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The Man Who Did Not Go To California

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*The Man Who Did Not Go To
California*

I wish to say first, how much I regret being on this platform alone tonight, without Dr. Hilda Neatby whose recent death has robbed Canada of a great personality and this audience of a brilliant speaker.

Second, I wish to thank your programme committee for their most flattering invitation to me to appear here as a "Distinguished Canadian Historian". This invitation is made the more an honour by the calibre of the men in whose footsteps I follow, those two outstanding Canadian scholars and teachers, Arthur Lower and Frank Underhill. It was also a wholly unexpected invitation because, if the truth be told, I am a man who never took a course in Canadian History when he was a student and never taught one when he was a professor. Yet Canadian History has long been a source of interest and pleasure to me and I welcome this opportunity to pay tribute to the men to whom I owe that interest.

The first was my father who in 1896 emigrated to Ontario to become Professor of Latin at Queen's University. In 1901 he returned to Britain after receiving from St. John's College, Cambridge, the sort of invitation which one does not decline. But his stay in Canada, during those final years of Queen Victoria's reign, left an indelible mark upon him. They gave him an interest in, and affection for, this country which lasted the rest of his life. That interest he early communicated to me, with, somehow, a special emphasis upon the Canadian West. Indeed, in this longitude I may perhaps safely confess that as a child I knew about such key points on the earth's surface as Winnipeg and Edmonton, and Athabasca Landing and Fort Chipewyan, well before I became aware that Canada also contained an inhabited area known as Toronto.

The second of these men was my Oxford tutor, Vivian Galbraith, whose name is known to all medievalists. It was he who said to me, when I was offered a job in the University of Saskatchewan in that most unlikely year, 1931, "History is where you are. If you go to Canada, you should do Canadian history."

The third, I need hardly say, was that great pioneer in our field, Arthur Silver Morton of the University of Saskatchewan. From him I soon learned that — however new Saskatoon might still look in 1931 — the West did have a history; and it was a history which, as my friend, Dr. John Warkentin, once said, Arthur Morton did, “literally, with the soles of his boots.” For, with an energy more easily envied than imitated, Arthur Morton supplemented his hours in the archives by hiking along river banks searching for the actual sites of fur trade forts. I recall his telling me the evidence for which he sought — it was two things together, a hole in the ground and a pile of stones. This may not sound like promising material; but he explained that where a cellar had once been dug, a hole would remain; and where a chimney had been built of stones set in clay instead of mortar, the stones would remain in a tumbled heap after the rain of years had leached out all the clay; so these things together were two outward and visible signs of a bygone trading post, after its timbers had rotted into dust.

Fifteen years later I found myself, after the various accidents of peace and war, in Winnipeg in 1946. I had then begun serious work on British military history of the Napoleonic era; and Winnipeg offered precious little source material in this field. But I still had that interest in the Canadian West, which my father had kindled, Galbraith had enjoined and Arthur Morton encouraged. Also the Hudson’s Bay Company was then, through its Record Society, publishing documents from its archives which hitherto few but Arthur Morton had ever seen. So I began work on the fur trade which has left me ever since a split personality — for what personality could be more split than a historian with, so to speak, one foot in an army boot at Aldershot and the other in a moccassin by the Red River?

When, after this schizophrenic career, I was invited to address the Canadian Historical Association in Edmonton, it was only natural to pick a Western, rather than a military topic; so I chose my present subject, “The Man who did not go to California.”¹

The cast of the story I have to tell consists of just three people. In due order of precedence they are, first, a Nobleman; second, a Knight; and, third an under-gardener from the nobleman’s estate. The nobleman was the 13th Earl of Derby;² the knight was Sir William Hooker (1785-1865), Director of the Royal Botanic Garden at Kew from 1841 to his death; and the under-gardener was that same Joseph Burke whom so many of you already know from Letitia Hargrave’s letters. As Letitia tells, he came out to Rupert’s Land by way of York Factory in 1843 to work as a natural history collector for the Earl and Hooker.³ He is also the man who never collected in his intended destination of California, because his employers sacked him before he could

do more than make a short transit across its north east corner en route to Oregon from Nevada. But before plunging into that crisis, let us take a look at these three people.

By the 1840's the Earl of Derby was already an elderly, and evidently a failing, man.⁴ He seems rarely to have gone anywhere except in a bath chair;⁵ his method of preserving his correspondence was not to file it but to copy it into exercise books; but unfortunately he sometimes let this task slide until he was appalled by the size of it and frequently too he did not finish it, so there are gaps in his records. He was not always good at answering correspondents, and many might conclude that he is to be remembered only as the father of that brilliant son, the 14th Earl, an orator who won fame in his House of Commons days as "the Rupert of Debate", a scholar and poet who translated Homer's *Iliad* into excellent English verse and a statesman who, as Queen Victoria's prime minister in 1867, ranks among Canada's "Fathers of Confederation". But in fact there was more to the 13th Earl than this. To high social position and enviable wealth he added an expert knowledge of natural history; with these qualifications he became in 1831 and remained until his death in 1851 President of the Zoological Society of London.⁶ The Society found him a generous patron, though hardly a regular attender of its meetings, and as he grew older, he visited London more and more infrequently. Yet no zoologist ever had less reason than Lord Derby for going to the London zoo to see animals, for at his home at Knowsley in Lancashire he had devoted about 100 acres of his ample park to making for himself one of the most extraordinary private menageries any individual has ever owned. The full scope of this menagerie is revealed in the catalogue prepared for its sale after the Earl's death in 1851, a catalogue which would hardly be relevant tonight if it did not contain an item of somewhat poignant interest for Canadians. It shows that at his death Lord Derby possessed some 70 living specimens of that now extinct Canadian bird, the Passenger Pigeon, *Ectopistes migratoria*, which are described as "bred at Knowsley".⁷ Anyone familiar with nineteenth century descriptions of the enormous and destructive flocks in which Passenger Pigeons travelled may suspect this bird's habits were too incompatible with agriculture for it ever to survive in the wild; but the Earl of Derby's success in breeding up so large a captive flock suggests that, if only other aviculturists had possessed his resources and his ability, the Passenger Pigeon might be with us yet, like such other aviary birds as Edwards's Pheasant, the Diamond Dove and the Zebra Finch, not to mention canaries and budgerigars, whose captive stocks carry on without any reinforcement from the wild.⁸

Sir William Hooker was a genuinely distinguished botanist, a man of great drive and energy, the creator of the Kew Gardens we enjoy today and

very much the dominant partner in planning Burke's expedition to North America. But how far he was an easy employer to work for is another question.

