

Robert Campbell (1808-1894)

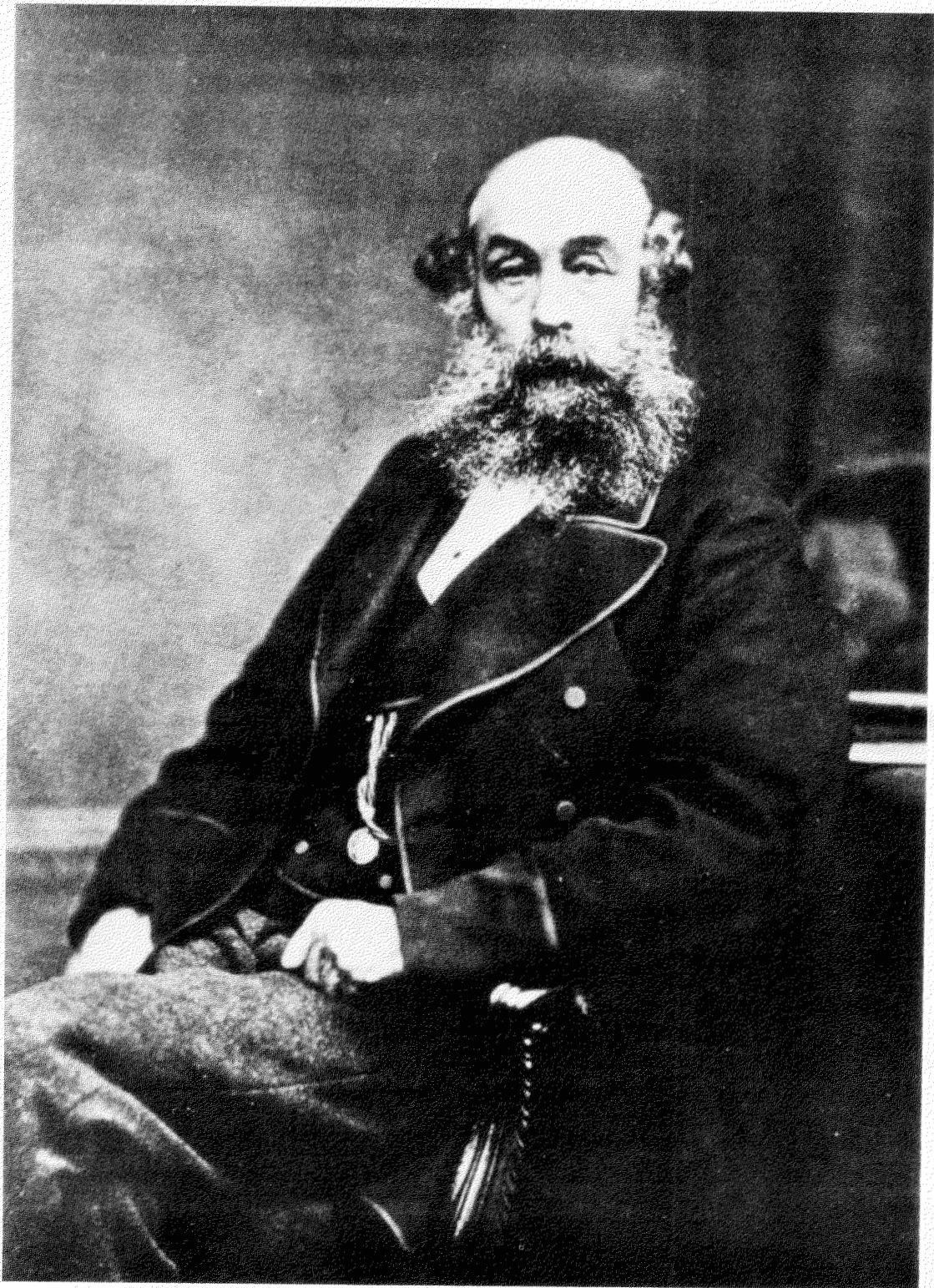


Photo courtesy of Hudson's Bay Company.

Known as "Campbell of the Yukon," a sobriquet that commemorates his years as an explorer and fur trader in the southern Yukon, Robert Campbell was born in 1808 in Perthshire, Scotland. Stories told by his cousin, Chief Factor James McMillan of the Hudson's Bay Company, sparked an intense interest in the North American frontier. In 1830 at the age of 22 he was hired to work on the Company's experimental farm at Red River. The work proved less exciting than he expected, and after four years he requested a transfer to the fur trade.

