

The Simpsons in Canada and the North Pacific – A Dingwall Family in Trade and Exploration

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The Schoolmaster's Family

In 1800 the schoolmaster at Dingwall's parish school was Alexander Simpson, who was originally from rural Aberdeenshire. He was the father of five children by his first wife, Emelia MacIntosh, who had died in 1792.

In 1807 Alexander married again. His bride was Mary Simpson, daughter of the minister at Avoch in the Black Isle. Mary would present Alexander with two more sons.



Alexander and Mary Simpson Image © Dingwall Museum

Mary also brought to the family her connections to another youngster, named George Simpson, whom she had spent her spinster years helping to raise. He was the illegitimate son of her brother, also named George (who was a lawyer by profession). During his up-bringing the younger George attended school in Dingwall and was known to some of his cousins-to-be.

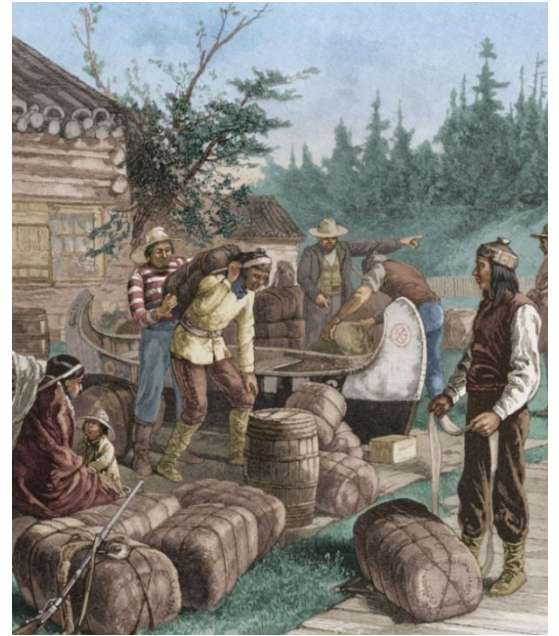
First Footsteps

In 1808 George Simpson was sent to London to join an uncle's sugar-importing business. There he caught the eye of a new partner in the firm - who happened to be influential within the important Hudson's Bay Company.

Consequently, in 1820, George, still only 28 years old, was despatched to British North America (now Canada) to represent the interests of the London directors in a merger between the Company and a local rival.

The Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company

The Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) administered a large territory around the bay that gave it its name. It traded for furs and skins with the indigenous peoples within that area – but also outside it, along the southern and western fringes. There it competed with the Montreal-based North West Company (NWC), which had been built atop an older French-Canadian fur-trading tradition by a family-based network of Highlanders (from Invergarry). The competition between the two firms had been intense - at times verging on open conflict. However, the costs of such disputes persuaded leading figures in the two companies that a merger was desirable. When that merger took place, in 1821, the new firm retained the name of the Hudson's Bay Company.



‘The Emperor of the North’ or ‘The Little Emperor’

Shortly after George Simpson arrived in Canada, he found himself thrust – unexpectedly – into the task of



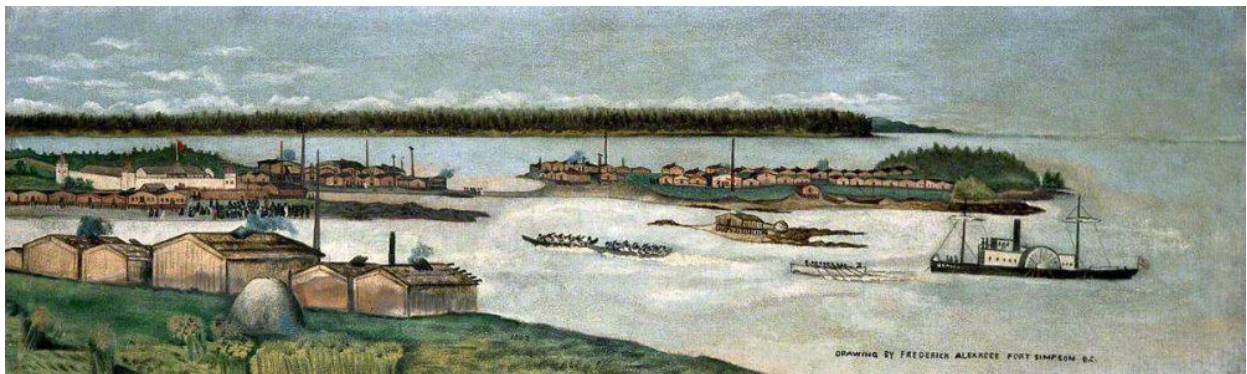
Portrait of George Simpson
© Canadian Dictionary of Biography

– unexpectedly – into the task of creating a single operational framework for the enlarged entity. He established a central trading headquarters - at Fort Garry near Winnipeg - while setting-up a residence and office for himself, as Governor-in-chief, at Lachine near Montreal. He also undertook several expeditions to get to know the vast territory over which the HBC enjoyed an almost total monopoly of fur trading.

