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SIR JAMES DOUGLAS, FUR-TRADER AND GOVERNOR

By W. N. SAGE

One hundred and six years ago, on May 7, 1819, the brig *Matthews*, of which Matthew Steele was master, might have been seen dropping down the Mersey on an ebb tide. Among the passengers on deck was a tall, dark-complected, rather striking looking youth of about sixteen years who was on his way to America to join the service of the North West Company. This was James Douglas, who in after years was destined to become Chief Factor James Douglas of the Hudson's Bay Company, and to retire from the offices of Governor of Vancouver Island and of British Columbia as Sir James Douglas, K.C.B. At that moment, we can imagine, he was thinking more of the home and parents he had just left than he was of the honours which might await him in America. The way to those honours was to be long and tedious.

Most authors have claimed that James Douglas was born either in Demerara, British Guiana, or in the island of Jamaica, in the year 1803. The year is correct, but the place of birth is not. According to information received from the two surviving daughters of Sir James and Lady Douglas, their father was born in Lanarkshire, Scotland, on June 5, 1803. His father was John Douglas, and his mother before her marriage was a Miss Ritchie. Douglas's father owned sugar estates in Demerara, and some of the family seem to have lived in that colony. James Douglas was educated at a school in the town of Lanark, and according to a letter written in 1867, while there boarded with a Mrs. Glendinning. He also received a sound training in the French language, his tutor being an émigré who had fled from his country at the time of the great Revolution.

In 1819, when not quite sixteen, James Douglas entered the service of the North West Company and left England on board the *Matthews*. He reached Quebec on June 25, and proceeded to Montreal. At Lachine he embarked in one of the North West Company's canoes for Fort William, where he arrived on August 6. He remained at the depot of the Nor-Westers until the following summer, accustoming himself in the ways of the fur trade. Since Fort William had recently witnessed stirring scenes when Lord Selkirk and his men had captured the post, we may be sure that young Douglas soon imbibed much of the "Ancient North West Spirit" and learned to regard all Hudson's Bay Company's employees as his natural enemies.

It was the custom of the North West Company to send its young apprentices far into the interior so that they might receive a thorough training in the methods of the trade. James Douglas, accordingly, was ordered to Fort Isle à la Crosse, in what is now northwestern Saskatchewan. He was fortunate in being sent to Isle à la Crosse, which was one of the most important posts on the Churchill or English river and was on the main route to the Athabaska country. Sometime in the summer of 1820 young Douglas started west, apparently with the English River Brigade, and made the long journey by way of lake Winnipeg, Cumberland House, and the Churchill river to Fort Isle à la Crosse. The journey up the Churchill was usually performed in boats built for the purpose, for its rocky bed requires numerous portages, and much of the way the voyageurs had to "track" the boats up the river, a terrible and gruelling proceeding.

Douglas remained at Fort Isle à la Crosse for five years until he was transferred to New Caledonia. We know little of him during this period, except that soon after his arrival he got into a fight with a certain Pat Cunningham of the Hudson's Bay Company. We are not told who was the victor, but the incident shows that young Douglas was a thorough-going Nor-Wester who was ready to uphold the honour of the Canadian company at all costs. But the union of the companies in 1821 ended the faction fights, and Douglas automatically entered the service of the reorganized Hudson's Bay Company, with which he was to remain connected until 1858. From a few scraps of paper which are preserved in the Archives of British Columbia it is evident that James Douglas during this period was attempting to complete his literary education. He was writing little essays, immature and rather puerile it must be confessed, on subjects which interested him. His longest production was on the natives of the territory around Isle à la Crosse, an indication that the boy was training himself in the art of close observation. All through his later life he was noted for his attention to detail, and his punctilious use of language. There is a family tradition that he brought books with him from Scotland and studied them assiduously.

In 1825 Douglas was ordered to New Caledonia, and in April left Isle à la Crosse to go over Methye Portage to Athabaska river and lake Athabaska. He spent some time at Fort Chipewyan, that northern capital of the fur trade, and then in the autumn ascended Peace river, crossed the great barrier of the Rocky mountains, and arrived at Fort McLeod on McLeod lake, New Caledonia, on November 9, 1825. Shortly after that he went over the rough eighty mile portage to Fort St. James on Stuart lake, the centre of the New Caledonian fur trade. Fort St. James was then in charge of Chief Factor William Connolly, who was later to become Douglas's father-in-law.

