

The St. Thomas Weekly Times.

EST'D JUNE 23, 1873

TWELVE PAGES

ST. THOMAS ONTARIO, THURSDAY, JANUARY 16, 1908

PAGES 9 TO 12 7/1 per year

Romantic Recital of Hardships of Red River Colonists Who Came to Elgin County Nearly 100 Years Ago

St. Tho. Weekly Times

BY LOUISA T. KING.

(All Rights Reserved.)

"The Spirit of Life, O atrophied soul, In trappings of ease is not confined, That touch from the Infinite Will 'neath the Whole, In nature's temple, not man's, is shrined."

Jan. 16/1908

WELL-KNOWN in Elgin county is the little village of Wallacetown, in pioneer days a commercial centre, but the iron horse has shied clear of its environs, and now it is merely a small residential centre, with but one relic of former days, one yearly excitement, what the Elgin people call "The World's Fair," a favorite resort for the whole county from early days. Here, with his daughter, Donald A. Gunn is spending his declining years. Now in his eighty-sixth year, the physical strength of manhood's prime is no longer his, but his mind is still active, and he has reached the time when memory is fond of leaping back over a chasm of years and telling the tales of long ago.

Born in Elgin county, he knows of the time when the settlers' axe first rang through the grand primeval forests of Southern Ontario, but it was not of that we talked the few hours I spent with him, but of the tales of his father and grandfather, a story of 1813, that shifts its scenes from the barren county of Sutherlandshire, Scotland, to the bleak shores of Hudson Bay, thence to the forks of the Red River and Assiniboine, the site of the Canadian Kildonan, near Winnipeg, and has its final setting on the shores of Lake Erie. Through all these scenes Donald Gunn's father and mother, grandfather and grandmother, relatives and early neighbors in Elgin, passed unscathed, and he tells the story as he got it from them in childhood as they sat and related their experiences before the blazing logs in the pioneer fireplace in Elgin.

They Formed Part of Lord Selkirk's Emigrants Who Sailed From Scotland to Fort Churchill, Hudson Bay, in 1813-- Many Descendants in Dunwich and Aldboro' Townships

schemes on hand, never off his guard, alive every minute for news. Born in 1771, in Kirkcudbrightshire, Scotland, young Selkirk had, early in life, in the rush of the River Dee and the swelling tides of the Solway, heard the "still sad music of humanity," and he became a philanthropist, with schemes for colonizing Canada with the oppressed of Scotland, especially the Highlands. He began with a settlement at Prince Edward Island, in 1803, and, being successful there, next undertook the famous Baldoon Settlement, at Wallaceburg, in Kent county, Southern Ontario. Not a few of the pioneers of Elgin remember hearing in their youth the stories of the Witch of Baldoon. Before either



DONALD A. GUNN

Of Wallacetown, who tells the story of the Red River settlers, who came to Elgin county. Mr. Gunn has been

Mr. Donald A. Gunn and Mrs. Janet MacFarlane, of Wallacetown, Are Children of Two of the Settlers--Mr. Gunn Tells of the Privations of His Ancestors in Graphic Language

tion from Kildonan (likely that of 1815), composed of people driven out by the Highland Evictions, some of whom later on found their way to the shores of Lake Erie, among them the Macbeths, ancestors of the London Macbeths, a different race of Macbeths from those who came out in 1813. The Dukes of Sutherland were never well-bred gentlemen. Donald Gunn asserts, always absentee landlords away home in England, seeing Scotland only on hunting expeditions.

"The people of Kildonan were an honorable class, never a law court was needed among them, nor for forty years after they settled in Elgin," says Donald Gunn. "My grandfather, Donald Gunn, was seventy-six when he left Scotland. He had nine children. One, Benjamin, started a little before the others, going out in the employ of the Hudson Bay Company in one of their ships. It outstripped the colonist ship on the voyage to Hudson Bay, and Benjamin Gunn passed on to his post, and his family never saw him again for fourteen years. Another, Aleck, had enlisted as a soldier when seventeen, and was present at the taking of the Cape of Good Hope. They came for the eldest son, William, to enlist, and the law at the time was that if the eldest was able and refused to go

sands at Fort Churchill she lies buried. The sailors who took the fever and were not expected to recover were laid on the decks in the hot sun at the Port to die, the flies swarming thick upon them. Small wonder that passing through such scenes as this the settlers' faith in Lord Selkirk dropped to zero. History has vindicated Lord Selkirk's good intentions and given him credit for a wonderful work, but one of the struggles through which our settlers passed would indicate that his agents were ill-chosen, and there was gross miscalculation as to the difficulties of the undertaking.

