

Oop-Chin, the Laird of Fort Colville

By Eileen Delehanty Pearkes

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November, 1861 found Charles Wilson, the secretary of the British Boundary Commission, back in Kettle Falls for the winter. He had spent a spring, summer and autumn travelling along the rugged landscape of the new boundary to check on the progress of the surveyors marking the 49th parallel. Wilson delighted in the natural beauty surrounding Kettle Falls and commented on the colourful mixture of native and non-native cultures established throughout the Colville valley. "We had a rather amusing scene here the other day which would have caused civilized people to open their eyes," he wrote, "the departure of Macdonald, the Hudson's bay officer here, and his family on a hunting excursion."

Angus Macdonald was the nephew of Archibald McDonald. His uncle had left his position as chief trader for the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) Fort Colville in 1844 and returned to the east. While Uncle Archibald had always considered himself to be an "exile in the wilderness" not interested in staying in the uncivilized west one moment past his posted duties, Angus demonstrated a different tendency, one reflected even in the distinct spelling of their surnames. By the time the Boundary Commission officer Wilson had arrived on the scene, Archibald's nephew had spent more than two decades thriving in the midst of the tribes of the Columbia District and showed no signs of leaving.

Watching the colourful procession that November day, Wilson took note of Angus Macdonald's "French half-breed" wife Catherine Baptiste, who led the party, "perched on a curious saddle used by women here...the baby swinging in its Indian cradle from the pommel." Behind her was Macdonald's eldest daughter, "Miss Christine who is about 17, with her gaily beaded leggings and moccasins and gaudy shawl flying in the wind." Bringing up the rear was Macdonald, positioned on a buffalo-skin runner, "surrounded by a crowd of Indians and half-breeds, to which added some 40 or 50 pack horses and spare animals rushing wildly about."

Born in 1816 in Craig Scotland, Angus had begun precisely in his uncle's footsteps, immigrating to British North America in 1838 to join the HBC at the age of 21. As he travelled throughout the HBC's vast territory, he packed along his bagpipe, a fluency in Gaelic and English and an open, classically educated mind. Gradually, he allowed himself to be absorbed into the hybrid lifestyle from which his uncle had always remained distant.

When Wilson first met Angus in 1860 at the age of 43, he described him as a "fine figure" and "great curiosity," someone who had had "hardly any communication with whites." By that time, Angus had many of the 12 children he would have with his wife, Catherine Baptiste (whose mother was descended from a line of Nez Perce chiefs and father was part-French, part Mohawk). He had acquired an Indian name (*Oop-Chin*, or, "Whiskers"), picked up several indigenous languages in addition to French, and could recite traditional Indian legends as if they were his own.

The decline of the fur trade in the Columbia District – predicted years earlier by his Uncle Archibald – had begun to accelerate after the boundary was established in 1846. When gold was discovered by an HBC employee under his charge in 1854 (while taking a drink in the Columbia River during a wood-gathering expedition), the region came alive with prospectors from as far away as San Francisco. The British trade fort became a supply depot for miners, many of whom were American. Concerned with preserving their tax entitlement to gold strikes north of the boundary, the British decided to survey the boundary and constructed a temporary headquarters for the commissioners near the fort in 1859-60. From 1858-62, the commission physically marked out the 49th parallel from the Gulf of Georgia to the Rockies.

The adept diarist and boundary officer Wilson had first set his powers of observation on the colourful Angus Macdonald just after arriving in the rapidly transforming Columbia District at the start of winter, 1860, when he was invited to enjoy a traditional Christmas dinner at the fort. After the meal - including the British mainstays of plum pudding and port wine - Wilson recalled “songs, sentimental and patriotic & innumerable Scotch reels, Highland flings & Mr. Macdonald...gave us a capital sword dance & we then had an amateur Indian war dance & song.” The Chief Trader presiding at the head of the table was a Scottish laird of sorts, one whose domain stretched all four directions from the hub of the fort.

Amidst the babble and medley of French, Nez Perce, Interior Salish dialects and English at the table that night, Wilson witnessed a polyglot culture that expressed Macdonald’s ability to harmonize disparate forces rather than oppose them in conflict. Self-described as having “no religion but God,” Macdonald transcended differences in part with his intelligence, in part with his belief that “the wild red man is a man, and his simple yet profound theology compares with anything of that kind we yet had from Paris or Jerusalem.”

Angus Macdonald sold his interest to the HBC in 1871, just before the company closed down its operations and moved supplies and records across the border. He retired a few years later to his ranch in western Montana, a place he called *Kootle tzin ape*, where he died in 1889 at the age of 72.

(For more on this era at Fort Colville, see *Mapping the Frontier*, Charles Wilson’s *Diary of the Survey of the 49th Parallel 1858-62* while Secretary of the British Boundary Commission, ed., George F.G. Stanley; and “Angus McDonald: a Few Items of the West,” *The Washington Historical Quarterly*, Vol. VIII No. 3.)