It has seemed useful to give this detailed statement of the early days of James Douglas in the fur trade, for in the past widely differing accounts have been written of his early career. Some have claimed that he was sent to the Athabaska country, others that Dr. John McLoughlin brought him west when he came overland in 1824 to take charge of the fur trade of the Hudson's Bay Company west of the Rocky mountains. According to this version Douglas came to the Columbia with McLoughlin and was later sent to New Caledonia.

From Douglas's own summary of his early life recorded in his handwriting in an old account book which he kept in New Caledonia, it is evident that he came to McLeod lake from Isle à la Crosse by way of lake Athabaska and Peace river.

From Fort St. James every spring the Brigade went down to the depot of the company on the Columbia river. Fort Vancouver, now Vancouver, Washington, U.S.A., was founded in 1825 as the capital of the Columbia Department, which included all the territory west of the Rocky mountains from California to Alaska. There Chief Factor Dr. John McLoughlin reigned supreme. To Fort Vancouver the Brigade of 1826 made its way. James Douglas accompanied the boats, which were under the charge of Chief Factor William Connolly. The Brigade left Fort St. James on May 5, and travelled by way of Stuart river and the Nechako river to Fort George, situated at the confluence of the Nechako and Fraser rivers, and then down the Fraser to Alexandria. At Fort Alexandria the boats were exchanged for horses and the Brigade proceeded overland to Kamloops and on, skirting lake Okanogan, to Fort Okanogan at the junction of the Okanogan and Columbia rivers. At Fort Okanogan, where the travellers found John Work and his men waiting for them, the horses were turned loose to graze, and the rest of the journey to Fort Vancouver was by boat.

The New Caledonia Brigade remained three weeks at Fort Vancouver and then started once more for the interior on July 4, 1826. On the return journey Douglas left the boats at Fort Walla Walla and proceeded with a party headed by John Work overland up the Snake river. The object of this mission was to procure horses for the pack trains. The Indians parted with seventy-nine animals, but the traders' supply of blankets and beads ran out and the natives were not attracted by blue cloth. Douglas and his men left Work and his party at Spokane House and proceeded overland to Fort Okanogan, where Connolly was waiting for them. From Fort Okanogan the pack trains went north to Kamloops and to Alexandria. The Brigade was back again at Fort St. James sometime in September.

Douglas seems to have found varied employment at Fort St. James. During the winter of 1827-28 he was engaged in superintending the new fishery at Yohogh or Petit Lac, a short distance from the fort. Whitefish formed a staple part of the diet of the inhabitants of Fort St. James, as it had also at Fort Isle à la Crosse, and an adequate supply was essential. Douglas seems to have done some exploring, but most of his time was spent at or near the fort. Romance was now entering his life, for he wooed and won Amelia Connolly, the Chief Factor's daughter. They were married, apparently according to the ceremony known as the "custom of the country," on April 27, 1828. During the same year two other important events took place. In August Douglas was nearly killed during a tumult with the Indians, but was rescued by his wife and by the wife of the interpreter at the fort. Father Morice is of the opinion that it was the old Indian chief 'Kwah who was really responsible for saving Douglas's life on this occasion, but so many versions of the affair exist that it is difficult to ascertain the facts. Certain it is that Douglas did not come well out of the affray, for which he must be held the most to blame. But his prestige among the Indians was somewhat restored by the arrival in September of Governor George Simpson of the Hudson's Bay Company, who was on his second voyage from Hudson bay to the Columbia. Connolly was away with the Brigade and it fell to the lot of Douglas to welcome Governor Simpson. It was a most imposing occasion, the full force of which was not lost upon the rather hostile natives. Father Morice claims that it was on account of his difficulties with the Indians that Douglas was transferred to the Columbia in 1830. There were other causes, chief among which is to be reckoned the retirement of Edward Ermäntinger from his position of trust at Fort Vancouver.

