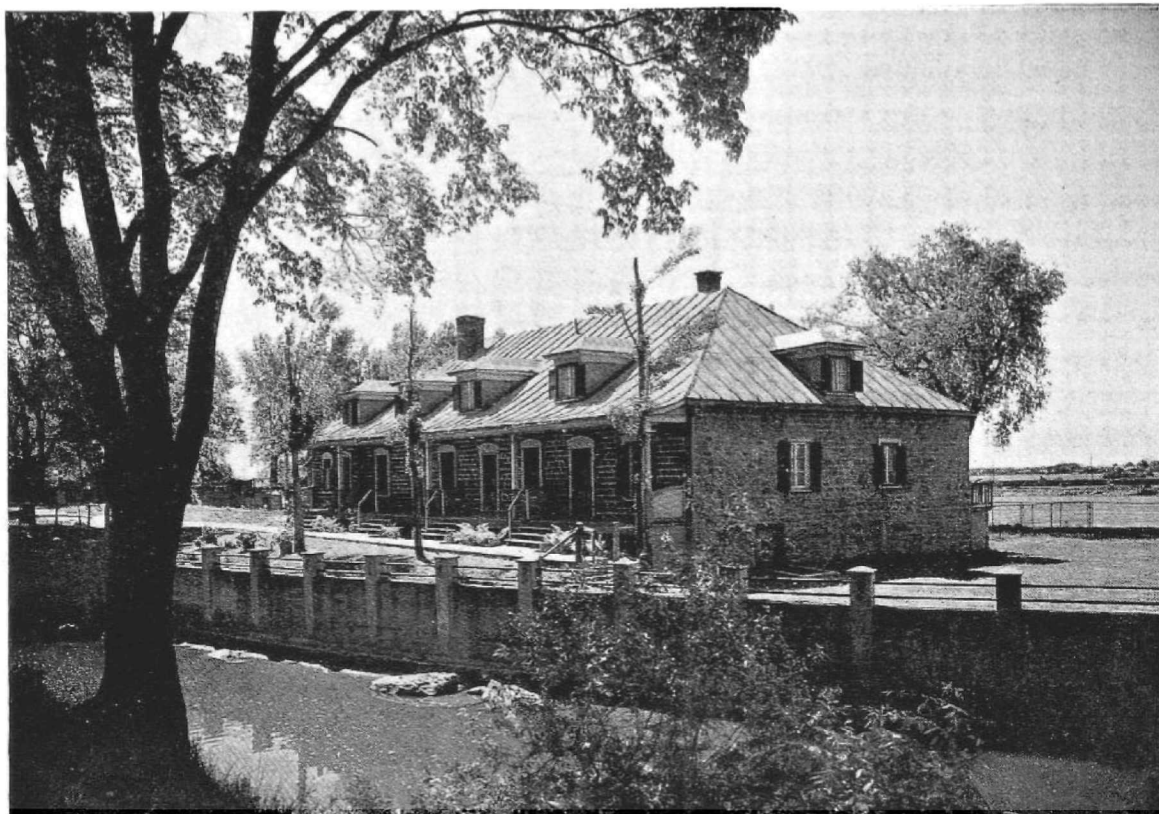


The Emperor at Lachine

By CLIFFORD P. WILSON
Montreal



Built over a hundred years ago, this former Hudson's Bay Company storehouse in Lachine is now used as a dwelling. Within the last fifteen years its appearance has been greatly changed by such alterations as a tin roof, shutters, a verandah, "cut-stonework" painted on the old field-stone walls, and the modernization of the dormers. The cement retaining wall is also a recent addition. In the foreground is the old Lachine canal, built between 1821 and 1824, but no

longer in use. Here it was that the Hudson's Bay Company canoes were moored, and here Sir George and his titled companions embarked, during his voyage round the world in 1841. The photo is taken from the Toronto-Montreal highway, just across the road from the site of Hudson's Bay House. This storehouse is quite possibly the one where the then future Lord Strathcona was ordered by Sir George to begin his career by counting rat skins.

EVER since the coming of the French to Canada, the locality of Lachine had been the port of departure for canoes bound for the fur countries. The reason for this, of course, was the presence of the Sault St. Louis, or Lachine rapids, barring the progress of ships and shallops up the St. Lawrence. Yet, even after the Lachine canal was opened to traffic in 1825, the village at the rapids' head continued to be the "jumping off place" for the canoe brigades until the railway was put through some thirty years later.