Burke himself had first been brought to Lord Derby's notice by Joseph Sabine, the same Joseph Sabine whose name bird watchers associate with the far northern bird called Sabine's Gull. Sabine was the London Zoological Society's treasurer from 1826 until 1830, and he had then employed Burke in forming the society's flower garden at Regent's Park.⁹ From there Burke went to Knowsley; and in 1839 the Earl sent him to South Africa to collect animals, alive and dead, for his menagerie and museum. Letitia Hargrave gives a convenient summary of the two years and over which he spent travelling inland in Africa; and more is told in his own manuscript journal preserved at Kew.¹⁰ He was obviously a splendidly tough traveller and conscientious man. He faced the most daunting difficulties — dishonest Hottentot servants; obstructive officials in the Boer republics; weather in which drought, and lack of forage for his animals, alternated with downpour and floods; and, worst of all from an animal collector's point of view, an epidemic of some kind of mange or scabies which killed his draught oxen, milch cows and young antelopes and of which he was ill for three months himself. Nevertheless he came back from Africa in November, 1842, with a splendid museum collection of skins of birds and mammals; a collection of both dried plants and bulbs and seeds which greatly impressed Hooker to whom the Earl sent him with an introduction; and, last but not least, he did get home alive three antelopes which had never before been seen in Europe. These were, first, a pair of that second largest of all antelopes, the Common Eland, *Taurotragus oryx*; the third, which he must have picked up at some West African port of call on his way home, was a bull of the still larger, and till then wholly unknown, species, the Giant Eland, now named scientifically after Burke's employer, *Taurotragus derbianus*.¹¹ All told, Burke did very well in Africa, and Hooker was keen to employ him again; so, with the Earl as a consenting party, Hooker arranged with the Hudson's Bay Company to have Burke shipped out to North America. Once there he wrote letters home which make him another witness on the state of the old west in the days when the Company still owned it; and he ran into problems with his employers which are my subject tonight.¹²

In 1843 Hooker had just completed his great book, *Flora Boreali-Americana*, based on the collections brought home by Franklin's two expeditions, so anyone might suppose him an expert on the Hudson's Bay territory. Unfortunately, however, his knowledge of it does not seem to have extended too far beyond its Botany or he would hardly have assured Derby (in the spring of 1843) that Sir George Simpson was "the Governor in Hudson's

Bay and it is he who with Dease completed the survey of the Arctic Coast of N. America which Franklin &c. could not accomplish".¹³ The plan Hooker made for Burke was to have him sail to Hudson Bay on the Company's ship, the *Prince Rupert*, in 1843, then proceed inland from York Factory and up the Saskatchewan by the fall boat to Edmonton, winter there and cross the mountains in "the spring" of 1844. John Halkett, that very experienced member of the Hudson's Bay Company's London committee, warned Hooker that this plan "would hardly answer" and suggested that the "opportunity" of sending Burke round Cape Horn directly to Columbia "would be a good" one.¹⁴ But, go-getter that he was, Hooker did not believe in wasting time. The Hudson's Bay Company would have no ship leaving for the Columbia till September 1843;¹⁵ the *Prince Rupert* would sail for York Factory in June, 1843, — so off on the *Prince Rupert* went Burke, regardless of the fact that after the Franklin expeditions the natural history of the prairies was fairly well known and the fact that most of the things his employers wanted were found on the West of the mountains. Unfortunately, too, Hooker was misinformed when he supposed the mountains really could be crossed as early as "the spring"; and Burke never learned that they could not until, on 20 March, 1844, he reached Jasper House and the post manager there (who was Simpson's piper, Colin Fraser) told him there would "be at least eight feet of snow on the hight of land at Midsummer"; and that his departure must be timed "in the Fall" when "the canoe arrives [at the Boat Encampment] from Fort Colville to meet the party going to the Columbia", with whom Burke could proceed further.¹⁶

But this was not all that Hooker did. One might suppose that after his two years in Africa Burke was by now a seasoned traveller who had faced dangers before and could safely be trusted to find his own way around. But this idea never occurred to Sir William; and he sent Burke off with three foolscap pages of minute instructions, which, *inter al.*, virtually hogtied his movements to those of the Hudson's Bay Company's brigades.¹⁷ This, as we shall see, was no help to Burke's attempts to fulfil Hooker's wishes.

But now — what were his employers' wishes? And what problems had to be overcome in fulfilling them?

The Earl of Derby wanted plants for his gardens, and animals, alive for his menagerie and dead for his museum. As for the animals, Sir George Simpson had encouragingly assured him that "The Bison, Moose and Antelope, likewise Swans, Ducks, Geese, &c. are numerous in the Saskatchewan, and of these Mr. Burke will have no great difficulty in making Collections in Pairs".¹⁸ So far, so good; but when Burke had caught all these desirable creatures alive, what was he to do next? They would have, of

course, to be fed, cared for and transported to England, by York boat to the Bay and then by ship to London. These were the really difficult things to do. If Burke caught the animals young, he would need a cow — or cows — in milk for a foster-mother; but few fur trading posts had domestic cows to spare; and in any case it is possible to think of more hygienic fellow travellers in a York boat than even the friendliest “cow all red and white”. If, on the other hand, Burke tried to ship out mature animals, how was he to feed them on the journey? They would need hay, which can only be made at one season and requires men to make it. Add that the 1500 mile journey downstream from Edmonton to York Factory took some thirty to forty days of steady travel;¹⁹ that the proper ration for a mature elk is some 30 lbs. of hay per day,²⁰ and that a buffalo may require double that amount;²¹ and one begins to get an idea of the sort of transport problem that would be involved in getting a considerable collection of mammals out of the Saskatchewan country. And in a time and place where hay-bailers, and even bindertwine, were unknown, the job of unloading the hay and carrying it overland through the bush, and the mosquitoes, at every portage is one at which imagination boggles. Yet the alternative to carrying and portaging hay was to cut forage daily for the animals throughout the journey; and there was precious little time for that on the long and hard voyages from the Saskatchewan to York Factory.

