

## The Murdoch McLennan Story, part 1

When Murdoch MacLennan came out from Scotland as an employee of the Hudson's Bay Company more than a century ago, he began one of the longest working careers any young Scotsman ever had in the north-West for he made two trips to the Arctic, worked on the railroad line and even at the Locks when 84 years of age. His son, Frank Mac Lennan, who observed his 84th birthday January 22nd, at his home at Peguis filled in a few of the high lights of his father's life recently.

Born at Stornoway, Scotland, Isle of Lewis, Outer Hebrides, in 1826, Murdoch McLennan signed with the company in 1847, arriving at York Factory in the chartered ship, Westminster. During 1847-48 he was at the Island Lake Post and continued in the Norway House district until he joined Dr. Rae's expedition of 1853-54.

"Father walked to Edmonton, accompanied by Thomas Mistagan, an Indian from the Peguis Reserve here. They crossed to Chesterfield Inlet then on to the Arctic. On one expedition, they were near starvation many times and if anyone talked about food at these times the leader, Dr. Rae, threatened to shoot him to ward off any attempt at cannibalism as they were near to losing their minds at such times. He was away from home seven years that trip."

It was during this expedition that the first news was heard of Sir John Franklin's party. When Her Majesty's Government's reward for the first to ascertain news of his fate was made to Dr. Rae, MacLennan's share was £260. At the end of the expedition Rae presented him as an "excellent servant and a good hand in a boat either at sea or on a river."

Before he knew of this reward, however, MacLennan had volunteered to join the Arctic expedition under James Anderson and James Green Stewart and on February 11, 1855, he left with Thomas Mistagan travelling down the Great Fish Back River to make further search for traces of Sir John Franklin's party.

"He returned from this second trip to find that his wife, who had been had passed away. Some years later, he married my mother. She was Annie Bird, daughter of James Bird, of this district.

"There were several others from St. Andrew's who went north with Dr. Rae, McDonalds and Linklaters and others," said Mr. McLennan. "They found the sleigh used in the Franklin expedition a few years ago; it was used to carry the boat across the ice."

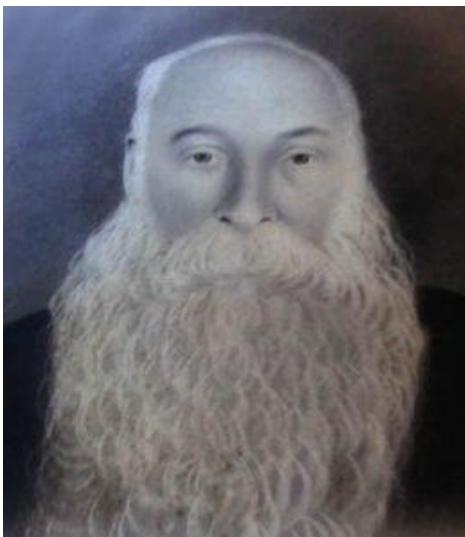
“Father worked along the railroad line for years. They cut the wood for use in the engines when the rail road was going through. I just remember father took some cows along when they camped on open prairie at Winnipeg. Grandfather Bird went along, too, to help them get away. Father went over to see my brother Roderick, who was at St. John’s College at the time.

“Father worked at the Locks in 1910,” said Mr. MacLennan. “He had hurt his foot while visiting in Scotland in 1896 and gangrene set in his toe. That’s what finally killed him in his 90th year.

“I remember when two or three boats and a big barge went down the Red River to Grand Rapids to meet the soldiers coming from the Riel Rebellion of 1885. They had come down the Saskatchewan and had to walk three or four miles across the portage at Grand Rapids to the Colville and the Princess. Some came in by barge, of course, as there were so many.

Mr. MacLennan has been a fisher man and hauled fish, winter-freighting until the early thirties and has done road-work since then. He still does his own chores, keeps a cow, and makes excellent butter; reads a great deal; he hasn’t been to a barber for 30 or 40 years, either, and has done his own dentistry.

Mrs. McLennan, the former Mary Olive Telier died last June. They had observed their 55th wedding anniversary in 1952.