The ice was eight feet thick on lake and river that winter, our friends say. In cutting for water they were careful to cut in a large circle, not in a small one, as, in the latter case, the water would spurt up and freeze again, and then they would have to cut in a fresh place. Then provisions were scarce at Fort Churchill, and the young men had to go on showshoes with an Eskimo guide, to a fort eighty or ninety miles distant for provisions, pemican and frozen blubber, the thermometer rating 55 below zero. At Fort Churchill, Angus Gunn's first child was born, a girl, Mrs. MacIntyre, mother of A. M. MacIntyre.

and they were all strong men, injured to hardship. However, our party of men, women and children arrived safely at the Red River, where further hardships awaited them. It is said that the way they lived for weeks on catfish, without any salt, until at last one of the children remarked it was like eating wool.

To explain their subsequent actions, we must now size up from published history the situation of affairs at the Red River. They had happened upon the days when the fierce conflict between the Hudson Bay Company and the Nor'-Westers was waxing to a climax. The Hudson Bay Company had been incorporated in 1670, with Prince Rupert as first governor. With sweeping assurance the British Government had deeded over the whole Hudson Bay territory to them, known and unknown. But the English made their voyages by the Bay and kept close to it, while the French Jesuits and voyageurs journeyed to the Red River along the waters of the Ottawa. When Canada fell into English hands after the taking of Quebec, an English trade sprang up on the ruins of the French barter, and that was the beginning of the X. Y. and North-West Fur Trading Companies. Shrewd Lord Selkirk saw

prerogative to bear on the Nor'-Westers. Granted that he had the legal right to do this, French voyageurs, of whom the Nor'-Westers were the direct successors, had just explored the land and had ancient privileges never before denied and had been in the district concerned a generation before the Hudson Bay Company. The proclamation was followed by a seizure of North-West stores at Brandon House and thus the supplies were cut off for the annual meetings of the Nor'-Westers at Fort William.

Such was the state of affairs when our party arrived at the Red River in 1814. Immediately on their arriv-



MRS. JANET MACFARLANE

Of Wallacetown, the surviving child

Column 5

Column 1

The story has been meagerly referred to in eastern papers, as, one by one, the actors themselves have been laid to rest from their labors, and it has been briefly outlined by historians of the West, incorrectly in parts. Elgin tradition would tell them, and surely it is a story worthy of a correct telling, with not one of its stirring incidents left out; and it is a pity it had not been early taken down in full in writing from the lips of the actors themselves. After their brief sketches up to Red River scenes, Western historians have dropped the theme, and the actors have been as if they were not; so the fancy has come to me to gather up all the fragments obtainable, particularly that which is told in Elgin and set the whole amid its historical surroundings, for it is a story to quicken the imagination and set the pulse beating to an heroic strain.

A name well-known to the Red



THE LATE B. B. GUNN, M. P.

Of Seaforth, who died very recently, was a grandson of Benjamin Gunn, a Red River settler, who came to Elgin county.

River settlers who came to Elgin is that of Lord Selkirk, none better known in Canadian history and immortalized in geographical names throughout Canada from Fort Selkirk in Prince Edward Island to Cape Selkirk in the Yukon, in mountain range, settlement, district, town and river. In her book, "The Lords of the North," Agnes C. Laut has given us a vivid pen picture of Lord Selkirk as she has him appear at the Beaver Club of Montreal, the rendezvous of the traders of the North-West Fur Company. "A young, keen-faced man," she says, "with a tie that came up in ruffles to his ears, with Imperial decorations, on his breast." Sitting opposite, she pictures Sir Alexander Mackenzie, head of the Nor'-Westers, whose book on his explorations north to the Arctic and west to the Pacific had fired the enthusiasm of the young Scotch nobleman. There, too, were Simon Fraser and David Thompson and other explorers. And then, as the wine passes around and other brains get muddled, she pictures Lord Selkirk sitting up, keen and alert, questioning the Nor'-Westers, a man of determination, with great colonization

the valued correspondent of the Times at Wallacetown for many years.