During the days of the Nor'westers, and later of the Hudson's Bay Company, the scene of bustle and excitement there during the annual

spring exodus of the voyageurs must have been picturesque in the extreme. Just before the ice went out of Lake St. Louis, the canoemen—French-Canadians, Indians, and half-breeds—would begin their traditional celebrations. Weary of the long uneventful winter, and all agog at the thought of getting out on the rivers and trails again, they would gather at Lachine two weeks in advance and spend their days and nights dancing to the fiddle and the concertina, singing the *chansons* of old France, making love to their womenfolk (or each other's), and spinning those fantastic yarns of theirs which gave rise to the saying: "*Les voyageurs n'ont jamais vu les petits loups!*"

As might be expected, the flowing bowl was the pivot about which these festivities revolved and, as the time of bidding farewell to their wives and sweethearts drew near, there were few who did not make full use of it, either to increase their joys or drown their sorrows, as the case might be. It was therefore the aim of the Company officers in charge to keep the time of embarkation a secret, giving the men plenty to do and then suddenly leaving on very short notice. By this means a final grand carousal was often prevented, and the men set off on the long voyage in a more or less sober condition.

At such times the scene opposite Sir George's big house must have been full of life and sound and colour—the gaily costumed voyageurs hurrying to and from the warehouses with their burdens; the big brightly painted canoes moored along the wharves; the shrill babble of the women warning their menfolk not to forget this and that; the rumbling ox-carts on the jetties; the shouts and laughter drowning out the protestations of fidelity and whispered farewells; and at last the word of command from *le maitre*, as each heavily laden canoe swung out and away up the lake to the strains of some age-old chanty.

We can imagine too (if we like) the little Scotsman who was ultimately responsible for it all standing on the balcony of his house across the road and beaming down on the throng with an amused and fatherly eye. But more than likely he was as busy as (or busier than) anyone else, giving orders here, there and everywhere, in his office, in the warehouses, and on the crowded docks; for it was a matter of personal pride that no detail should escape him. In his early years with the Company he had taken great pains to familiarize himself with every detail of every department, and had been duly commended therefor in the highest possible terms by the Governor and Committee in London.

Beckles Willson writes of him as "a man of merciless method, unsparing of detail when it conduced to clarity or order, no matter what pains it cost his clerks or what time it involved. All stores had to be listed and elaborate inventories made down to a packet of needles or a fraction of a pound of sugar. Simpson's aim was, as he himself boasted, to be able to ascertain in a moment exactly what was, or should be, not only in the cash box and fur room but in the larder of every one of the hundred and seventy posts of the Company from Ungava to Vancouver Island, and from the Arctic Circle to Red river. He carried the practice of economy to great lengths, but, as was frequently remarked by his subordinates, not a little

Sir George Simpson—

The second article in a series on Sir George Simpson and the Hudson's Bay Company's headquarters at Montreal dealing with certain aspects of Sir George's character and his life at Lachine. Mr. Clifford Wilson, as a result of much research, is producing in these articles hitherto unpublished material on this famous resident governor of the Company from 1839 to 1860.

of his economy was of the penny-wise-pound-foolish order."

To be specific, this criticism was made by John McLean, whose antipathy towards the little governor is well known, and who wrote, in one of his bitterest moments, that "in no colony subject to the British Crown is there to be

found an authority so despotic as is at this day exercised in the mercantile colony of Rupert's Land, an authority combining the despotism of military rule with the strict surveillance and mean parsimony of the avaricious trader. From Labrador to Nootka Sound, the unchecked, uncontrollable will of a single individual gives law to the land."

But, admitting that McLean may have been prejudiced, it is evident from the criticisms of other writers that Simpson was excessively arrogant and imperious towards the servants of the Company. The Emperor Napoleon was his ideal, almost his passion, and he assiduously set himself to cultivate the great man's bearing and behaviour. Even the kindly John Stuart, who was friendly with him both at York Factory and in London, found him difficult at times; but he was able to see the other side of Simpson's character too. Writing in 1836 from London, he says:

"Really I could not, if I was to attempt it, earn the kind attention I experience from Mr. Simpson, whom I see daily perhaps half a dozen times, mostly at my own lodgings. . . . I think that I know him better than most people, and am satisfied that when left to himself unbiassed to follow the dictates of his good heart (a contrast to McLean's reference to his 'cold and callous heart'), there cannot be a more kind or better man; but he is alike easily influenced by the flattery and prejudice of others, and when once aroused, excitable and without much reflection, and will go any lengths."

