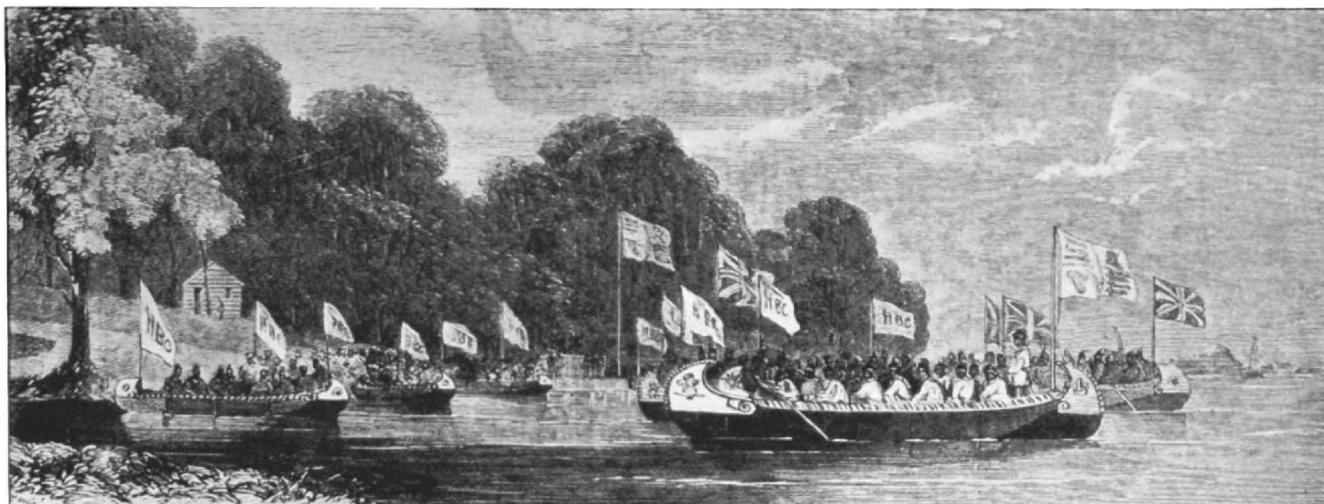




Grand canoe reception given to the Prince of Wales by the Hudson's Bay Company on 29th August, 1860, at Dorval Island, the country estate of Sir George Simpson, on the occasion of the Prince of Wales's first visit to Canada. From the Illustrated London News, 1860.

The Emperor's Last Days

By
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Montreal

Sir George Simpson, "Grand Seigneur" and Fur Trader, Dies at Lachine. Concluding Article of a Series with a Description of His Entertainment of the Prince of Wales in 1860

IN the year 1854, Sir George Simpson purchased the beautiful, wooded island of Dorval, which lies off the Island of Montreal not far above Lachine. He was then in his sixty-eighth year, and doubtless had begun to feel the need of relaxation from the cares and responsibilities of his office. For twenty years he had lived and worked in the same building, and the thought of owning a home of his own, separated from the workaday world by a wide strip of water, must have appealed very strongly to him. At any rate, he proceeded to build there a large, rather rambling brick house, with the square, high ceilinged rooms so characteristic of that age of spacious living, and laid out a garden with wide lawns and stately elm trees in the midst of the woods.

It must have been a great source of grief to him that his wife could not share this new home. Lady Simpson had died at Lachine in March 1853; but his eldest daughter was now about twenty years old, and doubtless kept house for him there. We can imagine with what pride he was wont to show off the house and garden to his friends, and to the titled visitors from overseas whom he entertained from time to time. For Sir George was always a very proud little man, who, by combining haughti-

ness towards some with courtly affability towards others, knew how to play the *grand seigneur* to perfection.

