

Sir George Simpson at Lachine

By
CLIFFORD P. WILSON
Montreal

The first of a series of articles on Sir George Simpson and the Montreal headquarters of the Hudson's Bay Company. The author of these articles has done much research in the archives of churches in the Province of Quebec and of the City of Montreal, producing unpublished material on this famous Scottish monarch of the fur trade monopoly.



Sir George Simpson, by Stephen Pearce. Presented to the Company by His Chief Officers

WHEN the Hudson's Bay Company amalgamated with the North-West Company in 1821, they found it advantageous to adopt a number of the well established practices of the Montreal firm which had been in use for some thirty-five years. One of these was the admission of field officers (chief factors and chief traders) to partnership in the concern. Another was the holding of an annual summer council for the Canadian partners. And a third was the utilization of the long established trade route from the fur countries to Lachine and Montreal.

Before the coalition, all the Hudson's Bay Company's traffic from the Lake Winnipeg region to

Europe had been routed through the Bay. This was, of course, shorter than the southern route through the Great Lakes to Montreal; but the latter had been in constant use for a great many years and had many advantages over the newer one.

These advantages the new governor, George Simpson, was quick to see; but it was not until six or seven years after the amalgamation that he could begin to make full use of them. In November 1820, when he was putting in his first winter on this side of the Atlantic, he was appointed acting resident governor to replace Governor William Williams, who was under indictment at the time in

the courts of Lower Canada. Next year, when the coalition took place he was appointed joint resident governor with the older man, Williams taking the southern and Montreal departments and Simpson the northern and Columbia departments. Finally, in 1827 he received a letter dated December 24, 1826, from the Governor and Committee in London commending him in the highest terms for his work

during the past five years and appointing him governor-in-chief of all the Hudson's Bay Company territories and Canadian business at a salary of £1800.

This apparently did not come as a complete surprise to Governor Simpson. Before Williams had relinquished his governorship of the Canada posts (which were included in the Montreal department) the younger man had, in the fall of 1826, established himself at Lachine, whence every spring the fleet of big canoes set out for the posts of the interior.

His object in moving down from the northwest is a matter for conjecture; but the most probable reason is that he wished to keep in close touch with the powerful ex-Nor'westers whose homes and offices were in Montreal, and who were now partners in the new company. Under their capable hands, Montreal had become the centre of the fur trade in America, and Simpson probably realized that, no matter where he set up his headquarters, the young metropolis would continue to hold her position of pre-eminence in this respect.

This position, in fact, she had held intermittently ever since the early years of Canadian colonization, and always it had been connected with the Great Lakes and Ottawa River route, not with the present St. Lawrence route via Lake Ontario. Legend has it that even before the coming of the white men the Algonkians of the Ottawa valley used to bring their furs to the Island of Montreal, where the then peaceable Iroquois tilled the soil and exchanged its products for the products of the chase. We know for certain, however, that ever since the first decade of the seventeenth century, the fur flotillas had been making their laborious way from the *pays d'en haut* to the St. Lawrence down the Ottawa, and that as early as 1611 Champlain met the Indians where Montreal now stands for the purpose of buying their furs. His report of the amenities of the place and the



Hudson's Bay House, Lachine, bought by the Company in 1833 as a residence for Sir George, and where he died in 1860. It was torn down in 1888.

facilities for trade there, which he made on his return to France, was evidently what decided the Company of Montreal to choose that spot for the beginning of the settlement thirty years later; and although Ville Marie de Montreal was founded as a missionary venture, not as a trading post, the obvious advantages of the spot as the confluence of three trade routes could not long be overlooked.

As the years went by, the importance of Montreal as a fur trading centre increased, although by no means steadily, owing to the depredations of the Iroquois. There was naturally a good deal of rivalry between the various traders of the village, and the obvious thing for the more enterprising of them to do was to establish posts further upstream, where they might pick out the cream of the crop before it reached the market. With the Iroquois continually waiting, however, to pounce on the unwary citizen (and even the wary one), it was frankly impossible to live outside the protection of the settlement. It was especially desirable that a post be built above the rapids of Lachine because of the dangers of capsizing in that famous *sault*. Baron La Hontan, for example, relates how the canoe in which he was descending the rapids one day overturned in their midst and his Indian companions lost not only their cargo of furs and their canoe but one of their own number as well. Since the cargo of each "canow," as he calls it, usually amounted to forty packs of fifty pounds each, the savages ran the risk of losing a ton of furs for every canoe that shot the rapids.