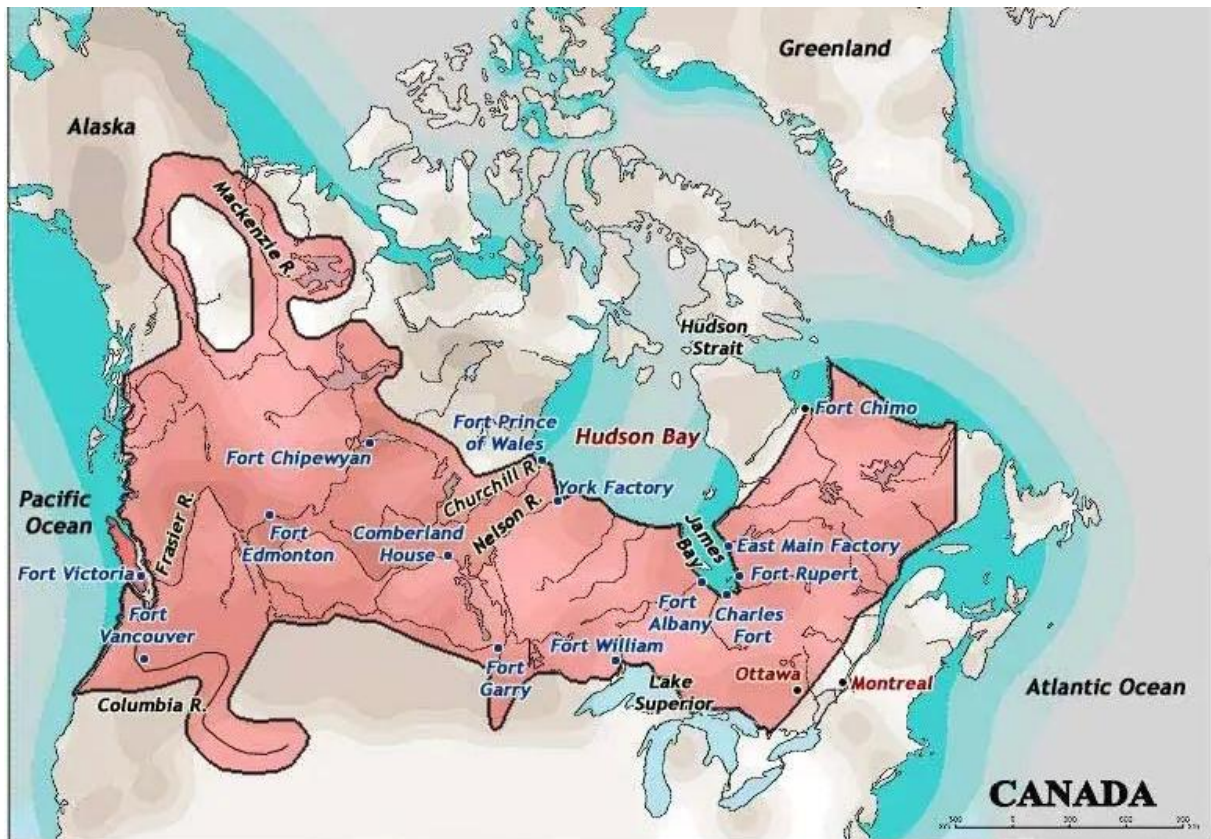
George, despite acquiring such power as to be labelled an ‘emperor’, did not forget his Dingwall roots. He had close relatives back there - sons of the former schoolmaster, Alexander Simpson - and he took steps to share his good fortune. Three of them found employment within the company.