In 1838 Stuart learned that his nephew, young Donald Smith, had elected to serve the Company and was already stationed as an apprentice clerk under the watchful eye of the governor at Lachine. "The only, or at least the chief, drawback," he wrote to him, "is that you are dependent upon the goodwill and caprice of one man, who is a little too much addicted to prejudices, for speedy advancement; but this is probably true in many other spheres of commercial endeavour. . . . There is, I may say, no man who is more appreciative of downright hard work coupled with intelligence, or one more intolerant of puppyism, by which I mean carelessness and presumption. It is his foible to exact not only strict obedience, but deference to the point of humility. As long as you pay him in that coin you will quickly get on his sunny side and find yourself in a few years a trader at a congenial post, with promotion in sight."



SIR GEORGE SIMPSON'S COUNTRY HOUSE
ON DORVAL ISLAND, NEAR MONTREAL

The house was built in 1855 and it was here that Sir George entertained the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII, and his suite to luncheon in 1860, having previously staged a grand canoe race in their honour.



The summer home stands by the St. Lawrence river which, with the south shore, is visible at the left side of the lower picture.

*Photographs
by*
HARVEY BASSETT

The future Lord Strathcona, however, was not destined to escape that dread charge of "puppyism." In 1830 the governor had married his cousin, Miss Frances Ramsay Simpson, who was only seventeen at the time, and a lady of considerable charm. She was, in fact, twenty-six years younger than her husband, and she can hardly be blamed for seeking the company of some of the "indentured young gentlemen" when the governor was away on his annual trips to the West.

When young Donald Smith, who was seven years her junior, arrived at Lachine, she was, we are told by one of his fellow apprentices, "attracted by the simplicity and gentle address of the newcomer's manners. She invited him to tea; she occasionally commanded his escort on boating excursions. Once, after the governor had returned after an absence at Red River, we heard that there had been a scene, and that in consequence young Smith, although innocent of any offence but that of obliging a lady, was in disgrace, one gentleman averring that he had heard the governor, in a highly pitched treble, declare that he was not going to endure any 'upstart, quill-driving apprentices dangling about a parlour reserved to the nobility and gentry.' I am not sure that those last words were actually uttered by the governor, but they represented at least the current

opinion as to the purposes for which our autocrat reserved his parlour."

Whether this had any effect on the governor's subsequent dealings with his eventual successor, it is impossible to say. John Stuart had said in his letter to his nephew: "Your sojourn at Lachine can hardly last beyond the coming winter (1838-9), and instead of the West, you may be sent to one of the King's posts or to the Ungava, if the governor still has that bee in his bonnet." In the course of the next two years, Smith was sent to the Lake of Two Mountains and other posts in the Ottawa valley, but he was again at Lachine when the proud little governor, now Sir George Simpson, K.B., arrived with his titled travelling companions on his voyage round the world.

This was in the spring of 1841. The party arrived at the end of March and stayed for over a month, while Sir George no doubt attended to business from which he had absented himself since 1839. Part of this business was to transfer Donald Smith to Tadoussac on two days' notice. Navigation on Lake St. Louis was opened by the first steamer of the season on May 1st, and accordingly on that day the first brigade of heavy canoes was dispatched to the northwest.

Sir George and his party, which included Lord Caledon and Lord



Mulgrave, set out three days later, travelling in two "light" canoes manned by twenty-seven picked voyageurs. The governor is said to have preferred French-Canadian canoeists to any others, but it is noteworthy that the men he chose for this important voyage were mostly Indians, or at least half-breeds. This, however, may simply have been done in order to lend an extra touch of romance—a bit of local colour, calculated to impress the visitors.

"By nine o'clock," writes Sir George (?), "our two canoes were floating in front of the house, on the Lachine canal. The crews, thirteen men to the one vessel and fourteen to the other, consisted partly of Canadians, but principally of Iroquois from the opposite village of Caughnawaga, the whole being under the charge of my old and faithful follower, Morin. To do credit to the concern in the eyes of the strangers, the voyageurs had been kept as sober as voyageurs could be kept on such an occasion; and each one had been supplied with a feather for his cap. This was all very fine; but the poor fellows were sadly disappointed that a north-wester, which was blowing prevented the hoisting of our flags."

