, 1812, reports that fourteen insurgents are to be sent to London to answer for their conduct... John McLeod from Lewis and Michael Macdannel from Ireland are to be sent along to give evidence against them. These young men may afterwards serve to get good men for us in their respective countries.

Macdonell’s report to Selkirk of May 31st, 1812, reports:—Some Irish attacked some Orkneymen in Hillier’s party. Too much liquor was the only incitement. Three Orkneymen were so severely beaten that a surgeon could not pronounce them out of danger for one month. The sufferers compromised with one Irishman – Anthony McDonell: “not being able to speak English” he was drawn into the fray by the two others. He will make a good settler and is strongly connected in Laggan, County Mayo – and will be the means of bringing out many of his relatives.

Scotsman William Findley refused to work. Macdonell confined him to a hut which 9 Glasgow men and 4 Orkneymen burned and then defied Macdonell and Hillier. “None of the Highlanders or Irish were concerned in this affair”... of February 12, 1812. Apparently there was a complaint by the settlers that Selkirk’s agents’ representations had not been carried out.

He also reported on the Rev. Charles Bourke thus: (P. 358.)

“The Chaplain is very sanguine for the advancement of the Colony and continues to write encouraging letters home. – He intends writing your Lordship – to offer his personal services to recruit in Ireland. He may be more useful there than here and perhaps this would not be a bad way to get rid of him... admitting him to hold a share in the concern would be the means of keeping him interested and be a spur to his exertions. I do not think he will ever make a convert to the Catholic

Religion. I should not however wish to part with him until another was on the way to join us. I expect that hereafter there will be no difficulty in getting a priest to come out who can be well recommended and probably at a reduced salary.”

Later he continued in a report dated July 4th, 1812. (P. 415.)

“ To Mr. Bourke I have granted leave to go home at his own desire. I enclose his letter. He was only an encumbrance to me - irregular and eccentric in his conduct as a clergyman. He has no sway over his flock and religion is turned to ridicule among strangers. If he can do any good to the colony in Ireland it is well. We must however immediately have a priest and he ought to be an exemplary steady character. Such a one will be a very great advantage.”

(P. 419.)

“ Four Irishmen are to be sent home - Higgins and Hart for felonious attack on the Orkney men.” Higgins only belonged to Macdonell’s list.

After this first difficult winter on the shores of the Hudson’s Bay, the pioneers began to trek inland, and on August 30th, 1812, they arrived at the scene of the settlement on the Red River, near the present city of Winnipeg. On September 4th, 1812, the ceremony of taking seizure of the land for the Earl of Selkirk was performed amid much show of pomp and authority, all of which was effectively designed to impress the none too friendly half-breeds.

Supplies being low, a buffalo hunting expedition was organized, Indians acting as guides. The party moved on to the shores of the Pembina River, there to prepare for the winter near the source of food. They were soon joined by a party of 17 Irishmen who, under the command of Owen Keveny, had made the ocean voyage and the inland track in the course of the summer. Keveny, an Irishman, held a place high in the esteem of all Hudson’s Bay Company employees.

Spring of 1813 saw the Pembina Camp broken up and the return to the Red River – culminating in the erection of a substantial group of structures called “Colony Gardens”. Nature in 1813 was not in one of her generous moods and the settlers were hard pressed for food supplies. By fall, it became apparent that they must return, to the buffalo fields of the Pembina, and so another hibernation was undertaken. The winter was long and cold, the Indians unfriendly and the North-Westers antagonistic. Their supplies of food and clothing were low and their spirits lower.

Word of their destitution reached Selkirk in Scotland. He doubled his efforts to secure new settlers and saw 97 Scotsmen off for Assiniboia in the summer of 1813. The new colonists were more experienced in agricultural pursuits and succeeded in taking the first grain crop from the Canadian prairies

in the summer of 1814. Persistently bad reports of the doings of some of the Irish had apparently had an effect upon Selkirk. Auld was particularly ill-disposed towards them (p. 484, etc.). There is little evidence to indicate that any pains were taken to secure a good type of person from Ireland, and, further, the absolute need of religious authorities in a colony seems to have been ignored.

However, the official records emphasize the bad features of the Irish conduct at the expense of ignoring some accomplishments. Letters were written to Ireland in 1812 by the settlers and although only extracts are available at the Archives, the tenor of the letters is cheerful, and encouraging to other prospects in Ireland (p. 553).

There are extracts from letters from Cornelius Hays, John Green and Pat. Corcoran.

Michael Hyland wrote to his father "I never was so well in health... don't be daunted at this place because where we are to go is as fine a country as in all America."

Patt Quinn wrote to Anthony Gillespie that he was well treated, had provisions in great plenty, rum every Saturday evening and little or no work! He recommends the proposed colony to the poor people near Killala.

Some of the other letters are interesting as to the life in the country.