of these colonies had been begun, Selkirk had it in his head to begin a settlement on the shores of Lake Winnipeg, but the British Government had objected. However, Selkirk had not plied questions in vain at the Beaver Club in Montreal. He bought up the controlling stock of the Hudson Bay Company, got from that body in fee simple the grant of 116,000 square miles of territory around and south of Lake Winnipeg, and then felt himself in a position to carry out his schemes.

As a prelude to my tale of 1813, as told by the actors themselves, I must briefly sketch the story of two earlier Selkirk colonies by the Red River, as given by Begg and Bryce in their histories of the West. In 1811 Selkirk equipped three ships, two with supplies and a third fitted up for colonists. Begg says the total number of people on board were ninety laborers and fifteen writers, largely Glasgow and Orkney men, with a few Irish. Leaving Stornoway on July 26, they arrived at York Factory, on the Hudson Bay, September 24, 1811. Here they wintered, and in June, 1812, started for the Red River, where, after many hardships, they arrived well on towards autumn. Selkirk had chosen as commander of the expedition from Scotland, Captain Miles Macdonnell, a young U. E. Loyalist, who had settled in Glengarry county, in Upper Canada. In 1813, it is said, Lord Selkirk's agents brought out early in the year another load of colonists, largely Irish, Begg says, with several newly-married couples among them. They made their trip through to the Red River in one year. Bryce says that never decimated their ranks so that not more than fifteen or twenty reached their destination, but Begg says that there was mutiny on board and that the offenders were not taken on to the settlement. Donald Gunn, when asked about this expedition, merely shook his head and said, "I never heard tell of it."

Begg and Bryce tell very briefly in two or three paragraphs the story of the second load of emigrants of 1813, the one with which we are largely concerned. Briefly, as they sketch it, their tale differs in many respects from the story as told by the actors themselves, and, naturally, that of the latter is longer and more vivid, so we will return to Donald Gunn's reminiscences.

Ninety-three is the number given by Bryce, as belonging to the emigration.

"Would all these be from Kildonan?" I asked Donald Gunn. "I think not," he said. "Kildonan was but a parish; besides, there were Irish and Argyle men on board, I know."

"Why did these people leave?" was my next query. "Was it at the time of the Highland Evictions, when one hundred smokes went up one chimney?"

"No," was the reply, very emphatically; "it was the next year the English shepherds came and the crofters were driven to the north, to the shores of Caithness."

Western historians have given the impression that the emigration of 1813 was on that account, but Donald Gunn says there was a later expedi-

off the estate. William refused to go, saying that perhaps the sooner they left the estate the better. Just then a younger boy, Aleck, stepped in and offered to go, and, his offer being accepted, the lad of seventeen went off to the wars."

Such is Donald Gunn's pathetic story of those days. On the top of centuries of oppression the last straws were being laid and the burden could not be much longer borne.

It was to these people that Lord Selkirk and his agents came with stories of a better land, where landlords held no sway. Small wonder that he found them ready listeners, less marvel that, much as they loved the Highland glens of their forefathers, they prepared to embark on what looked like a wild adventure. So they set out from their own seaport, Dornoch.

"Western historians say they set out from Stornoway," I said to Donald Gunn at this point.

"Well, now," was the quick reply, "what would they be doing away off at Stornoway? The ships came for them at Dornoch. Among the Kildonan people who embarked were Donald Gunn, aged seventy-six, his wife and seven children, one of them, Angus Gunn (of whom we will talk hereafter), being twenty-four years old and married. Then there were Matthews, Macbeths, Bannermans, Sutherlands, and others, also Angus Mackay and wife, of whom we shall hear later.