Campbell spent two unproductive years in the Dease Lake area, trying to break the Russian American Fur Company's hold on the interior fur trade. An agreement between the H.B.C. and R.A.F.C. in 1839 freed Campbell to turn his attentions northward. Thomas Simpson and Peter Warren Dease had, in 1837, crossed a major new river, which they named Colville, during their excursion along the arctic coast. Campbell, who had learned from the natives of the "Toutcho" or "Great Water" to the north, was directed to push to the north in search of the headwaters of this new river. He completed the exploration in two stages, reaching the Pelly River in 1840 and descending that stream to its junction with the Lewes (Yukon) River three years later.

Governor Simpson ordered Campbell to establish a trading post at the promising "Forks," but poor trading and provisioning conditions at Frances Lake and Pelly Banks and Campbell's own hesitations stalled the expansion until 1848. These were hard times for Campbell and his men, as starvation threatened almost every year. Finally established at Fort Selkirk, he was directed to explore the remaining distance between that fort and Fort Yukon. His 1851 voyage proved that both posts were on the Yukon River and completed Campbell's contributions to the exploration of the North.

With the years of hardship behind him, Campbell expected that his district would now bring handsome returns. Those hopes were soon dashed. The strong opposition of the coastal Tlingit Indians to the H.B.C. presence culminated in an attack on Fort Selkirk in 1852 that left the post a charred ruin. Campbell, who James Anderson said "is mad when he touches on the prospects of Selkirk," was determined to re-establish the fort. He travelled to Fort Simpson, but Anderson, his immediate superior, would not grant him permission to return. Campbell refused to see his years of suffering in the North go for naught, so he set out on a 4800 km march on snowshoes from Fort Simpson to Minnesota. From there he continued on to Lachine, near Montreal, where he pleaded his case before Governor George Simpson. The governor would countenance no further expense on the unproductive field and sent Campbell on a long-overdue furlough to England. The trip provided him an opportunity to circulate news of his discoveries. In particular, he helped the Arrowsmiths, famous map makers, add the Pelly, Lewes, and Yukon rivers to the map of the far northwest. His accomplishments had been duly noted.

Although these exploits demonstrate his contribution to northern exploration, Campbell remains an enigmatic personality. He was a tall, powerful man, possessed of great strength and a tenacious approach that often bordered on obsession. His contemporaries spoke favourably of his com-

passion, his devout Christian faith, and his courage in the face of personal danger. Those who earned his ire, and there were a number, discovered Campbell's other side. His correspondence reveals a dour, unforgiving man given to extreme and unreasonable criticism of Company officers he felt were not assisting his efforts as an explorer with sufficient zeal. Campbell's constant complaints, repeated threats to retire (all recanted), and his tendency to overrate his importance to the Hudson's Bay Company angered many of his fellow officers.

Robert Campbell dearly sought the fame he felt would accompany geographic discoveries in the far North, but he lacked the flair and originality of other northern explorers. Campbell advanced northward in a tentative fashion, stopping short of the bold exploratory thrust that would have solidified his claim to being a great explorer. He developed a myopic view of the Company's affairs in the far northwest, incorrectly believing that Governor Simpson assigned Campbell's own explorations top priority and had given him *carte blanche* to requisition supplies and men for his work. Governor Simpson disabused him of this, and he ordered Campbell to pay greater attention to his trading responsibilities. Campbell's determination to place his name among the great explorers often blinded him to the H.B.C.'s interests and made the task of establishing a fur trade in this inhospitable district even more difficult. Still, his efforts helped bring the Hudson's Bay Company into the Yukon River valley and helped fill in one of the last remaining gaps on the map of North America. That alone was an appropriate legacy for a man driven to be a northern explorer.

Robert Campbell's Yukon career ended with the debacle at Fort Selkirk. He returned to Fort Liard in 1854 and from there was reassigned to the Athabasca district. He eventually achieved the rank of chief factor, but resigned his commission in 1871 under unfortunate circumstances. He retired to a ranch in Manitoba, where he died in 1894 at the age of 86.

FURTHER READINGS

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