Some have accused him of an undue love of display, but there is reason to believe that when he indulged himself in this fashion, it was with the idea, not so much of self-glorification, as of adding to the prestige of the great Company which he represented, for he knew that the Indians were not the only inhabitants of Canada who could be impressed with a display of pomp and pageantry. Much has been written of the various shows he put up when in 1828 he crossed with his retinue from Hudson Bay to the Pacific, complete with Highland piper in native dress. But his crowning achievement in this line was undoubtedly his reception of the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII) at Isle Dorval—an impressive function which, dramatically enough, proved to be the last public act of his colourful career.

Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, had arrived in Canada at the end of July 1860, and a month later he was in Montreal, a rather long haired, handsome boy of eighteen, who found life full of excitement and who bore the honours heaped upon him with every appearance of enjoying them.

Sir George, with his flair for pageantry, had arranged a grand canoe reception for the royal visitor at Isle Dorval, to be followed by luncheon at his country house. On the morning of August 29th a military review was staged in Montreal in the Prince's honour, and after it was over His Royal Highness drove out with his suite to Dorval. For a description of the event we cannot do better than quote from the contemporary account in the *Montreal Gazette*:

"On Wednesday, the 29th instant, the canoe excursion given by the Hudson's Bay Company to His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales came off with complete success from Sir George Simpson's beautiful country residence—Isle Dorval—about three miles above Lachine. The weather, which had been threatening in the morning, cleared up in the afternoon and was everything that could be desired. After the review, which took place in the morning, was over, the Prince of Wales and suite drove out to Lachine by the upper road, meeting a hearty reception along the whole route, but more especially at the village of Lachine, where the residents had made great exertions to do the Prince great honour.

"No less than eight or nine triumphal arches spanned the road. Among others, we noticed those at the Hudson's Bay House, the residence of Sir George Simpson, and at the residence of Mr. Hopkins (H.B.C. service). (This was E. M. Hopkins, the governor's secretary.)

"At a point opposite Isle Dorval (also the property of Sir George Simpson) the royal party quitted their carriages to embark in boats sent up for the purpose from the vessels of war lying in our harbour. The scene at this moment was unrivalled in interest and picturesque effect.

"The site was well chosen; the channel, less than a mile in width (actually about a quarter of a mile), flows between fields now ripe for the harvest, sloping to the water's edge, and the dense foliage and verdant lawns of Isle Dorval, fresh with recent showers and brilliant with sunshine.

"A flotilla of nine large birch-bark canoes was drawn up in a line close to the head of the island. Their appearance was very beautiful: the light and graceful craft were fitted up with great taste, each having flags in bow and stern; their crew, composed of one hundred Iroquois Indians from Caughnawaga and the Lake of Two Mountains, being costumed *en sauvage*, gay with feathers, scarlet cloth, and paint.

"As soon as the barge carrying the Prince pushed off from the mainland, the fleet of canoes darted out from the island to meet him in line abreast, and to the inspiring cadences of a voyageur song. On nearing the royal barge, the line opened in the middle apparently to let it pass, but suddenly wheeling round with a rapidity and precision which took everyone by surprise, they again formed in line with the Prince's barge in the middle, and in that form reached the landing place, when the canoe song ceased, and a cheer burst from the voyageurs, which H.R.H., with his face beaming with pleasure, returned by saluting his Indian escort.

"The Prince of Wales was received on landing by Sir George Simpson, and soon afterward luncheon was served to a select party invited to meet H.R.H. by Lieutenant-General Sir Fenwick Williams, who at present occupies the island as the owner's guest. We understand there were about forty at the table.

"Sir Fenwick Williams, as the host, had the Prince on one side of him and Sir George Simpson on the other. Among other guests were the Duke of Newcastle (secretary of State for the Colonies), Lord Lyons (British minister at Washington), the Marquis of Chandos, the Earl of Mulgrave (by that time governor of Nova Scotia), Lord Hinchinbrook, General Bruce (the Prince's governor),

Admiral Sir Alexander Milne (commander-in-chief of the North American and West Indies station), Mr. H. McKenzie (H.B.Co.) and Mr. Hopkins. No ladies were invited, nor were any present (!), except three immediately connected with Sir George, viz., Mrs. Hopkins (the artist) and her sister Miss Beechey, and Mrs. McKenzie.