PART TWO. As the last survivor of the Rae search for the Franklin Expedition, Murdoch McLennan was interviewed by Free Press in 1908, (quote): “The old gentleman seemed as full of life and fire as men twice score years his juniors. A bright, fresh-complexioned face shined in a wonderful head of silvery white hair, and a long white beard both of which seemed to have brought away with them the frost of the Arctic, where he has so often wintered, he is a man to impress the visitor with the fact that the dangers of the Polar sea cannot be so great when men survive as hale and hearty as himself, at such a great age.”He retains all his faculties and his memory is very wonderful. Said Mr. McLennan: “The Government of Canada don’t know what a wonderful country they have got there. Gold mines and coal mines, copper and silver, and an island of pure marble. The finest park in the world, where the reindeer and the caribou are as thick as the grass and all it wants is a railway to make known its wonderful resources.

“It was like this, Dr. Rae was a great explorer, and when he went back to England there was a great dispute about King William’s Island. Some said it was an Island and some said it was the mainland and Dr. Rae was sent to find out and go up the inlet which he said existed. The expedition was sent by the Hudson’s Bay Company and was able to take small boats and look for Franklin’s party as well as map the coast about three hundred miles. We went down to York Factory by water and started across from there to Great Fish river or Backs river they call it both names on the map and so on down to the mouth; but we could not go far, as the “grub” gave out and we had to send some of the men back.

“We wintered in Repulse Bay, where Sir James McIntock wintered some two or three years later and found all about the Franklin party. I lived seven months in a snow hut. We used to keep warm like the Eskimos by sleeping all together without any clothes on hardly, but all covered on top with clothes so as to keep each other warm. Sleeping bags are no use, any more than gloves in this country. We never washed all the winter. How would you like that?

“We heard about a big boss and some of the men coming ashore there at Point Ogle and on Montreal Island from the natives. We thought it must be Franklin, and afterwards McIntock found that Franklin’s ships got to that point and some of the men came ashore and thirty died there. An Eskimo woman told me that she saw one crawling about on all fours and his eyes were turned this way (here the speaker illustrated). She said they were dying of starvation, and this man could not walk, he was so weak. ‘Afterwards McIntock followed up the news we brought back and found the stern of one of the boats on Montreal Island with the name of the ship on it and two skeletons. ‘We got lots of relics from the Eskimos. I myself traded with them for thirteen gold guineas, some of them of the year that Franklin sailed from England. We also got lots of half crowns and smaller silver. The Eskimos had watches and all sorts of things they had taken from the bodies.

‘There was another party formed when we got back and I went with this, too. I went across from Norway House to Athabaska river and down the Great Slave Lake and Aylmer Lake and then down the Backs river again. Rae was not with us this time, but of course no survivors. There is one man alive still who was with me on the first expedition, but not on the second. That is John McDonald.

‘No, this was not the only time I was in that country. I have travelled a lot. I was mining years ago in the Rockies, and I have been up in the Hudson Bay several times. It’s a great country that, and no one knows it but those who have been there. There’s finer harbours there than anywhere else. Look at Churchill. It’s a splendid harbour — seven miles one way and three the other; and at high tide you can see the shells at the bottom, the water is so clear. There is deep water for ships and a fleet could winter there. It beats the Russian Port Arthur. The little vessels — sailing ships used to come there regularly, so the big steamers today would not have any trouble, and there are not fogs like there are on the other route; but ye’ll be knowing this, I’m thinking. There are fish, salmon and great whales spouting; and an island of pure marble about one hundred miles from Churchill.

‘Then there is a great bay — I forget the name of it west of King William Island and east of Victoria Land, and at the mouth of the river there are three little islands. The water there is thirty feet deep. It’s the greatest thing on earth.

‘Do you know that Canada owns the greatest park on earth there? It is 700 miles long and sixty miles broad and reindeer and other big game are as thick as the grass. Seen it — seen it — why man, I lived on them!’”

Note: Two of Mr. McLennan’s expeditions in the north were of seven years’ duration. McLennan Crossing, near Parkdale, is named after Donald McLennan, youngest son of Murdoch McLennan.