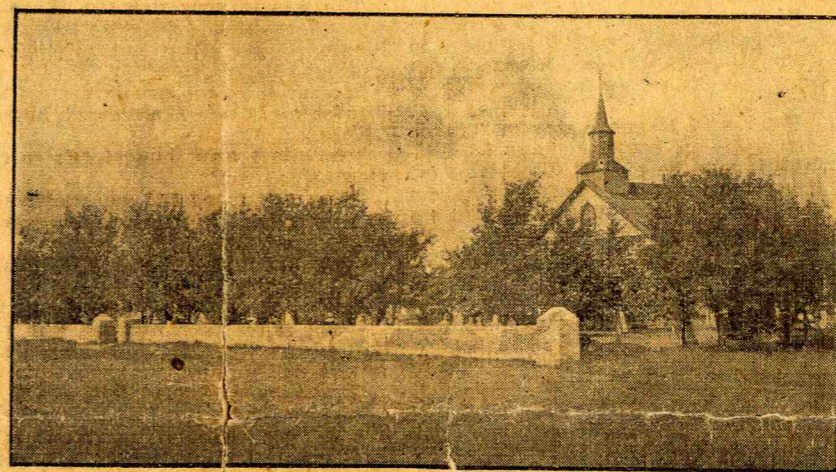
The vessel set sail June 5, and was stalled at Fort Churchill, Hudson Bay, in August, after a voyage of ten weeks or three months. The other expeditions, it will be remembered, had landed their colonists at York Factory, at the mouth of the Nelson river. The emigrant ship had a convoy with it that kept darting hither and thither, for the sea was infested with pirates.

It is interesting to imagine the scene that met their eyes at Fort Churchill. I know not what the buildings of the Hudson Bay Company there were like then, probably much the same as they are today. Certainly old Fort Prince of Wales was there, for it was begun in 1735, and completed in 1760 by the Hudson Bay Company, probably to protect their possessions from the French. Charles R. Tuttle, of the Government survey expedition of 1884, thus speaks of it. "This curious old Roman style of a fort is about 350 feet square. The inner walls are in a good state of preservation and will stand for centuries to come. On them are a large number of guns, stamped G. R., and representing the reign of King George I. (Near the fort are a number of graves, some of them with rude tombstones. On one are the initials 'C. B.' and on another 'John Sutherland, 1813.'"

Were some of these the graves of our Kildonan friends? for their story here is a sad one. Western historians say that fever broke out on the ship during the voyage, but the Elgin people relate that in the middle of the Hudson Bay the ship became ice-bound. While there the Eskimos came along in their little boats with oil for shipment back to Scotland. This oil smelled very badly, and afterwards the sailors and passengers went down with a fever. There was no fever before this. Among those of the passengers who died was Catherine Gunn. On the

But provisions continued scarce at Fort Churchill, and the order came for all able-bodied men, who were free and able to go, to push on to Fort York, about two hundred miles further down the west coast of Hudson Bay. The journey was made on snowshoes, and it took them six weeks. They always made a point of resting for the night in a ravine, or where there was timber. They scooped holes in the snow for a bed and made a wind-break of branches of evergreens to prevent the snow drifting into their resting places. Those who went to Fort York started as soon as there was snow enough, and among them was Angus Mackay and his wife. On the way the latter gave birth to a still-born child. The party with them had no provisions to spare for a long journey and had to go on to York and leave them in the care of hospitable Indians. It was there that Mr. and Mrs. Mackay solemnly vowed that if the Lord would deliver them from their troubles they would serve Him faithfully all their lives.

"A finer Christian man never walked Talbot street," says Donald Gunn,



KILDONAN CHURCH AND CEMETERY

Where many of the Selkirk settlers are buried. Photo by A. W. Lang, of Russell, Lang & Co., Winnipeg.

For Angus Mackay later on reached the shores of Lake Erie, and New Glasgow church testified that the vow had been kept by making him its first ruling elder. The Indians were very kind to Mr. and Mrs. Mackay, though they had nothing to give them to eat but pemican and catfish.

After Mrs Mackay's recovery, they made their way to Fort York, and in the spring were joined by the remainder of the party from Fort Churchill.

