

John McLean (ca. 1798-1890)

We tend to picture the nineteenth-century Hudson's Bay Company as a vast, impersonal monopoly extending its trade routes and power throughout Canada. If we associate any particular name with the company, it is probably that of Sir George Simpson, the tightfisted and wily Scot whose iron rule as governor brought him the title of the "Little Emperor". Yet the Company's wealth was founded, in large part, on the industry and skill of its traders in the field — common men, too often forgotten, such as John McLean, another Scot, who fortunately provided the means for rescuing his name from oblivion in his book, *Notes of a Twenty-five Years' Service in the Hudson's Bay Territory*.

McLean was born on the Isle of Mull, Scotland, in 1798 or 1800. It is apparent from his book that he was middle class in origin and well educated. After initial brief employment by the North West Company, he entered the service of the HBC following the union of the two companies in 1821, and until 1833 worked as a fur trader in the Ottawa Valley. In his account of those years, we note McLean's cunning in dealing with competitors and Indians, the risks he took to advance the Company's interests, and the sacrifice he made in withdrawing from society to the loneliness of life in the bush. We sense too his physical toughness, daring, and drive to succeed. There was also a testy and sardonic element in him that bespeaks pride. Yet for all this, he could admit to shedding "tears of joy" over a narrow escape from danger, and we see other evidence, occasionally in his treatment of native peoples, that he was a man of some feeling. McLean was a complex and gifted man.

In 1833 he was transferred to the Company's western department, and his book describes his trek overland to the North Pacific slope of the Rockies (New Caledonia), the difficulties of travel being, as usual, understated. He was struck by the beauty of this territory, which reminded him of "his own poor, yet beloved native land." It was McLean's destiny to cross on foot and by boat and canoe virtually the whole of what is now Canada.

In 1837 he began the greatest adventure of his life, when he was appointed by Simpson to take charge of what was termed the "Ungava venture", i.e., the quixotic attempt to open up a fur trade in the interior of the Labrador peninsula. McLean arrived at the recently built Fort Chimo on the Koksoak River late in 1837, and proceeded with the effort to establish an overland supply and trading route between Ungava Bay and Lake Melville. Simpson's scheme was to provision Fort Chimo through some kind of inland navigation from Fort Smith (North West River). McLean gamely undertook this virtually impossible task, and what is remarkable is how much he accomplished in obedience to Simpson's instructions. In the first three months of 1838, for example, he trekked back and forth between Fort Chimo and Fort Smith — a feat that had, however, been accomplished earlier, in 1834, by Erland Erlandson, HBC employee and McLean's co-worker. It was apparent that the interior could not be supplied in winter owing

to deep, soft snowdrifts; the only way was by canoe. In the summer of 1839, with Erlandson dispatched to Lake Petitsikapau on the plateau of Labrador to build Fort Nascope, McLean led a party of men along the coastline of Ungava Bay to the mouth of the George River, and headed upstream by canoe. In August, after prolonged torture by mosquitoes and bitter labour, "half starved, half naked, and half devoured", he arrived at Lake Petitsikapau. After a day's rest, he, Erlandson, and two others set out for the Labrador coast. They reached Lake Michikimau, found its outlet, and headed downriver. Before long their progress was stopped by rapids, and a day later they saw "one of the greatest spectacles in the world", the "stupendous" Grand (now Churchill) Falls. McLean was the first European to describe the falls. No way around the cataract could be found, and the party, "with heavy hearts and weary limbs," returned to Fort Nascope, and thence to Ungava Bay.

In 1841 McLean did find a navigable route around the falls through a string of small lakes. In effect, he showed that the practical way to approach the interior of Labrador was upstream from Lake Melville rather than from Ungava Bay. To him this discovery made Fort Chimo unnecessary, and McLean recommended that it be abandoned. He was, in fact, disenchanted with the whole Ungava enterprise and with Simpson's leadership of the Company. In 1842 he was authorized to withdraw from Fort Chimo and the following year the post was closed down.

A scholar has recently argued that McLean's recommendation to close the fort was "wrong", that it was abandoned just as it was starting to make money. He suggests as well that McLean's antipathy to Simpson may have been a factor in leading him to make his recommendation. (Fort Chimo was in fact reestablished in 1866.) But whatever McLean may have failed to do in his years in Labrador, his brilliant expeditions were landmarks in the story of northern exploration. His qualities were undeniable.