He then goes on to describe the canoes themselves, which, he says, were about thirty-five feet long and five feet wide amidships. They drew, when loaded, about a foot and a half, and weighed by themselves between three and four hundred pounds; which means that on the portages, with two men to a canoe, each of them had to carry between one hundred and fifty and two hundred pounds over the rocky, tree-strewn trails. This may seem a lot for one man to be burdened with, even in these days of well cleared portages, but the voyageurs of Lachine and Caughnawaga were supermen when it came to hard labour.

The baggage was usually made up into ninety-pound packs, and each man would carry two of these at once. Nevertheless, their strength seems to have been nothing compared to their amazing endurance. Every day, according to Sir George, they would work for sixteen hours out of the twenty-four. They would get up at one a.m. to begin the daily grind, go ashore for breakfast at eight (*i.e.*, they would presumably work for seven hours on a practically empty stomach), for a cold lunch at two, and to retire for the night about seven. "This almost incredible toil," writes the governor, "the voyageurs bore without a murmur, and generally with such a hilarity of spirit as few other men could sustain for a single forenoon." Nothing is said, however, about what would happen to his "poor fellows" if they showed any signs of slacking.

Sir George was famous throughout the Company's domains for the relentless way in which he drove on his voyageurs, and doubtless on this particular voyage he was especially anxious to show off in front of the "nobility and gentry." Driving on the noble Iroquois may not have been so easy, but the governor knew they would work as hard as anyone as long as they could look forward to a suitable reward. "It is not for your cloth and blankets," some Indians had told him during his early years with the Company, "that we undergo all this labour and fatigue, as in a short time we

could reconcile ourselves to the use of skins for clothes as our forefathers did; but it is the prospect of a drink in the spring, to enable us to communicate freely and speak our minds to each other, that carries us through the winter and induces us to work so hard." We can only hope, then, that what kept them working so hard through the summer was the prospect of a drink in the fall.

Sir George's description of the Canadian portion of his voyage is to be found in the first volume of his "Journey Round the World," which was published in 1847. Doubt has often been cast on the veracity of the title page, which proclaims that the governor himself was the author of the work. Many attribute it to Dr. Thom, a journalist, of Montreal. In support of this contention, it is interesting to note that one of the copies of the book in the McGill University library, which was once the property of F. Griffin, the well known collector of *Canadiana*, contains this note by the original owner:

"Sir G.S.'s journal, during ye time of this 'Journey Round ye World,' was kept by his secretary, Mr. Edward M. Hopkins, until March 1842, when they separated at Honolulu (vol. II, p. 143). From it, and its continuation by Sir George himself, these two volumes were compiled by ye learned Adam Thom, Esqre. (now LL.D.) ye Recorder of Rupert's Land from ye spring of 1839 to ye spring of 1855. . . ."

The book also contains an autograph letter from the governor to Mr. Griffin, dated at Hudson's Bay House, Lachine, 7 Dec., 1859, and giving him Thom's address in Edinburgh. Incidentally, the learned gentleman was recorder of the Red River Settlement, not of Rupert's Land.

Sir George was about fifty-five years old at the time of his world tour, but he continued to make his annual voyages of inspection to the western posts for nearly twenty more, travelling in the big canoes with his chosen voyageurs. Thus to the very end he not only kept himself supplied with first hand knowledge of the Company's entire range of business, but also impressed the factors and traders of the remotest posts with a sense of the unifying power of his authority. His reputation is chiefly one of harshness and arrogance, but there is no doubt that to many he was kindness itself. He was approachable, as Dr. Bryce says, to the humblest, and listened to many a complaint and grievance with apparent sympathy and great patience. And so, combining the qualities of a friendly adviser with those of a despot, he welded together all the divergent interests of the Great Company and ruled them with an absolute authority.

The next, and concluding, instalment of this interesting series of articles on Sir George Simpson which Mr. Clifford Wilson has written for The Beaver, and which are throwing a great deal of new light on Sir George's character and his life at Lachine, will deal with his last days there, his reception in 1860 of the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII, and the grand canoe spectacle arranged in the Prince's honour, and Sir George's sudden death a few days after the reception. Mr. Wilson has given his subject great study, and it is extremely interesting to read in the concluding article his opinion, formed after this study, that Sir George's love of display was not by any means all for self-glorification, as it has so often been stated, but that first and foremost he was an energetic and loyal Company officer.