The natural place for a trading post, therefore, was at the head of the *sault*, where the precious cargoes could be safely disposed of. But the Montreal traders feared to make this step until they could be sure that the Iroquois menace had been removed. It did not take long, however, for them to act, once they were certain about it. Peace with these dread marauders had hardly been declared when a young gentleman-adventurer, fresh from France, took up land at the head of the Lachine rapids and began to clear it for cultivation. A life of bucolic security, however, held no attractions for Cavalier de La Salle, and in 1669 he set out to look for China via the St. Lawrence and the Ohio rivers. Less than a year later, when the expected failure of his quest became known, his seigneurie of St. Sulpice was derisively renamed *La Chine*.

(China), and Lachine it has remained to this day. Nevertheless, he had demonstrated that it was possible to live quite safely in a lonely outpost well beyond the precincts of Montreal, and the fur traders proceeded to profit thereby.

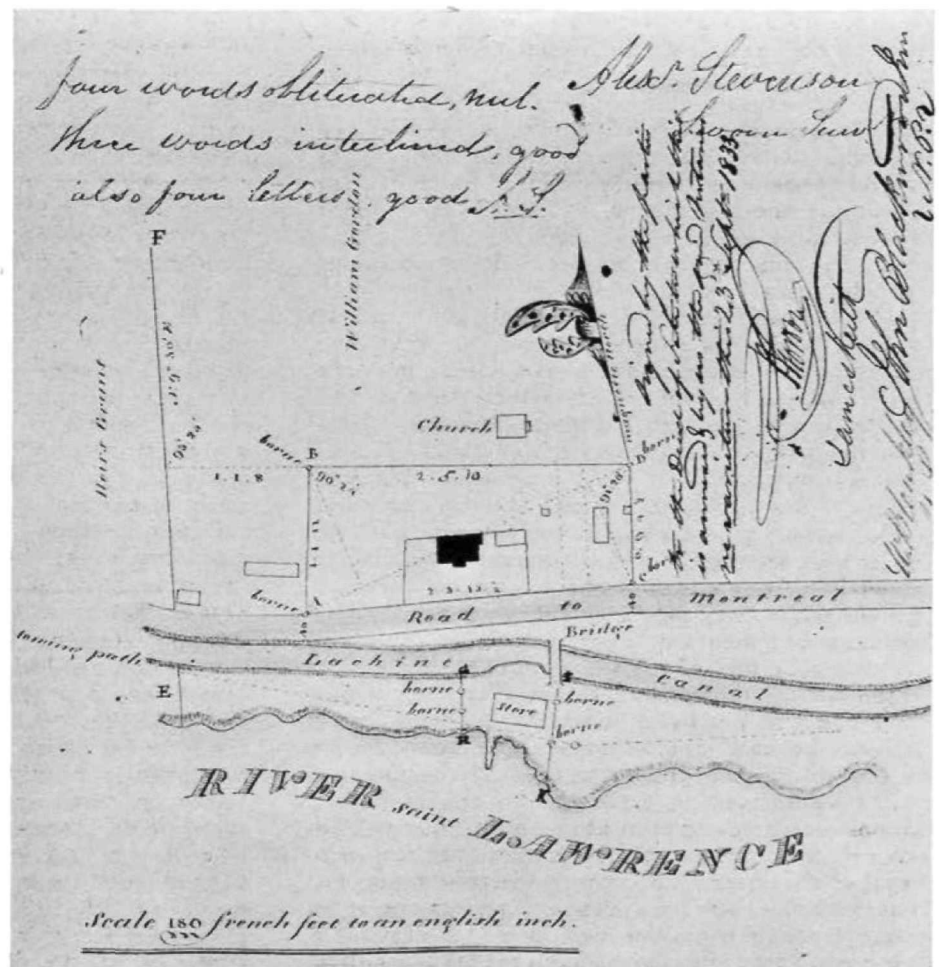
On the very day of his departure, Charles Le Moyne and Jacques Le Ber, the former one of the bravest officers and the latter one of the richest merchants of Montreal, had bought from him a parcel of land near the water's edge above the rapids. These two brothers-in-law had seen the importance of getting at the Indian fur fleets before they reached the market, and on the land purchased from La Salle they built in 1671 a house and a storehouse for furs, the first fur trading post established west of Montreal. Today these two buildings still stand, the oldest on the island.