An even more insoluble problem would seem to be the job of crating animals as animals should be crated for a journey. If anyone wishes to learn how that should be done, he cannot do better than consult — an art expert. For the type of crate needed has not changed in 3,000 years; and any real art expert will be familiar with the crate shown in the British Museum’s Assyrian bas-reliefs of King Ashur-bani-pal out lion-hunting in about 850 B.C. As sportsmen, you may regret that His Majesty should have chosen to hunt lions released from crates, but you cannot fault him on the design of his crates — of solid longitudinal planks set wide enough apart for good ventilation, yet close enough to prevent the lion reaching out and doing mischief with a large and well armed paw; at the end a door slides up through well-fitted grooves to release the lion; and on top is a feature unknown to modern zoomen, a neat little cage to protect the boy who did the releasing from any lion which might be so ungrateful for liberty as to turn upon him. But fur-trading posts in the old West were generally less well-equipped than ancient Nineveh for such sophisticated carpentry as this; and at Jasper Burke found it hard enough to make an ordinary box to carry his own kit on a pack-horse over the mountains

“having no tools but a hatchet, a small garden saw, a knife and a small gimlet. I had neither nails nor screws and was “obliged” to chop the planks from solid trees. I made glue by boiling Moose skin and sewed the bottom on with strips of hide.”²²

It is perhaps not surprising that the only live animal he managed to ship home was a Snow Goose he found available at York Factory. The Earl received it with gratitude, but hardly with enthusiasm, commenting in his letter book ‘‘I am sorry to say it has suffered some time from a broken Wing very likely at the time of capture.’’²³ For the rest all that Burke could add to the Earl’s collections consisted of skins for his museum.

To understand what Hooker wanted, one must recall that by the 1840’s the classical age of English landscape gardening was over. Men were no longer primarily interested in such things as making ‘‘water stagnate where it could be seen and fall where it could be heard’’ by damming brooks to create lakes and cascades. A century had passed since Alexander Pope defined the gardener’s art as being to:

Consult the *Genius* of the place in all
That tells the waters or to rise or fall,
Or helps th’ambitious Hill the heav’n to scale
Or scoops in circling theatres the Vale,
Calls in the country, catches opening glades
Joins willing woods and varies shades with shades [etc.]

The last great gardener of that school had been buried in 1818 when Humphrey Repton died. What men everywhere wanted now was new plants. Classic names of this plant-hunting era are Philipp von Siebold (1796-1866) who introduced many new trees and shrubs from Japan and China; William Lobb (1809-63) who sent much back to England from South America; K.T. Hartweg (1812-1877) who did the same from Mexico; and, greatest of all, Robert Fortune (1813-1880) who beautified Europe’s gardens with so many splendid things from China. It was Hooker’s aim that what these men were doing in other parts of the world should be done by Burke in western America; and he was very specific as to what he wanted, namely, Oaks, Pines, other good conifers and in particular a splendid evergreen from California and Oregon called the Golden Chestnut, the *Castanopsis chrysophylla* of botanists.²⁴ This chestnut was something Hooker had been wanting ever since he first learned of it. For twenty years or so he had been bombarding every likely traveller with requests for it, and all had failed him, so naturally he demanded it of Burke. But he wanted much more too. Burke was also required to collect ‘‘alpine vegetation’’; if seeds and roots could not be got ‘‘specimens should be carefully dried’’; even ‘‘Mosses and Lichens’’ were to be collected. California, where he was told to go with the Hudson’s Bay Company’s ‘‘Hunters to the Sacramento River, down which you will proceed in their boats to San Francisco upon the Coast’’, promised, wrote Hooker, ‘‘to be a most profitable and important journey in regard to Plants and Animals’’; ‘‘even in the plains nothing is to be neglected’’; and he was also expected to

go to the "Snake country" and do the same work there.²⁵ Clearly Sir William Hooker did not believe in asking too little.

Now consider what chances Burke had of satisfying his two employers' demand for plants. The first and obvious requirement of anyone who is to find new plants is an area where no one has collected before. But after the Franklin expeditions Burke could expect little new in either zoology or botany east of the mountains — you will remember his disappointment at York, as recorded by Letitia Hargrave who wrote "He found 77 species of plants *here*", and added, significantly, "none new". He was also by no means the first botanical collector to work on the west side of the mountains.

Second, good communications are essential to good understanding; and I doubt if Burke realised how much harm would be done him by the difficulties he faced in getting through to his employers. He certainly did not know until the *Prince Rupert* broke her voyage at Stromness in the Orkneys in 1843 that only two mails a year could be got out of Rupertsland, one by the ships from the Bay in autumn, the other by Montreal in winter; and the cost of the Montreal mails horrified him. A lady at Stromness told him, as he wrote to Hooker, that "she pays 2^s/6 for a single letter . . . At that rate it would be very expensive to send much by way of Montreal."²⁶ How far Hooker ever heeded this warning is a question I cannot answer, but he does not appear to have remembered it long.

Third, the weather inevitably plays an important part in collecting the seeds of wild plants. As every fruit-grower knows, you can get no fruit at harvest time without good blossom well fertilised in springtime; and those of you who winter luxuriously in the South will recall how in every Florida orange orchard a dirty old tin can full of sand stands at the foot of every tree. If frost threatens, gasoline is poured into the sand, a match is put to the gasoline, and so each tree has its own "smudge" burning through the night to keep its blossoms or young fruit from freezing. But there is no one to put smudges in spring under wild trees in the north woods to make sure they will have seed for enterprising plant collectors when autumn comes.

Fourth, timing is essential to successful plant collecting. As William Morwood has well pointed out, botanists employed on discovery ships had only to collect dried plants and rarely "attempted to take living plants or seeds. That was grubby work to be performed later by plant collectors"; and, continues Morwood, the plant collector "must patiently wait out his seasons, locating species in the spring and summer, returning in the fall and winter to harvest seeds and dig up roots".²⁷ Thus put, the point sounds obvious enough; what is not so obvious is how the spring and summer reconnaissances,

followed by the autumn and winter collecting trips, were to be made by a man whose movements were as closely tied as Burke's to a timetable designed for the needs of the fur trade.