After his return in 1843 from a furlough in Britain, McLean was posted to Fort Simpson on the Mackenzie River, but on seeing evidence of a "cold and callous heart" in Simpson's treatment of him, in 1846 he resigned from the Company. His life thereafter was obscure. He spent nearly a decade as manager of a bank in Guelph, Ontario, and for 25 years thereafter served as clerk of the division court in nearby Elora. His last seven years were spent with his daughter in Victoria, B.C. He died in 1890.

McLean in middle life was described as "a tall, straight, thin man, about six feet tall, and active in all his ways. He had a strong, rugged face and prominent nose, and was clean-shaven, except for side whiskers."

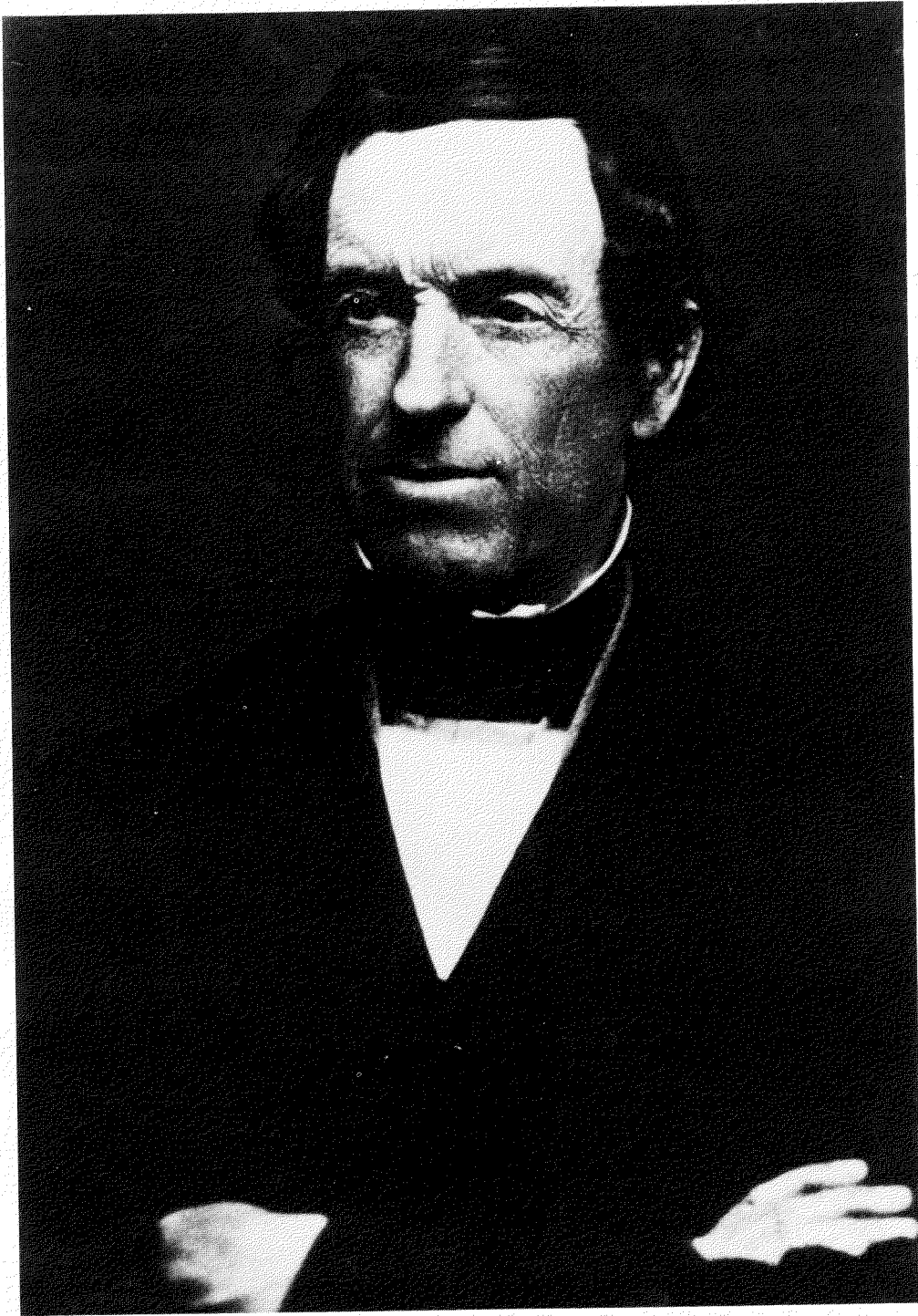


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