The Coasts of British Columbia

The first to arrive was Aemilius Simpson, who had been George’s school mate in Dingwall. Aemilius was a semi-retired naval lieutenant when, in 1826, George offered him a position as hydrographer and surveyor. His principal role would be to oversee the Company’s new maritime activities along the coasts of British Columbia. Aemilius travelled overland from York Factory on Hudson Bay to the shores of the Pacific, where he oversaw the construction of several small ships. With these he conducted surveying and trading voyages along the coastline between southern Alaska and northern California. He also pioneered trade to the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii), where sealskins could be obtained. He died in 1831, from a liver condition, while establishing a fort on the Nass River in British Columbia. The fort, on completion, was dedicated to his name.



Fort Simpson BC, Canada



Hudson's Bay Company Sphere of Operations, 1821-71 ©The British Columbia Review

A Protectorate for Hawaii?

Amelius's half-brother, Alexander, arrived in Canada from Dingwall in 1828. Initially he worked as an accountant, but in 1839, George selected him to develop sea-borne trade in the northwest Pacific. Ambitious directors in distant London hoped the Hawaiian Islands might offer an export market for salted salmon and agricultural products from the North American mainland.

Alexander put the Canadian end of the project into place at Fort Vancouver and then, in 1841, proceeded to Honolulu to become HBC's 'chief trader' there.

In Honolulu he quickly became a leading figure in a scheme to turn the Kingdom of Hawaii into a British protectorate. The proposal suited neither Cousin George nor the British government of the day. Alexander therefore resigned angrily from the HBC in 1843. He returned to Scotland a disappointed man and lived out his days at Kilmorack near Beaulieu.



Honolulu c. 1850

Arctic Exploration

Thomas, a graduate of Aberdeen University, was the third of the cousins to arrive in Canada - in 1829. By 1836 he was a 'factor' at Fort Garry, but his ambitions lay more in exploration than trade. He therefore leapt at the chance to take part in the exploration of the Arctic region, with the aim of discovering and mapping the fabled North West Passage between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

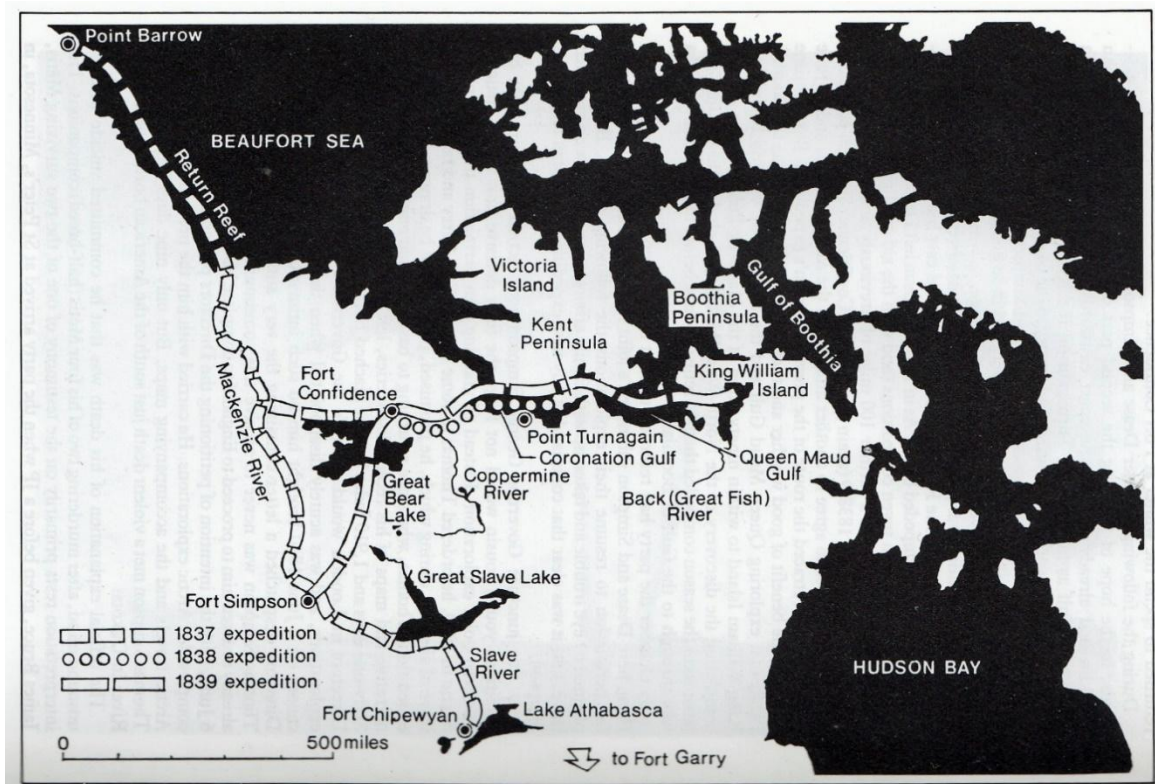
Between 1837 and 1839 Thomas participated in three expeditions led by an experienced traveller named Dease. Together they surveyed several long stretches of open coastline between King William Island and Point Barrow, from where it was known that ships could navigate from the Arctic into the Pacific (see map). It was cold, difficult, and dangerous work, and much of its success was down to Thomas's energies and drive.

