

George Simpson Family Affairs

Sir George Simpson, the Governor-in-Chief of Rupert's Land for the Hudson's Bay Company, ordered the establishment of Hudson's Bay Fort Colvile nearly 200 years ago in 1825 and that Spokane House the former North West Company fur trading post be abandoned. He was born in 1792 in Dingwall Scotland, the illegitimate son of George Simpson, a member of the College of Justice which included the Supreme Court of Scotland. The Hudson's Bay company had already been in business for 122 years. Its upstart rival, the North West Company, started in Montreal, had only been in business for 13 years.



The themes of illegitimacy, privilege and the fur trade would play out in his family life for the next 68 years until his death in 1860. Although born out of wedlock, young George was far from abandoned. He was raised by two aunts and his paternal grandmother, Isobel Simpson, daughter of George Mackenzie from a noble family. His father-in-law was Sir Alexander Mackenzie, and his uncle Geddes Mackenzie Simpson ran a sugar trading company that soon employed young George. That trading company, merged with the Hudson's Bay firm in 1812 then directed by Andrew Wedderburn,.

(In 1814 Wedderburn changed his name to Andrew Colvile Wedderburn. This adopted name was used to name Hudson's Bay Fort Colvile and through an

Americanized misspelling became the "Colville" name applied to the future Military Fort Colville and also used to label the Shwoyelpi Tribe (Sx^wyelpetk^w), managers of the fishery at Kettle Falls, as the "Colville Tribe" and subsequently the 12 tribes confined with them on the Colville reservation as the Colville Confederated tribes.)

1820 the rivalry between the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company escalated to open conflict with each side arresting the other's officers. The officials in London lost faith in their Governor-in-Chief, William Williams and appointed George Simpson, then 28, to manage their Northern holdings, which included the Columbia River watershed. They sent him to Montreal, the capital of the fur trade via New York, the first of his many long journeys. He left behind two illegitimate children of his own.

By this point it is obvious that the Hudson's Bay Company was not a meritocracy, though Simpson would prove to be of great merit. The "gentlemen" who managed the company had aristocratic roots and considered company employees as a lower class. The North West Company, which employed David Thompson, who had mapped and managed much of the company's western fur trading territory, including Kettle Falls by 1811, had a more equitable distribution of profits, at least among the management. With better morale and closer relations to native peoples, it was driving the expansion of the fur trade by 1810.

Those "closer relations" included the practice of fur traders taking native wives and supporting their families. These relationships cannot be clumped into a one-size-fits-all description. But generally speaking, as outlined in Sylvia Van Kirk's excellent study [Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870](#), they can be grouped into 3 eras: early years where native women were treated as equals both as members of the family and essential workers in the fur trade, middle years where daughters of mixed blood became the favored wives of fur tradesmen and a later period where native wives were shunned by high fur trade and business society in favor of "exotic" brides from England. This later era is tied to the marriage of George Simpson to Frances Ramsey Simpson, his 18-year-old first cousin, in 1830 and her subsequent transport to Hudson's Bay Territory, Rupert's Land. "After her arrival in Rupert's Land, First Nations women married to Hudson's Bay Company officials were excluded from respectable society." (Wikipedia on Frances Ramsay Simpson)

George Simpson was a remarkable man with many firsts to his name, including the above marriage. But let us set the scene by harkening back to the first era of fur-trade matrimonial unions. Fittingly there is a French rather than an English term for these: marriages *à la façon du pays* ("according to the custom of the country") refers to the practice of common-law marriage between European fur traders and Aboriginal or Métis women in the North American fur trade. The ceremonies were typically a mix of Christian and Native customs. Although the managers of Hudson's Bay at first discouraged these unions, they proved to be valuable and inescapable.

Native women were tough enough to take care of themselves and their families in the harshest conditions. They could hunt, forage, and preserve foods. They could tan hides and sew the endless series of moccasins, snow shoes and other apparel that the trappers wore out constantly. They acted as translators and ambassadors between the tribal and trader communities. These were not necessarily idyllic relationships. Some fur traders were unfaithful and left their families behind or bequeathed them to other fur traders when they returned to the old country. Some native women sought other partners or returned to their bands. But this was the fur-trader community and native wives were integral to it. Many families remained together even after employment in the fur trade ended. A look at the 1865 habitation map on the Heritage Network website (<http://theheritagenetwork.org/maps/>) will confirm that.



NWT Archives/Chief Julius School (Fort McPherson)/N-1992-171-0033

1865 is 200 years down the road from the beginning of the fur trade. A look at the life of Angus McDonald in the 2022 Silverado articles, <http://theheritagenetwork.org/articles/> shows how his mixed blood wife, Catherine, and daughter, Christine, were very sophisticated and capable women, educated in and adept at managing the affairs of the fur trade as well as handling horses, hunting and any other tasks inherent in country living. This next generation of “country wives” was at the heart of fur-trade society when George Simpson appeared on the scene in 1821. He had several wives and at least 6 children in the 10 years before he imported Frances. Those transitions will be the subject of the next article on George Simpson’s Family Affairs.