Fifth, the fact that the plant collector had to wait out his seasons and repeat his journeys meant that it had to be safe for him to do much more travelling than the mere botanist. To quote Morwood once more, "a botanist might climb back aboard his ship again with an arrow through his hat and be none the worse for the adventure . . . but conditions in a new territory had to be reasonably stable for the collector to work effectively."²⁸ The conditions which Burke encountered, however, were far from stable. He travelled up the Saskatchewan in the late autumn of 1843 in no little danger owing to a war of the Assiniboines and the Crees against the Blackfeet.²⁹ Beaver Indians were threatening mayhem when he was trying to collect in the eastern Rockies in 1844; when he reached Idaho and Montana with the "Snake Country" hunters in 1845, the Utahs were up in arms and "the Snakes and Sioux" were "at war all [the] Summer"; and in June, 1846, "no one would engage to go with" him to the sources of "the Snake and Green rivers . . . the Blackfeet having destroyed several lodges [of Snake Indians] in that quarter."³⁰

In these circumstances Burke would need really good luck to enable him to satisfy his employers. But his luck was bad; and in 1844 he took three severe blows one after another. First, as I mentioned, he arrived at Jasper House on 20 March, expecting to cross the mountains in June, only to be told he must wait till "the Fall" when the snow would be less deep and when he would be able to travel on from the Boat Encampment in the Fort Colville canoe.³¹ So that wrecked one part of the plans Hooker had made for him. And before he could start his crossing, difficulties arose in another collecting area. "Mr. Ogden, a chief factor of the Company," arrived at Jasper on 13 May with the news that "the whole of the Country on the south side of the Columbia is taken up by American Emigrants. No more trapping parties will go to California." So that upset Hooker's plan for what he had supposed would be "a most promising and important journey."³²

Then, when at last, on 17 September, 1844, Burke did start over the mountains from Jasper, he found "the country very different to what [he] expected. There are" he continued, "neither open hills nor plains. The whole distance was through dense forests, swamps and periodically covered parts of [the banks of] rivers."³³ As a result the man who had been specially sent to collect "alpine vegetation" saw little of alpine plants in the season when seeds should be ripening.

Meanwhile Burke had tried to spend the summer of 1844 usefully round Jasper House; but here the weather turned sour. That summer was the worst in Colin Fraser's memory; "Whe [*sic*] have had frost, snow or could rain nearly the whole time," as Burke wrote to Hooker.³⁴ As a result the pines Burke had been told to collect produced no cones; hence he could get no seeds of them either. Of course he found no oaks in that summer, for none grow on the eastern slope of the Canadian Rockies;³⁵ and the difficulty of pressing flowers in camp in constant wet weather hardly needs mentioning. It was therefore not until the summer of 1845 that Burke found himself in good collecting country around Fort Hall, in what was then the "Snake country" and is now south-eastern Idaho.³⁶ This became the base from which he worked in the summers of both 1845 and 1846.

But Hooker had — quite correctly — not wished seeds from temperate North America to be sent to England by boat round Cape Horn from the Columbia. They were unlikely to remain viable after the double trip through the tropics which that voyage involved. Yet it might take a year or more to get them to England by the other route, from Fort Hall to Walla Walla, on to the Boat Encampment, then over the mountains with pack horses, down the Saskatchewan in York boats, and finally from York Factory to Britain by the return voyage of the Company's annual trading ship to the Bay. Well before all this time could pass, however, dark suspicions began to fill Hooker's mind. By 29 August 1845 he wrote Derby saying — inaccurately — "we have received nothing from him" in "just 2 $\frac{1}{4}$ years"; could he have been tampered with by the Hudson's Bay Company men?³⁷ By 14 October he was complaining that he had had "one letter" containing "Half a dozen little packets of seeds, not worth 6d. each, whereas the postage is some 12/- or 14^s. All this," he added, "is perfectly unintelligible."³⁸ Already, in August 1845, with Derby's acquiescence, he had shot off a letter of rebuke which reached Burke at Fort Walla Walla on 16 October, 1846, and hit him with impact of a solid punch in the solar plexus. To this missive, which apparently accused him of negligence and threatened to stop his finances³⁹, Burke replied on 17 October with considerable dignity, listing what he had done, the dangers he had faced and commenting, "I think, Sir William, it is a very hard case if [when] a collector is sent from the Royal Botanic Gardens to a country where he cannot by any means send his collections by the time mentioned in your letter . . . his funds are to be stopped"; and, in a tone of injured pride, he ended his letter with the sentence, "I trust, Sir William, you will forgive my retiring from [your] service without waiting an answer, as it would be two years or upwards before I could receive one."⁴⁰

So now Burke set out on the long trail over the mountains and down the Saskatchewan to York Factory. There he arrived looking "eccentric" for,

“having been spilt into the river [and] lost everything”, he was now clad in “trousers too long and coat too short, the best the Co’s store . . . could supply, but which made him very grotesque”.⁴¹

On 27 October, 1847, Burke arrived in London — nearly three months before his letter of resignation of 17 October, 1846, reached Kew.⁴² On the 28th he had a thoroughly unpleasant interview with Hooker and with “Mr. J. Smith, the Curator of the Garden”, for Hooker was too cautious a civil servant to have an interview of this kind without a witness. By his own account of the interview, written to Lord Derby, Hooker also seems to have been at his bullying worst, telling Burke, unjustly, that the earlier collectors “Douglas, Drummond, Nuttall, Tolmie [and] Gairdner who had on the same ground . . . for less than half the time have sent home lots of rarities”;⁴³ but the unfortunate Burke had “sent home *nothing* of the least value, not a Pine, not an Oak, nor any forest Tree, nor even a single Shrub . . . for these he was expressly sent. All I can get from him,” continued Hooker to Derby, “is an account of the difficulties he encountered and that he did what he could. That, again, I said, ‘you know is *nothing*’.” Finally, Hooker told him “I could not possibly settle his wages with him without consulting your Lordship, for . . . it was perfectly clear that he had grossly neglected his duty and was not entitled to it”; and, according to Hooker, the wretched Burke replied “Sir if I have done nothing for you, you must cut off my wages.”⁴⁴ In that sentence the key word is “*wages*” — just wages, not expenses; and Burke’s great fear, when Hooker’s severe letter reached him at Walla Walla, was that he would be stuck for his expenses too, all the costs of transport, board, lodging and guides due to the Hudson’s Bay Company.⁴⁵

In conclusion Hooker, cautious as well as brutal, suggested to Derby that the matter of wages should be settled by an arbiter.