Bryce says in his history that about the middle of April the strongest of the party set out for the Red River, where they arrived near the end of June and were able to plant a few potatoes.

"How could they go before the snow went?" said Donald Gunn when I read that to him. "They went together when the snow was gone."

A journey from Fort York, up the Nelson and on to the Red River, is, even now, when the trail is well-known, no easy task. In September last, when I was in Winnipeg, there arrived in the city a squad of North-West Mounted Police from Fort York, and they gave a graphic account of the hardships endured on the numerous ports of the Nelson,

nine points of the law—a government charter for the whole country. Before Selkirk's time the Hudson Bay Company had been very stagnant, and their rivals aggressive, establishing forts on the Peace and Athabasca, pushing north to the Arctic and west to the Pacific in their explorations.

With Lord Selkirk came a change. The Hudson Bay Company woke up, and, with the coming of his colonies, the fears of the Nor'-Westers were aroused. At the forks of the Red and Assiniboine the latter had established Fort Gibraltar. The French built this first in 1738, and it was again rebuilt in 1804. A mile north of this the Selkirk settlers had made their homes, and Governor Macdonnell had established his citadel—Fort Douglas. The settlers had not had a very happy time since the first batch arrived in 1812. With their arrival the few supplies Selkirk's agents had on hand began to dwindle away. Sixty or seventy miles south, on the higher lands of Dakota, was the Nor'-Western Port—Fort Pembina. This the buffalo preferred to the lower lands of Manitoba, so Macdon-

al our colonists were put into possession of land, one hundred acres for each family. Western historians say, but Donald Gunn shook his head at this statement and said he didn't think it was that much. The farms were narrow, reaching along the river front and extending back a mile or so. The lots were at first ten chains wide; then, later on, the Hudson Bay Company changed them to eight chains, then to six, making them at last two miles long, instead of one mile. None of the promises Lord Selkirk had made to them had been kept. There were no implements to till the soil, nor was there a sufficiency of food to be had, but they struggled bravely on until the spring of 1815. In August, 1814, a son was born to Mr. and Mrs. Mackay, the late John Mackay of Aldborough, Elgin county, who died in September, 1906.

In the meanwhile there was mischief brewing with the Nor'-Westers. In the early summer of 1815 they held their annual council at Fort William and a closed meeting was held over the manifesto of Governor Macdonnell. Here came the traders from the Rocky Mountains, Athabasca and the Saskatchewan, voyageurs from Montreal and Quebec and their chiefs. It is said that it was resolved that the Selkirk colony must be broken up and Duncan Cameron and Alexander Macdonnell were despatched to see this carried out. On their arrival at the Red River violent action was brought to bear on Governor Macdonnell, of the Hudson Bay Company, to give himself up, and he was sent, under arrest, to Montreal.

And now we come again to the part where Elgin people have more to say than Western historians, and do not always agree with them. Bryce says: "Cameron was now ready to carry out his promise to the settlers who were disloyal to the colony, and, in June, with the deserters, departed on his long voyage to Upper Canada."

The story of the Elgin people is as follows: The Kildonan people grew disheartened and dissatisfied, and made up their minds to leave.

"Was it the Nor'-Westers put it into their heads to go to Lake Erie?" I asked Donald Gunn.

"No," he said, "they heard of the place and of Colonel Talbot's Settlement away back in Scotland."

In reply to their discontent, however, Governor Macdonnell had pointed one night to the moon as it shone over the prairie and said, "You may as well try to get to that moon as get out of this." The promises made by Lord Selkirk had not been kept, but the Hudson Bay Company had opposed their leaving and the Nor'-Westers helped them out. For the safety of those who were leaving, the young men went into the Hudson Bay fort and threw all their guns into the river. The late Angus C. Gunn of Dunwich, who died in Elgin county, December 29, 1879, went into the fort to throw the guns into the river and was followed by a half-breed with a gun to shoot. Angus Gunn, who was strong as he was brave, pulled the gun out of the half-breed's hand, threw it into the river and pitched him out the window. The settlers had their boats on the river, with all their little effects, before-hand. The North-West Company