

Akaitcho (ca. 1786-1838)



Drawn by Lieut. Hood, R.N.

PORTRAIT OF AKAITCHO AND HIS SON

The Yellowknife Indian leader Akaitcho stepped upon the stage of Canadian history in the afternoon of 30 July 1820 when he met Captain John Franklin and affirmed his willingness to guide and provision Franklin's expedition of exploration "to the shores of the polar sea." A year later, almost to the day, Akaitcho and his band delivered Franklin and his complement to a point on the lower Coppermine River within five hours of the ocean. The drama of the succour of the starving survivors by Akaitcho and his followers the following November assured Akaitcho's place in history.

Known in Franklin's time as Copper Indians, the Yellowknives were the northwesternmost division of the widespread Chipewyan peoples. Speaking a somewhat distinctive dialect of Chipewyan, they were a small "tribe" of about 190 souls in 1820. Akaitcho, "Big Foot", was the paramount leader. His band included about 40 men and boys. The Hook and Long Legs, who were also involved in the Franklin expedition, headed smaller groups.

Ranging broadly in the caribou lands from the East Arm of Great Slave Lake to the Coppermine River, Akaitcho and the Yellowknives traded as meat provisioners into the North West Company post of Fort Providence on the North Arm of Great Slave Lake. For at least a decade the Yellowknives had pillaged furs, stolen women, and occasionally killed Dogrib and Hare Indians, their neighbours to the west and northwest. Dogribs were forced to avoid parts of their traditional hunting range during Akaitcho's years of aggressive leadership.

Akaitcho's ferocity is featured in Dogrib lore to the present day. Franklin and his officers experienced Akaitcho's character in more diverse aspects. At their first meeting in 1820 at Fort Providence, Akaitcho was at pains to impress Franklin with his dignity and importance. Franklin was to discover that Akaitcho did not easily yield in matters regarding his own judgment or self-interest. After the expedition was under way, Akaitcho resolutely balked at attempting the journey to the arctic coast in one season, pointing out that when he had agreed to do so he had no idea of the "slow mode of travelling" of Franklin's party. In consequence, the expedition established winter quarters at Fort Enterprise on Winter Lake. The following spring Akaitcho had a try at demanding immediate distribution of promised trade goods before he would undertake the summer's expedition to the coast. When other Yellowknives did not support his allegations of bad faith, Akaitcho backed down, offering as justification that "as the leader of his party, he had to beg for them all."

When, after the terrible overland return from the arctic coast, the starving remnants of the Franklin expedition were rescued by Yellowknives, Akaitcho revealed another facet of his character. Treated with the "utmost tenderness" by their rescuers, Franklin and his party from Fort Enterprise were conveyed to the camp of "our chief and companion Akaitcho." There, in Franklin's words, Akaitcho "shewed us the most friendly hospitality and all sorts of personal attention, even to cooking for us with his own hands, an office he never performs for himself." To survivor George Back, Akaitcho was "generous and humane."

By 1825, when Franklin arrived at Fort Resolution on the

south shore of Great Slave Lake to launch his second overland expedition, Akaitcho and the Yellowknives had suffered a change of fortune. In consequence of the merger of the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company in 1821, the post of Fort Providence had closed in 1823. Akaitcho and the Yellowknives now perforce had to direct their trade into Fort Resolution in company with Chipewyans already attached to that post. (Their intermarriage and absorption into that population brought the eventual disappearance of the Yellowknives as a distinct people.) Driven by vengeance or desperation over killings perpetrated by Yellowknives earlier in the year, in October of 1823 Dogribs attacked the Yellowknife Long Legs and his band, who were encamped in the area between Hottah Lake and Great Bear Lake. Thirty-four Yellowknives perished — four men, thirteen women, and seventeen children. This was a bitter reversal. Akaitcho refused to join Franklin's expedition to Great Bear Lake, sending word that he and his hunters would not go into the lands where their kinsmen had died, "lest we should attempt to renew the war." "Peace" took the form of mutual avoidance between Dogribs and Akaitcho's band. In 1829 a tense encounter, apparently the first since the destruction of Long Legs's band, was resolved without bloodshed.

Akaitcho re-emerged in the history of northern exploration in the winter of 1833-34 during an "appalling period of suffering and calamity" at Fort Reliance, the base Back had established for the overland search for John Ross, believed lost in the polar region. Akaitcho's energy and resolve in the hunt and the example of psychological fortitude he set in that time of famine commanded Back's admiration. Yet later in his journal Back remarked that Akaitcho, who was then about 50 years of age and in poor health, had lost much of his authority over the Yellowknives.

In 1838 word came to the trader at Fort Resolution that Akaitcho had died that spring. Dogrib tradition has it that Akaitcho is buried on an island in Yellowknife Bay.

FURTHER READINGS

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