"About 4.30 the party embarked in the canoes and proceeded in great style and at a rapid pace towards Lachine. One, bearing the Royal Standard and carrying the Prince, the Duke of Newcastle and General Williams, taking the lead, while the remainder in line abreast followed close behind it. About the centre of the brigade we observed Sir George Simpson (accompanied by the Earl of Mulgrave and General Bruce, both old fellow-voyageurs of Sir George's) directing the movements in person.

"Passing down close along the north shore, the flotilla at that point (Lachine) again executed the extraordinary evolution of wheeling round in line, and then crossed the St. Lawrence to Caughnawaga, where crowds lined the banks. . .



Pen and ink sketch of Sir George Simpson by Sir James Alexander Grant. (Courtesy McCord National Museum)

"We consider the Hudson's Bay Company are entitled to the thanks of the Canadian public for their liberality and spirit in getting up this unique excursion, which, besides gratifying our royal visitor, afforded a most agreeable holiday to several thousand persons (the italics are ours) who were enabled to witness the scene from the shores of the noble St. Lawrence."

Evidently the whole affair was a grand success, and Sir George's feeling of triumph must have been heightened by the praise he received from the duke himself, who—to quote the *Gazette* again—"availed himself of the opportunity afforded by personal communication to express the high opinion entertained by himself and Her Majesty's Imperial Advisers of the skilful and successful administration of one of the most extensive provinces of the British Empire."

That was on Wednesday. On the following Saturday, September 1st, Sir George was driving out to Lachine from Montreal, when he was attacked by a fit of apoplexy. It was not the first he had suffered, for he had been seized with a similar attack some months before, and later had been forced, on account of ill health, to turn back from his usual spring voyage to Red River. But after the excitement of the past few days, the chances of his pulling through once more seemed small indeed.

For six days he lay abed in his great long room at Hudson's Bay House, suffering intensely. Then on the seventh, at half past ten in the morning, his gallant spirit passed.

He died surrounded by his family and friends, many of whom had for long been his loyal companions in the service of the Company, and who must have known that his going would leave a gap that could never be filled. "The little Emperor's light has gone out," wrote chief Trader Dugald

MacTavish, "Just after he basked in a final blaze of glory." And so the dramatic story that was his life came to a dramatic end.

Sir George was given a funeral of considerable pomp from Christ Church Cathedral in Montreal, and was buried in the Mount Royal cemetery. There today a simple monument covers his remains and those of his wife.

The Governor was in his seventy-fourth year when he died. The year of his birth has usually been given as 1792, although Beckles Willson says it was 1796 and Pinkerton 1798. These errors have been partly responsible for the general feeling of amazement that he should have been chosen governor in 1821—that is, when he was anywhere from twenty-three to twenty-nine years old. But his gravestone and the records of the cathedral show that he died at the age of seventy-three, which would place the date of his birth in the year 1787, or the latter part of 1786.

He was succeeded by Governor Dallas, who apparently saw no future use in keeping up the establishment at Lachine. The railway had been put through six years before, and the canoe brigades had passed into history. Therefore the Company property at the rapids' head was ordered sold, and in February 1861 Hudson's Bay House and its dependencies were bought for \$8,000 by the Sisters of St. Ann. For the next twenty-seven years it was used by them as part of their boarding school, one of Sir George's rooms being employed as a chapel until 1864. But in 1888 the house was torn down.

The storehouse across the old canal, however, still stands, although in the last few years it has been spoiled by numerous alterations, and is at present used as a dwelling by employees of the convent. The house on Dorval Island is standing, too, in the midst of its lawns and shrubs and elms.



The grave of Sir George Simpson and his wife in Mount Royal Cemetery, Montreal. The rail is a recent addition.