Now the injustice in Hooker’s conduct does not lie only in the fact that it was he who had chosen, against Halkett’s advice, to send Burke off by the wrong route, and to tie him up with hampering instructions (of which he had had none in Africa), or in his failure to digest the long and detailed letters in which Burke gave clear warnings of his problems, or in his failure to pay heed to the time-lag in all communications from the American West. There is also the fact that he had not heeded more than one warning from Lord Derby. For, though Derby was, from Hooker’s point of view, admirably docile in following Hooker’s lead, he still displayed a somewhat more balanced attitude toward his former employee. Thus, in October, 1846, the very month in which Burke received the letter that ended his expedition, Derby informed Hooker that his head gardener, Mr. Jennings, had recently had a letter from Burke, written at Fort Hall on 8 December, 1845, which spoke of his “having

sent to Kew about 2000 odd packets of seeds''⁴⁶ — and that could hardly be dismissed as “nothing.” Again in an undated letter, of apparently the summer of 1847, Derby had written Hooker to say that a new parcel of Burke’s seeds, which had just arrived, contained chestnuts; could they be the long-sought, never received Golden Chestnuts?⁴⁷

They were indeed the much desired *Castanopsis chrysophylla*; and, where all others had failed, Burke had at last succeeded. In August, 1846, he had left Fort Hall to travel with the well known pioneer, Jesse Applegate,⁴⁸ on a route that led him into what is now Nevada, then across the northeastern corner of modern California to Oregon; and there, between Upper Klamath Lake and the Calipooa Mountains, he found the Golden Chestnut “abundant. It is a very shy fruiter”, he commented, “and not ripe when [we] passed.” But he collected a number of young chestnuts “in the husk, with a small piece of [stem] hoping they may ripen sufficiently to grow.”⁴⁹ He sent some to Kew, as well as Knowsley; and, as Derby’s letter shows, they arrived months before his covering letter (the same of 17 October, 1846, which retorted so crisply to Hooker and reached Kew in January, 1848).

Still better news was to come before Hooker and Derby had picked their arbiter. There was really but little hope that nuts picked so much out of season as Burke describes would ever germinate; and at Kew none did. But one in the Knowsley parcel was more forward, and on 28 January, 1848, Derby was writing to Hooker that Jennings had succeeded in raising one very promising Golden Chestnut⁵⁰; and, still more, from Burke’s seeds, he continued, Jennings had

“also raised a tolerable stock of an *Aquilegia*, which he seems to expect will be something good . . . also plants of *Umbelliferae*, *Compositae*, *Leguminosae*, many of which are said to be very beautiful, also several species of a beautiful Genus allied to *Statier*, with *Malon*, *Penstemon*, [illeg], *Alliums*, several varieties of *Ipomopsis*. Many plants have been raised from Seeds collected in the latter end of the summer of 1846 between California and the Columbia from Plants not seen in flower.”⁵¹

When we add all these things to the not inconsiderable number of mammal and bird skins Derby had received — many of which he apparently failed to catalogue⁵² — and the pressed flowers which seem to have been sent to Kew,⁵³ it is evident that Burke had done a great deal more than nothing, in spite of the handicaps he faced.

How much credit he was ever given for these successes is a moot point. In February, 1848, Burke duly met the arbiter — a magistrate of Hooker’s choice named Penrhyn;⁵⁴ and on 21 February, 1848, Hooker reported to Derby:—

Last week Mr. Penrhyn was so good as to meet Burke, and after reading all the documents that could bear upon the subject, and after receiving answers to very full questions . . . Mr. Penrhyn could come to no other conclusion than that the time Burke was employed in our service in N.W. America was most grossly misspent.⁵⁵

Is it partisan of me to suspect that before he read all those documents bearing on the subject Penrhyn might — just might — have been very well coached? Certainly his conclusion is remarkably similar to Hooker's;⁵⁶ and after reaching it — with or without help — he proposed that instead of the £100 p.a. which had been promised, Burke should be paid only £50 p.a.; and when note was duly being taken of the fact that he had resigned on 17 October, 1846, this would entitle him to about £170.

At that point, however, Hooker himself relented somewhat. He does not say why. Perhaps he feared Burke would not accept too harsh an arbitrament; and certainly Hooker had reason to weigh the facts that Burke had indeed sent home the Golden Chestnut and all those other plants which Derby reported as flourishing at Knowsley; and that Burke, who had recently been to Knowsley and seen Mr. Jennings (but not the Earl), should now be well aware of these successes; also the fact that Burke had a formal contract which very explicitly promised him £100 a year; and that, though he had been short of money on his arrival in London, Burke did have some savings in a bank in Liverpool.⁵⁷ If Burke were now to use those savings to hire a lawyer to present his case, an impartial court might take a much more favourable view of his deserts than Mr. Penrhyn; and, win or lose, the publicity of a court case would be far from pleasant for Hooker and Derby. These were indeed reflections that might have softened Hooker; but we should not exclude the pleasanter possibility that he was an essentially decent man whose decency came to the surface when once his disappointment, frustration and anger subsided. Anyway, for whatever reason, Hooker now undertook "to make up [Burke's pay] to £200"⁵⁸ as his reward for over three years of toil, hardship and no little danger in the wilderness of North America. With that Burke declared himself satisfied, his dealings with his former employers ceased and he prepared to return to the land to which they had sent him where he proposed to become a settler in Oregon.⁵⁹

That is the end of a story of which Letitia Hargrave tells only the beginning. It is also the answer to the riddle which Miss McKelvey posed when, in her *Botanical Exploration of the Trans-Mississippi West*, she asked why "after thirty-eight months of arduous work, Burke" remained "a virtually forgotten collector."⁶⁰ There can be few by whom he less deserves to be forgotten than by those of us who care for Canada's history. His letters, from which so little has yet been published, have their own picture to give of

travel and hardship, of wildlife and Indians, of "freemen"⁶¹ and the mountains, of the "Snake Country" and of emigrant bands heading for Oregon on the eve of its becoming American territory under the treaty of 1846. Burke, in short, is a new and valuable witness on the mid-nineteenth century West, who merits a place beside our old acquaintances, Paul Kane, Henry Lefroy, Palliser and his colleagues, Cheadle, Messiter, Hind and the Earl of Southesk.