However, discussions about a possible fourth expedition – one to be under Thomas's sole command – resulted in a breach between Thomas and George. They disputed whether the expedition should be launched immediately or await authorisation from the directors in London. Information

that the directors had given such authorisation did not reach the ambitious and increasingly impatient Thomas before his decision, in mid-1840, to leave Fort Garry for London, where he hoped his powers of persuasion would hold sway.



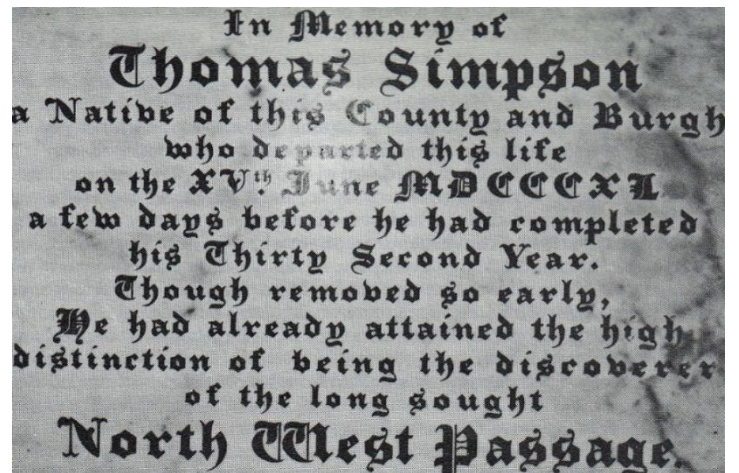
Thomas Simpson (1808-40)
©Dingwall Museum



Thomas Simpson's Arctic Expeditions ©Dingwall Museum

Death in the Dakotas

Thomas chose a southerly route, intending to reach an Atlantic port on the American seaboard. However, in mid-June 1840 a tragedy occurred at a campsite near Turtle Creek in North Dakota. A violent incident left Thomas and his two companions dead. Thomas apparently shot the two men – but why he did so, and whether he then committed suicide or was shot by the dead men’s friends upon their arrival on the scene, remains a matter of debate. His brother, Alexander, back home in Scotland, would later try to exonerate Thomas and lay the blame elsewhere. Alexander also commissioned a commemorative stone, to be erected in Dingwall, which proclaimed Thomas to be ‘the discoverer of the long sought North West Passage’. That was untrue – although he certainly contributed significantly to the body of geographic knowledge about Canada’s Arctic regions.



Thomas Simpson Stone Inscription © Dingwall Museum

George Simpson’s Later Years

We do not know George’s motives for trying to delay Thomas’s return to the Arctic. However, the tragic affair brought no check to his reputation, or to his authority over the HBC. Queen Victoria knighted him in 1841.

Through the 1840s and 1850s George continued to guide the Company and defend its domination of the Canadian fur trade. But he also began to interest himself in banking and railways. The arrival of steam transport would eventually open up the central and western regions to settlement and lead to their incorporation into the Confederation of Canada. Over time too, the fur trade would gradually diminish in importance for the HBC, as it became a principal supplier of the goods and equipment needed by people settling new lands.



Sir George Simpson (1792-1860)
©National Portrait Gallery

Sources and Further Reading

Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Vol VI (1821-1835), entry on ‘Aemilius Simpson’; Vol VII (1836-1850), entry on ‘Alexander Simpson’; Vol VIII (1851-1860), entry on ‘Sir George Simpson’.

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James Raffan, *Emperor of the North: Sir George Simpson and the Remarkable Story of the Hudson’s Bay Company* (HarperCollins, 2007)

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