For the first couple of years or so, the partners probably did a flourishing trade; but soon other Montreal merchants caught on to the idea, and one by one other "seigneuries"—which were really trading forts—sprang up along the shores of Lake St. Louis. Finally, in 1679 Le Moyne and Le Ber were obliged, in order to get ahead of their competitors, to transfer their Lachine business to the western end of the Island of Montreal.

Despite this westward trend, however, the annual fur fairs continued to be held at Montreal, when the little town would be thronged with naked Indians and beribboned *coureurs de bois*. In 1674, as many as eight hundred canoes arrived there from the west; but this was probably a bumper crop, owing to the establishment of Fort Frontenac the previous year, which served to divert some of the Iroquois fur trade to Montreal. For in the early seventies most of the furs of Canada had been secured by the Dutch and English traders, due to the higher prices they commanded at Albany (N.Y., not H.B.), and it was to prevent the Indians of the Upper Lakes trading with France's enemies through the Iroquois that Frontenac built the post which took his name, and which has since become Kingston, Ontario.

The establishment of posts in the far wilderness was not, of course, wholeheartedly welcomed by the stay-at-home traders of Montreal—unless they had a share in the profits. Moreover, the race of *coureurs de bois* (men who penetrated to the remote Indian villages and bought their furs at the sources of supply) was growing more numerous and more independent each year. The Indians, instead of making the long, laborious annual trips to and from Montreal, began to sit back and let the Frenchman do all the hard work of paddling and portaging. Certainly it was much more pleasant to sit and drink brandy in one's own village, and barter one's furs at ease without fear of competition, than to lug the heavy packs all the way to market, where the traders concerted to beat down the price and fire-water was obtainable only in restricted quantities.

Soon the established traders, who were more or less subject to law, saw that the outposts and the *coureurs de bois* were between them capturing most of the trade, and it became necessary for them either to take shares in a trading post or to employ their own wood-runners. And so the numbers of



Plan Showing Location of Hudson's Bay House at Lachine, office and residence of Sir George Simpson. The House is shown black. Taken from the deed of sale of the property from Wm. Gordon to the HBC, 23rd September, 1833. The building marked "store" still stands and is used as a dwelling. Note signature of Chief Factor J. Keith, who signed for Hudson's Bay Company.

the annual Indian fur fleets began to dwindle, until by the end of the seventeenth century they came no longer to Montreal. The French fur trade, in fact, had gravitated into the hands of a few big merchants who sent their own canoes out, manned by their own voyageurs, to their own posts in the wilderness. Thus began the establishment of the large Montreal fur companies.

With the coming of the Scottish merchants after the cession, the fur trade of Montreal received a tremendous impetus, and the little town flourished as never before. Following in the footsteps of the Verendryes, and aided by the Canadian voyageurs, who knew the routes of old, they began to intercept the Indians bound for Hudson's Bay and to establish posts in the wilderness as the French had done before them. Charles Grant, writing in 1780, estimates the number of canoes upbound from Lachine each spring at ninety to one hundred, each manned by eight voyageurs. (These were bigger canoes than those used by the Indians in 1674.)