NOTES

¹ I wish very gratefully to acknowledge help received in preparing this paper from the following persons:— the authorities of the Merseyside County Museums (formerly the City of Liverpool Museums), and in particular my friend, Peter Morgan, Keeper of Vertebrate Zoology, for showing me the 13th Earl of Derby's correspondence books, which they hold, providing me with photostats and securing the present Earl of Derby's permission for me to use his ancestor's papers (identified in my footnotes as "Derby; Merseyside MSS"); likewise to Mrs. Naomi Evetts, of the Record Office of the Liverpool City Libraries, who provided me with photostats of letters from Burke and from Sir William Hooker to the 13th Earl (identified as "Liverpool MSS"); to Mr. V.T.H. Parry, Chief Librarian and Archivist and Mrs. K.E. Mortimer, the assistant archivist, at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, for enabling me to use 100 folios of Burke's letters (identified as "Kew, American Letters") and the letters from the 13th Earl to Hooker (identified as "Kew, English Letters"); these are subject to Crown copyright and my quotations are reproduced with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office and of the Director, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew; and finally to the staff of the Carleton University Library who procured for me microfilm of Burke's letters at Kew which I had not been able to copy in full.

Photostats of Kew's collection of Burke's letters to Hooker have been previously used by Susan Delano McKelvey in a chapter on him in her *Botanical Exploration of the Trans-Mississippi West, 1790-1850* (The Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University, 1955), pp. 792-817. She has taken great pains to identify places Burke visited, a piece of work which I have found especially useful in following his movements after he had crossed the mountains.

Last, but by no means least, I wish to thank the Canada Council for financial help given me for my research on Burke.

² Born, 1775; succeeded to the title, 1834; died 1851.

³ *The Letters of Letitia Hargrave*, edited with introduction and notes by Margaret Arnett MacLeod, (The Champlain Society, Toronto, 1947), Vol. XXVII, pp. cviii, 161, 161n., 175.

⁴ On 26 April, 1843, Burke replied to Hooker, who had complained of Derby's failure to respond to his proposals, "I think Lord Derby must fancy he has answered your letters. I am confident he would not otherwise have neglected doing so . . . His memory is not as good as it used to be . . . He has been taken unwell three times since I was at London. It is a sort of fainting. After one of these faints he is not quite well for two or three days. I think this causes him to forget many things he would otherwise feel sorry to neglect." Kew; American Letters.

⁵ Derby to Hooker, postmarked "AP7-1845", in expressing a hope of visiting Kew, adds a request for "a Garden or Wheeling Chair", Kew; English Letters. Joseph Wolf, whom the Earl hired to paint animals in 1850, also recalled his being "wheeled amongst his paddocks and aviaries in a Bath chair" and that he was "very deaf." A.H. Palmer, *The Life of Joseph Wolf, Animal Painter*, (London, 1895), p. 82.

⁶ He was also an amateur artist of more than common skill; and I encountered several of his original water colours of birds in the seven volumes of John Latham's collection of bird portraits in the British Museum (Natural History) at South Kensington. An artist himself he also chose artists well and picked a number of able men to make portraits of his animals at Knowsley,

notably Richard Ansdell, Waterhouse Hawkins, Edward Lear and Joseph Wolf. Much of the work of Lear (on birds) and Hawkins (on mammals) is reproduced in that very rare, and very splendid, book, edited by John E. Gray of the British Museum, *Gleanings from the Menagerie and Aviary at Knowsley Hall*, (Vol. I, Knowsley, 1846; Vol. II, Knowsley, 1850).

⁷ The library of the Zoological Society of London has two copies of the printed catalogue of the Knowsley sale, one of which is annotated and shows that only 58 of these Passenger Pigeons were sold and that the average price of just 3 shillings. See also A.A. Prestwich "Retrospect; the Knowsley Sale", *The Avicultural Magazine*, Jan-Feb. 1947, pp. 16ff.

⁸ The last of the Passenger Pigeons was "Martha" who died in the Cincinnati Zoo in Ohio on 1 September, 1914. As there seems to be some doubt about her origin, it is worth recording that the late Lee Crandall, Curator Emeritus of the New York Zoological Park, assured me that the director of the Cincinnati Zoo always insisted to him that she was bred there.

⁹ Derby to Hooker, 29 May, 1844. Kew; English Letters. There are conspicuous conflicts between the two accounts of Joseph Sabine, which I have read, one in *The Dictionary of National Biography* and one in P. Chalmers Mitchell, *Centenary History of the Zoological Society of London*, (London, 1929), pp. 62-3. I follow Mitchell, who had more evidence.

¹⁰ Some portions of this journal were published by Hooker in several issues of his *London Journal of Botany*, but Hooker blended them with a journal of another South African collector, named Charles L. Zeyher, and ceased printing it at all when he became dissatisfied with Burke. As a result I found the printed version of little value compared with the original manuscript. Miss McKelvey appears to err in identifying Burke's companion in Africa with the "Jean-Michel Zeyher, director of the garden at Schwetzingen" who "died in 1845" (*op. cit.* p. 792). "Charles L." are the initials given by the *Journal* to this Zeyher, who was also alive, well and expecting to return to Africa when he called on Hooker in January, 1847. Hooker to Derby, 29 January, 1847. Derby; Merseyside MSS.

¹¹ Derby kept this Giant Eland until December, 1845, when he sent it to the Jardin des Plantes in Paris in exchange for what was probably the first Anoa, or dwarf buffalo of the Celebes, *Anoa depressicornis*, seen in Britain (*Gleanings from Knowsley*, I, p. 30). Although it was the first of its kind ever recorded, and although its portrait was carefully painted for the earl by Waterhouse Hawkins, this Giant Eland did not become the type specimen of the new species. The type specimen of the Giant Eland is a skin, and horns, sent home later by a Mr. Whitfield who provided the earl with many things from West Africa.

¹² A part of the story on which Susan McKelvey (see note 1), who knew only the Kew collection of Burke's letters, could tell but little.

