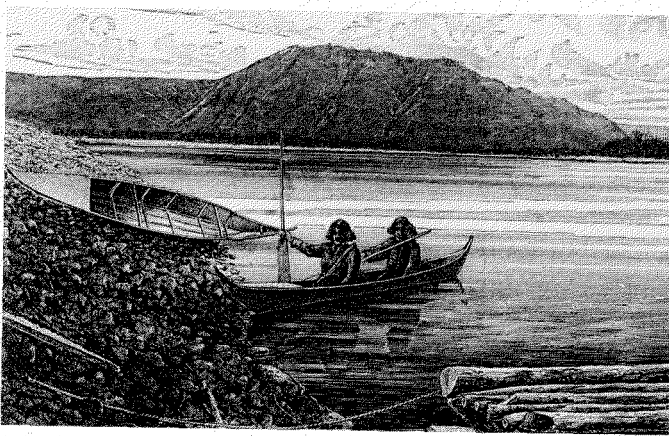


James Green Stewart (1825-1881)

James Green Stewart, a classic example of the often-neglected second rank of the northern exploratory corps, made a noteworthy contribution to the opening of the far northwest. Although his part in northern exploration has been obscured by the more dynamic and public careers of his superior officers, most notably Robert Campbell, Stewart played a vital role in the Hudson's Bay Company's efforts to expand into the Yukon River valley.

Born in 1825 in Quebec City, James Stewart joined the Hudson's Bay Company in 1844 as an apprentice clerk. He was soon sent to the northwest, where he was assigned to assist Robert Campbell. Campbell had been active in the Liard and Pelly River regions for almost a decade and had just opened Fort Selkirk at the junction of the Pelly and Lewes (Yukon) rivers when Stewart joined him in 1848. As Campbell's assistant, Stewart faced the onerous task of helping to make this isolated fur post a viable enterprise.

The challenge proved difficult and, ultimately, unsuccessful. Fort Selkirk was poorly positioned, for it thrust the Company's trade into the midst of trading networks maintained by the



Indians from the vicinity of Fort Selkirk. From Frederick Schwatka's *A Summer in Alaska* (1892).

coastal Tlingit Indians, who, ironically, exchanged their furs at coastal points with other Hudson's Bay Company traders. The post suffered as well from its isolated position. Supplies had to be brought in along the Liard River, a violent and dangerous stream that claimed the lives of many Company tripmen.

In 1849, while Campbell remained at Fort Selkirk to supervise the trade, Stewart was sent to Pelly Banks to pick up supplies cached there the previous year. Having sent the trade goods on to Fort Selkirk, Stewart remained behind to wait for the annual supply boat from Fort Simpson. The wait was in vain, and Stewart and Andrew Flett were forced to retreat to Fort Selkirk. Sorely missing the expected shipment of supplies, the fort was in desperate straits, having no goods for trade and

barely able to support its inhabitants. Stewart, who Campbell said was "always ready for any enterprise," was dispatched in April 1850 to Fort Simpson on the Mackenzie River. Campbell was ready to abandon Fort Selkirk if Stewart's journey was unsuccessful. The trip was long — 1750 km, in fact — and arduous, but the urgency spurred Stewart on. Stewart secured some supplies at Fort Simpson, then set out immediately on his return journey. Stewart's remarkable expedition preserved, at least for a time, the Hudson's Bay Company post at Fort Selkirk.