One McKinlay wrote "The thermometer stood for most of the winter from 72° to 87° below the freezing point." And later "the embarrassment of the miskeeties fly in the summer exceeds that of the blistering cold in the winter."

Selkirk's failure to enlist Irish after the summer of 1812 is explained in the following letter, to Miles Macdonell, dated June 12, 1813. (P. 659.)

"The accounts sent home by Wm. Keveny's people last year were not encouraging and Mr. Everard seems to have had no great choice. But after the unpleasant occurrences on board the Robert Taylor [which brought the party of 1812] I had no desire to take any great proportion of that untractable race till the police of the country should be established on a footing of tolerable security. Whenever that time comes I flatter myself that the Irishmen you already have will be sufficient to lead over the abundant reinforcements. Under these circumstances it is not of so much consequence to send out a priest immediately. Nevertheless I should have sent you one had I not been disappointed by the Bishop who on the recommendation of Dr. E. undertook to look out for one. I hope to send a good man next year and at the same time a Minister for the Protestant Highlanders. It is perhaps as well that the one of these does not go before the other, as the Sutherland men are rigid Presbyterians and might have been alarmed at the appearance of the priest, if there had been no other clergyman to do away with the impression. — I trust that everything can be avoided that will alarm the

prejudices of these people. I would wish to keep as much as possible out of sight the circumstance that any of the officers in command over them are not of the same persuasion as themselves. After a little personal acquaintance they will be convinced that an R.C. may be a very good man. But we must treat with delicacy the feelings of men who have never lived with any but their own sect.”

Meantime as a result of a decree of Macdonell's in January, 1814, forbidding any export of supplies from Assiniboia, the North-West Company and their partners became alarmed and decided to challenge the rights asserted on behalf of the Hudson's Bay Company. As a result of the edict Macdonell effected a seizure of a large quantity of the North-West Company stores within the territory. This called for a show of hands from the North-West Company. It came through the machinations of two men, Duncan Cameron and Alexander Macdonell. Cameron weaned away from the Selkirk settlement several of his fellow countrymen whose loyalties to Selkirk had been considerably diluted after the hardships encountered in the settlement. In April, 1815, Cameron succeeded in capturing a few field pieces owned by the colony. What amounted to a pitched battle occurred in early June, 1815, as a result of which Miles Macdonell surrendered to the North West Company and was taken to Montreal under arrest. One hundred and forty settlers, the majority from the colony, were removed under Cameron's orders. Forty or fifty remained behind, only to be attacked by Alexander Macdonell at the end of the month, and, after a gallant defence, the exhaustion of supplies and ammunition forced them to leave the colony, which was promptly destroyed by fire at the hands of the North-Westerns.

All, however, was not lost. One of Selkirk's men, Colin Robertson, coming to the rescue, located the fleeing settlers, revived their hopes, brought them back to the Red River and re-established the colony. They were joined by a new group of 90 Scotsmen in the late summer of 1815 and Robertson successfully recaptured the lost field pieces and made Cameron a prisoner. He was released before another winter, which proved arduous for the settlers, but was recaptured and held until the summer of 1817, when he was returned to England for trial. On a point of jurisdiction he was discharged and later successfully sued Selkirk for substantial damages.

The warfare between the two companies continued, culminating in the famous massacre of the seven Oaks in 1816 and the murder of Governor Semple, the resident Governor in Assiniboia.

Meanwhile Selkirk was advancing West, accompanied by a force of 200 disbanded soldiers and clothed with the powers of a magistrate. At Fort William he arrested William McGillivray and 8 other North-West Company partners and seized the North-West Company establishment. The prisoners were sent east for trial.

In the Spring of 1817 Selkirk came upon the scene of the Red River

settlement. The retired militia were settled, further land given the colonists, and a treaty made with the Indians, granting Selkirk further land.

Selkirk then returned to the East only to find law suits standing against him in Canada, some of which cost him substantial sums.

Selkirk's experience in Canada was unhappy. His zeal for colonizing cost him over \$500,000. However, it came at a time when strife between the companies had reached its most desperate peak. Gradually the bloodshed subsided, the battlefront switched to the law courts and finally, after Selkirk's death in 1820, the quarrel was dissolved by the amalgamation of the two companies.

From this resumé of Selkirk's work it is apparent, I think, that he was an able social reformer in the interests of Imperialism, despite the arguments used by him to enlist the support of the British government for his schemes to rehabilitate Irish Catholics. I think it can safely be said he was broader and more tolerant of religious opinions than many of his conferees among the English nobility. His plan to rehabilitate the destitute, illiterate Catholic masses of Southern Ireland was fundamentally sound, and had the North-West Company opposition not been so violent he might have succeeded in transporting many more hundreds of Irish Catholics to his Red River settlement. As it was, they formed a considerable number of the early settlers.

NOTE: Page references are to the Selkirk Papers in the Public Archives of Canada, transcripts of the originals at St. Mary's Isle, Scotland.