¹³ Derby; Merseyside MSS. This letter's only date is "Wednesday evening", but it enclosed John Halkett's letter to Hooker of 22 March, 1843, which had recently been received. Hooker is, of course, confusing George Simpson with his nephew, Thomas Simpson.

¹⁴ Halkett to Hooker, 22 March, 1843. Derby; Merseyside MSS.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Burke to Hooker, Jasper's House, 1 May, 1844. Kew; American Letters.

¹⁷ "On arriving [at York Factory] you will receive instructions from the Officers of the [Hudson's Bay Co.] respecting your route, and their instructions are to be implicitly obeyed . . . they have liberally undertaken to forward your scientific views . . . You will, therefore, frequently consult the Gentlemen of the party, especially when you wish in any way to deviate from the regular route, taking care never to do so without their express sanction." Kew; American Letters; and Liverpool MSS.

¹⁸ Simpson to Derby, Hudson's Bay House, La Chine, Montreal, 5 December, 1843. Derby; Merseyside MSS.

¹⁹ The time would depend in part upon the weather and these approximate figures are based on the number of days' navigation required for the journeys from Edmonton described in 1799 and 1800 in Alice Johnson, *Saskatchewan Journals and Correspondence, 1795-1802*,

H.B.R.S. XXVI, (London, 1967). Note that the Edmonton House of 1799-1800 was some 30 miles downstream from the Edmonton where Burke wintered.

²⁰ Lee Crandall describes the ration given to the Bronx Zoo's elk in winter (when their paddock provided no grazing) as "20 pounds of alfalfa hay and 7 pounds of pellets for each animal" [*Wild Mammals in Captivity*, (Chicago and London, 1964), p. 583]. Since the Bronx Zoo's pellets are a concentrated diet, and wild prairie hay would not be alfalfa, my allowance of 30 lbs. per animal per day is probably a conservative estimate.

²¹ I have no precise figures for the rations needed by buffalo, and base this estimate on the size of the animals. In his *Elk of North America*, (Washington 1951), p. 71, O.J. Murie gives 631 lbs. as the average weight of 30 bulls from Jackson Hole and the Yellowstone National Park, and 520 lbs. as the average weight for 38 cows; but, when fat, bulls can scale over 1000 lbs. For the weights of Buffalo, Crandall (*op. cit.* p. 647) gives "about 2000 lbs. for males and about 1000 lbs. for females" — that is, roughly double an elk's weight. Note also that a good load for one York Boat was 56 cwt. according to Thomas Blakiston [I. Spry, *Papers of the Palliser Expedition, 1857-60*, (Toronto, the Champlain Society, 1968), p. 542].

These details illustrate the nature of one problem which his employers had imposed upon Burke. It is proper to add that the Earl hardly needed more elk or buffalo, as he had both already, but they were also the things which Burke could most easily get along the Saskatchewan. Of those mentioned by Simpson, the Pronghorn Antelope, *Antilocapra americana*, was impossible. The only really successful method of collecting live Pronghorns for zoos has proved to be picking day-old kids and hard-rearing them; June is the month for doing that in the northern part of the Pronghorn's range and by June Burke was already in the mountains. It would be foolish to try to ship Moose from the Saskatchewan to England, partly because, as browsers, they do not thrive for long on hay, and partly because calves were so easily got right by the posts on the coast of Hudson Bay, whence, in fact, several had actually been sent to Britain in the previous century [on which, see my note 1 in *Andrew Graham's Observations on Hudson's Bay*, H.B.R.S., XXVII, (London, 1969), p. 17]. "Swans, ducks, Geese" were of course not available at Edmonton during the winter months Burke spent there.

²² Burke to Derby, *ca.* 10 September, 1844; Kew; American Letters. Given the tools and materials, Burke could certainly have made crates, as appears from his African Journal for 14 April, 1840, when he was "engaged in making cases for small Antelopes" which one of Derby's South African agents, the Rev. John Fry of Vige-Kraal, wished to send to England. But the fact that screws and nails were scarce in the Hudson's Bay Company territories is known to everyone who recalls that Red River cart (like the birch canoe) was designed to be made without them; and the only Company posts likely to be equipped with a sawpit and pit-saw, seasoned timber and adequate tools, as well as nails, were those where York boats were made. But Burke left the last such post on the Saskatchewan behind him on 5 March when he set out from Edmonton for Jasper and the mountains.

²³ Derby; Merseyside MSS. The comment is interjected at the foot of his copy of a letter from Sir George Simpson, dated 20 November, 1843, reporting that "charges [were due] on the Bird amounting to 5/8d." and payable to "Messrs. Lucas, Pope and Shaw, of Harp Lane, London."

²⁴ I gave the modern scientific name. Hooker calls it *Castanea chrysophylla*, the name under which he had himself described it from specimens collected by David Douglas in 1826.

²⁵ There are copies of this "Agreement" at both Kew and the Liverpool Public Library.

²⁶ Burke to Hooker, 19 June, 1843. Kew; American Letters.

²⁷ *Traveller in a Vanished Landscape; the Life and Times of David Douglas*, (Newton Abbot, 1974), p. 21.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ To Derby, from Edmonton, 14 November, 1843. Liverpool MSS.

³⁰ Burke to Hooker, Fort Hall, 15 December, 1845. Kew; American Letters.

³¹ Burke to Hooker, Jasper's House, 1 May, 1844. Kew; American Letters.

³² Ogden, who was on his way to England, came with "the Columbia party . . . fifty in number" who had just crossed the mountains with "the prisoners and witnesses connected with the murder of Dr. McLoughlin's son." They had run out of food two days before reaching Jasper where "we were obliged to kill horses" to feed them. Burke to Hooker, Jasper's House, 1 May, 1844. Kew; American letters.

³³ Burke to Hooker, Fort Hall, Snake Country, 28 December, 1844. Kew; American Letters.

³⁴ Burke to Hooker, 11 September 1844. Kew; American Letters.

³⁵ *Native Trees of Canada*, (Forestry Branch, Department of Resources and Development, Fourth Edition, Ottawa, 1950), pp. 158-179.

³⁶ Its site is on the modern Indian Reservation between Blackfoot and Pocatello, Idaho.