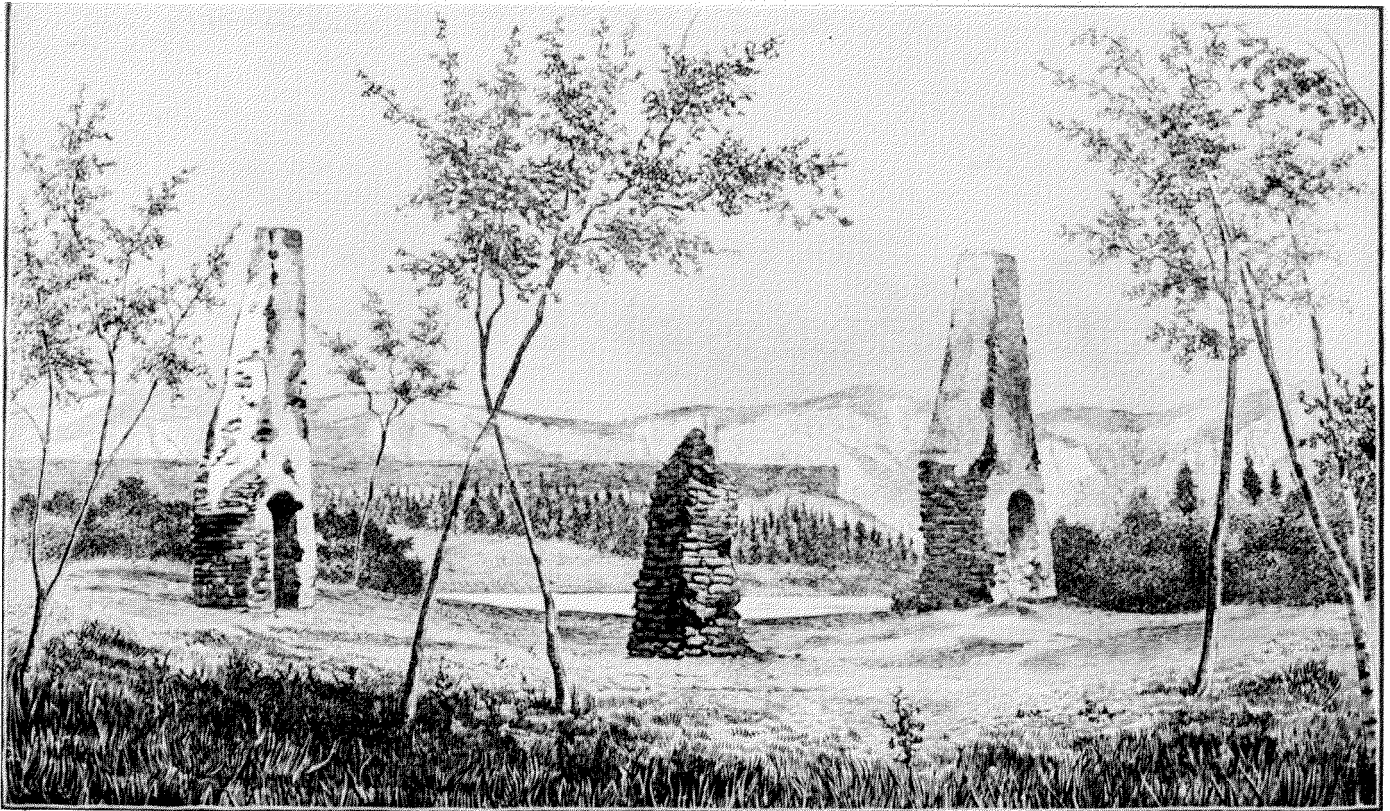
Two years later, in 1852, Campbell and Stewart were forced to abandon the post they had fought so hard to sustain, when Chilcat (Tlingit) Indians, long-time rivals of the Hudson's Bay Company traders at Fort Selkirk, attacked it. Stewart was away when the Chilcats ransacked the place, but he returned in time to help salvage what was left of the supplies. Campbell's attempts to secure the Company's permission to reopen the post at Fort Selkirk failed, and both men were reassigned.

Because he spent his Yukon career in a subordinate role, Stewart has seldom received proper credit for his contributions. There is no doubt that Robert Campbell, himself plagued by doubts as to the viability of the Yukon trade, relied heavily on James Stewart. Although second in command, Stewart provided much strength and commitment, at a time when Campbell's resolve was dwindling rapidly. His fellow officers spoke highly of his physical prowess and his willingness to accept tasks that others avoided. He seemed, from Campbell's journals, to have also been a very personable colleague.

Campbell's comments for those times when Stewart was away reflect the musings of a lonely man, isolated from "civilization" in a land he found unappealing. When Campbell and Stewart were together at Fort Selkirk, however, an infectious, spritely tone dominates the post commander's writing, reflecting Stewart's optimism and the deep friendship of the two men. During his time in the Yukon, Stewart was the quintessential second-in-command, willing to follow orders, provide advice, assume a leadership role when conditions warranted, and carry out difficult tasks under very trying circumstances. Governor George Simpson valued Stewart's advice greatly, corresponding with him directly on matters connected to the future of the Yukon trade. The governor seemingly put greater stock in Stewart's comments than he did in those from the post commander, Robert Campbell.

For both Stewart and Campbell, the debacle at Fort Selkirk marked the end of their Yukon careers. Stewart, however, continued to serve in the North. He was stationed for short periods at Fort McPherson, Fort Carleton, and Fort Resolution. In 1855, Stewart was assigned to assist James Anderson's Back River expedition, sent to confirm reported sightings of the lost crew of John Franklin.

The journey was wracked by discord between the two principal men. Anderson repeatedly overruled Stewart, challenging his selection of guides and route. Bad luck and poor planning plagued the trip throughout. Anderson claimed that Stewart had used poor judgement in securing bark for the canoes, which proved incapable of handling the rough waters of the Back River and the heavy ice conditions along the coast. The troubles



Ruins of old Fort Selkirk. From Frederick Schwatka's *A Summer in Alaska* (1892).

continued at the end of the expedition, when Stewart was accused of lacking initiative and chastised for not following orders. As Governor Simpson noted, "Stewart has unfortunate failings for which he received from myself, at the request of the Council, a severe reprimand this season." It was an ironic twist in Stewart's career, which hitherto had been characterized by the laudatory comments of his superior officers. The experience severely damaged Stewart's reputation, which clearly had peaked during his Yukon career.

Stewart remained with the Company, rising to the rank of Chief Factor in 1869. He served at Cumberland House, Oxford House, and Norway House before being dropped from the Hudson's Bay Company's list of officers in the deed poll of 1871. James Green Stewart died 10 years later, at the age of 55.

FURTHER READINGS

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