When the North-West Company was formed, they established their principal storehouses for merchandise and pelts at Lachine. The Indian department did the same, and when the Cascades and Coteau locks were finished in 1783 the Upper Canada trade increased to such an extent that the Montreal merchants set up warehouses at the head of the rapids for the storage of goods bound up the St. Lawrence. Thus the little old village began to assume a position of real importance. Each season saw no less than fifteen to eighteen thousand loads of stores carted from the foot of the rapids to the head, and in 1804 a new road (the Upper Lachine Road of the present day) had to be built to accommodate the traffic.

By the time the Nor'westers were absorbed by the Hudson's Bay Company, therefore, the facilities for trade between Montreal and the up-country were well established, and the new combined concern continued to make full use of them. More and more traffic was diverted from the Bay, and Montreal found her position as centre of the American fur trade strongly consolidated.

It was only natural, then, for Governor Simpson, when he had arranged the affairs of the northern department to his liking, to move down from the northwest and set up his headquarters on the St. Lawrence. Why he should have chosen Lachine in preference to Montreal is not quite clear. Perhaps he wished to keep a fatherly eye on his staff, who lived just across the canal, or possibly he felt that residence in Montreal would not bring with it that sense of unchallenged supremacy he so dearly loved. And so he took a house in La Chine (as he spelled it) and settled down in solitary grandeur.

Where he lived during the first seven years, it is impossible to say. But in 1833, having married and acquired an added sense of importance, he saw to it that the Company should house its resident governor-in-chief in a mansion more worthy of his dignity. On September 23, 1833, therefore, the Hudson's Bay Company bought from William Gordon, of Lachine, the biggest house in the village—a veritable mansion, sixty feet long and fifty wide—which became the Canadian headquarters of the Company and the residence of its governor.

Its position in relation to the old canal, and to the stone store, which is now used as a dwelling, is shown in the accompanying sketch taken from the deed of sale in the Montreal archives. The house itself, unfortunately, no longer stands, having been pulled down in 1888 to make room for the huge, three-domed sanctuary of the convent of the Sisters of St. Ann. But a photograph of it, taken after 1872 from the southeast corner, has fortunately been preserved, and is reproduced herewith. It is probably the only existing photo of the building where the "Emperor of the Plains" lived and laboured for so many years, until his death there in 1860. That we are enabled to use the picture here and give the following description of some of its rooms is due to the kindness of the good Sisters, who, in response to a short written request for information, took the trouble to copy out eight closely typewritten pages from the description of the old house in their archives, and draw careful plans of the three floors to illustrate the text.

Looking at the photo, we see on the first floor at the nearest corner the tall window of the governor's private office. The lower window on the east side of the house was originally a door leading from a verandah (demolished before the picture was taken but shown on the plan of 1833) into his public office, so that access could be obtained to it without passing through the house. From these two rooms the Canadian affairs of the Company were directed for a period of twenty-seven years.

Above them, its one side window and two front windows visible in the picture, was an enormous room fifty feet long and twenty-six wide, stretching the whole width of the house. It is said to have been reserved for the governor's three daughters—Frances Webster (who rejoiced in the curious nickname of "Greyhound"), Augusta D'Este, and Margaret McKenzie. Normally, these children lived in England, but occasionally they used to visit their parents in Canada. While they were away, the big room was conceivably used as a dormitory for some of the Company employees.

R. M. Ballantyne, the famous author, tells in his "Hudson Bay" how as a boy of twenty he stayed at the house from October 1845 to January 1846. "Hudson's Bay House," he writes, "is the most imposing building about the place, but it does not reflect much credit on its architect." Why he should make this remark is not evident, but possibly he was referring to the heating, lighting, or interior arrangements of the building. Certainly, judging from the picture, it was as "stately, great and pleasant a house" as one could wish for.

The farthest tall window seen on the front of the house (through the porch) was that of the governor's grand salon, and above it that of his bed-chamber, a room twenty-two feet wide which also stretched the entire width of the house, and which, after his wife's death in 1853, he shared with his youngest child, John Henry Pelly. Here it was that, in his seventy-fourth year, the "little emperor's" energetic and industrious life came to a close.

(The next instalment will deal with certain aspects of Sir George's character and of his life at Lachine.)