³⁷ Hooker to Derby, 29 August, 1845. Liverpool MSS.

³⁸ Hooker to Derby, 14 October, 1845. Liverpool MSS.

³⁹ I have not found this letter which caused Burke's return and judge its contents by his reply. It may not have been intended for a letter of recall, as was one sent him by Hooker in 1846.

⁴⁰ Burke to Hooker, 17 October, 1846. Kew; American Letters.

⁴¹ MacLeod, *Letters of Letitia Hargrave*, p. cviii, citing Dr. John Sebastian Helmcken's manuscript reminiscences (dated 1892) in the Provincial Archives of British Columbia, p. 120. This independent account of Burke's river accident confirms the report he made to Hooker on his return. Hooker suspected this report of being a lie designed to cover the theft of "his map, his guns, his every thing", which he supposed Burke had deliberately left behind in order to use them as his own on his intended return to North America; but Helmcken's story stamps these suspicions as unjustified.

⁴² Hooker docketed it "Only received in *January*, 1848! By Post. W.J.H."

⁴³ Hooker's comparison is not fair, because these men had all preceded Burke and so had had every chance to skim the cream off the country's rarities before him; also they had not all been "on the same ground . . . for less than half the time." David Douglas had twice been on the West coast, from 1825 to 1827, and 1830 to 1833; Thomas Nuttall was collecting there in 1834, 1835 and 1836; Dr. William Fraser Tolmie from 1833-1841; Dr. Meredith Gairdner had two summers of good health on the Columbia, 1833 and 1834, before his illness in 1835; and in his travels between 1825 and 1827 Thomas Drummond had collected in the same country round Jasper (apparently with the same guide) where Burke was trying to find new things in the miserable summer of 1844.

⁴⁴ Hooker to Derby, 28 October, 1847. Liverpool MSS.

⁴⁵ Burke to Hooker, 17 October, 1846. Kew; American Letters.

⁴⁶ Derby to Hooker, 20 October, 1846. Kew; English Letters, vol. XXV, f. 140.

⁴⁷ Derby to Hooker, N.D., Kew; English Letters, vol. XXV, f. 134.

⁴⁸ On Jesse Applegate, 1811-88, surveyor, legislator, publicist and early settler in Oregon, see *Dictionary of American Biography*.

⁴⁹ Kew; American Letters.

⁵⁰ In his *Trees and Shrubs hardy in the British Isles*, (seventh edition, London, 1950), vol. I, p. 377, W.J. Bean describes the Golden Chestnut as "introduced [to Britain] in 1844", but he does not say where or by whom it was introduced, and I suspect the true date should be Burke's, namely, 1847. Certainly Hooker, in his reply to Derby, shows no awareness of anyone having imported it in the earlier years; and of those of Burke's nuts which had been sown at Kew he could only report "We have not yet been so fortunate" as to have any germinate; and they were in any case "imperfect." Hooker to Derby, 7 February, 1848. Liverpool MSS.

⁵¹ Derby to Hooker, 28 January 1848. Kew; English Letters. Note that this was written *after* Burke had visited Knowsley and on information from Mr. Jennings, the head gardener, who seems always to have stood up for Burke when consulted by Derby.

⁵² The catalogue of the Knowsley Museum in the Merseyside County Museums gives Burke credit for providing 20 named species of mammals and 15 of birds from America; but he does not seem to be credited with "a good Pair of Sharptailed Grouse . . . two [skins] of the Whiskey Jack or Canadian Jay and two of the smaller Woodpeckers" which Derby reported receiving from Edmonton (to Hooker, postmarked "DE2/1844", Kew; English Letters); and about 10 September 1844 Burke wrote Derby to say that he was sending from Jasper "male and female skins of the Mountain Sheep . . . the skin of a female wolf, a wolverine, 29 small Quadrupeds — 80 birds — 2 sp. fish — a few birds eggs & a small box of Butterflies" (Kew; American Letters) of which I could identify only the sheep, the wolf and the wolverine as credited to Burke in the Knowsley Museum catalogue. Nor does it mention a Grizzly Bear which Burke shot.

⁵³ In his letter to Hooker of 28 January 1848 Derby writes "Jennings adds you will probably give a full description of Burke's Aquilegia from the dried Specimens received last year." From this it appears that Burke did not fail to send material of this kind, although Miss McKelvey was informed in 1952 by the then Director of Kew "no list of specimens collected by Burke . . . [has] been found in the Herbarium." McKelvey, *op. cit.* p. 817.

⁵⁴ How far Burke was ever consulted over the choice of this man is a question to which the letters I have seen provide no answer; he certainly cannot have known him personally as Hooker did.

⁵⁵ Hooker to Derby, 21 February, 1848. Liverpool MSS.

⁵⁶ Cf. Hooker to Derby, 28 October, 1847. Liverpool MSS, as cited over footnote 44 above.

⁵⁷ As Hooker had learned from Derby in an undated letter (apparently of the summer of 1847) saying "Jennings has had a letter about ten days since from [Burke] in some alarm about some Money he has in a Bank at Liverpool. Jennings has made enquiry and finds the alarm unfounded and the Money all right . . ." Kew; English Letters, Vol. XXV, folio 134.

⁵⁸ Hooker to Derby, 21 February, 1848. Liverpool MSS.

⁵⁹ On 12 March, 1851, Burke sent some specimens to John E. Gray, of the British Museum, and in a covering letter summarised his career since 1848. He had gone out "to Oregon intending to settle there, but when California gold became the rage, I went to the mines with the crowd." There he "was taken ill of the California fever and as soon as I was sufficiently recovered to travel, I was ordered to leave the country as the only means of regaining my health". When he wrote to Gray, he was in Harrisonville, Missouri (British Museum, South Kensington; Letters; Zoological Department, Vol. II). He does not seem to have been hard up and was not trying to sell his specimens to Gray for money, but asked "should you consider them worthy of anything, I should like a few books." R.K. Beattie, "Joseph Burke up to 1853", *Madrono*, Vol. 13, no. 8, Oct. 1956, pp. 259-261, gives similar information based on one letter from Burke in the New York Botanic Garden Library.

⁶⁰ p. 792.

⁶¹ The term applied to former employees of the Hudson's Bay Company, who, after leaving its service, remained in the west as independent hunters and trappers.