From 1830 to 1849 James Douglas was at Fort Vancouver, where McLoughlin had now started a large farm, including an orchard of various fruits. He went there a clerk and left as Chief Factor in charge of the fur trade west of the mountains. Fort Vancouver, therefore, played a great part in the development of the future Governor of Vancouver Island and British Columbia. Douglas was now brought into close personal touch with Dr. John McLoughlin, that Canadian of Scottish-Irish extraction, who ruled the Columbia Department as a benevolent despot from 1824 to 1846. McLoughlin, who is revered as the "Father of Oregon," was a remarkable man. His empire was the Columbia Department, which as a result of the treaty of 1818, was then held jointly by Great Britain and the United States. McLoughlin upheld British interests, but was scrupulously fair to the Americans. He was a keen judge of men, and from the first seems to have recognized Douglas's abilities. McLoughlin and Douglas were opposites, the Old Doctor being frank and open, whereas Douglas was stiff and formal, but both were shrewd business men. McLoughlin came to depend on Douglas more and more and his confidence was not misplaced.

On at least three occasions Douglas accompanied the annual Express which left Fort Vancouver in March and usually reached York Factory in June. This Express carried out the official books and papers from Fort Vancouver and brought back letters and orders from the Council of the Northern Department of Rupert's Land, which met annually to settle the affairs of the fur trade. Douglas was accountant at Fort Vancouver and so was the logical man to despatch "with the books." It was a long and hazardous journey up the Columbia, across the Athabaska pass, down the Athabaska, overland to Edmonton, down the Saskatchewan to lake Winnipeg and thence by way of Norway House and Oxford House, down Hayes river, to York Factory. The voyage to the Factory and back usually occupied from March to November.

Douglas's journal for his trip with the 1835 Express is in the Archives of British Columbia. It is written in pencil and is sometimes illegible, but it gives a detailed account of his movements. On this occasion he did not go direct to York Factory. He had been invited to attend the Council of the Northern Department of Rupert's Land which that year was meeting at Fort Garry in the Red River Settlement. Douglas was now at the age of thirty-two to receive his commission as Chief Trader. There were then two classes of commissioned officers in the Hudson's Bay Company's service, the Chief Traders and the Chief Factors. Both classes were entitled to a share or shares in the profits of the company. A Chief Trader held one eighty-fifth share, a Chief Factor two eighty-fifth shares. The amounts varied from year to year, according to the price of beaver, but in average years a Chief Trader obtained from £200 to £300. Douglas was now to be admitted to the lower rank of the aristocracy of the fur trade. He left the Express at Carleton House on the Saskatchewan and went overland with a party by way of Fort Pelly to Fort Garry, or the "Stone Fort" as it was termed by the fur traders. On June 3, 1835, James Douglas received his Chief Trader's commission.

After a short sojourn at Fort Garry, during which he attended the Council, Douglas made his way across lake Winnipeg to Norway House and thence to York Factory. In July he returned with the Express which arrived at Fort Vancouver early in November. He had covered a distance of about six thousand miles, in boats, canoes, on horseback, and even on snow shoes, when crossing the Rocky mountains. But he probably thought little of it. It was all part of the fur trader's life.

For five years Douglas remained a Chief Trader, his headquarters being, as before, Fort Vancouver. In 1839 Dr. McLoughlin went to England and Douglas was left in charge of the depot. He was also responsible for the shipping on the Pacific coast, including oversight over the ss. *Beaver*, the first steamship on the north Pacific. This well-known vessel was built in England, came out

to the Columbia in that year as a sailing ship, was converted into a steamship, and began her long career up and down the coast in 1836. In 1888 the old *Beaver*, long out of the Hudson's Bay Company's service, was wrecked off Prospect Point, Stanley Park, Vancouver, B.C. A tablet to her memory was unveiled on May 7, 1925, by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada.

The *Beaver* carried James Douglas on many important occasions. In 1840 he journeyed on her to Sitka, Alaska, on a mission to confer with Governor Etholine of the Russian American Company concerning the cession to the Hudson's Bay Company of the fur trade on the Alaskan coast. She conveyed Governor Simpson, with Douglas as a member of his party to Sitka and back in 1841. It was from the *Beaver* that Douglas landed when he founded the new depot of the company on Vancouver Island, Fort Victoria, in 1843. In 1858 when Douglas was inaugurated as Governor of Vancouver Island at Fort Langley, the *Beaver* was present to fire a salute.

James Douglas became a Chief Factor in 1840 and took his place among the lords of the fur trade. By this time the Oregon Question was looming large and the Hudson's Bay Company was aware that a settlement of the boundary would, in all probability, occur, which would leave the Columbia river in American hands. In 1842 Douglas was commissioned to seek a suitable site for a new depot on the southern coast of Vancouver island. He chose a spot bearing the native name of Camosun, or as he termed it, "Camosack." There, in 1843, Fort Victoria was built. In the same year the Americans on the Columbia set up a Provisional Government, "until such time as the United States of America extend their jurisdiction over us." Dr. McLoughlin, who was on bad terms with Sir George Simpson, the Governor-in-Chief of the company, tendered his resignation to take effect in 1846. In the same year the Oregon Treaty was signed and the boundary settled. James Douglas and Peter Skene Ogden took charge of the Columbia Department. In 1849 the depot of the Hudson's Bay Company was moved to Fort Victoria.

In that year the company obtained a Royal Charter of Grant for Vancouver Island, on condition that it brought out colonists. A Royal Governor, Richard Blanshard, an estimable English barrister, was sent out to administer the affairs of the infant colony. When he arrived in March, 1850, he found that the colony existed in name only that and the real ruler of Vancouver Island was James Douglas. In 1851 after much controversy Blanshard retired, with only his dignity as recompense, to England and James Douglas was appointed Governor.

The new colony did not progress, for it was not intended to do so. There was only one genuine colonist and he soon left in disgust. The price charged for land was one pound per acre at a time when land was free in Oregon. Coal was discovered and important mines were opened at Nanaimo. Douglas governed the colony with the assistance of a small nominated Council, made up of men who either were, or had been, connected with the Hudson's Bay Company. In 1856, at the command of the British Colonial Office, a House of Assembly was inaugurated. These seven elected members, headed by the Honourable Dr. John Sebastian Helmcken, son-in-law of James Douglas, composed the first representative body established in Canada west of the Great Lakes. The first Chief Justice of Vancouver Island was the Honourable David Cameron, brother-in-law of Governor Douglas. This period of the history of Vancouver Island has been well termed the rule of the "Family-Company-Compact."

But in 1858 gold was discovered in paying quantities in Fraser river, and the whole situation changed immediately. There had already been gold discoveries in the Queen Charlotte islands, but they had not been more than a "flash in the pan." Now a gold rush started in earnest. Within a few months 30,000 miners had arrived. Although, technically, Douglas's commission as

Governor of Vancouver Island did not extend to the mainland, as Chief Factor he had control of the fur trade west of the Rocky mountains. But Douglas was not ready to let technicalities interfere with the maintenance of law and order in the gold camps and he immediately took steps to control the situation. The British Government acted quickly and on August 2, 1858, the gold colony of British Columbia was formed by Act of the Imperial Parliament. Douglas was offered the governorship on condition that he relinquish all connections with the Hudson's Bay Company and its adjunct the Puget Sound Agricultural Company. He accepted the conditions and on November 19, 1858, was sworn in at Fort Langley, British Columbia.

From 1858 to 1864 James Douglas ruled the two colonies. In British Columbia he was practically a despot. There was no Assembly and no Legislative Council until the year he retired. From Victoria and elsewhere, Douglas issued "Proclamations having the force of Law," by which the mainland colony was governed. Of course, Douglas was accountable for his actions to the British Colonial Office, but he was, in the main, granted a free hand. The chief stipulation that the Secretaries of State for the Colonies made was that the new colony was to be self-supporting and was not to be heavily subsidized from the British Exchequer. A detachment of Royal Engineers under Colonel Moody was sent out by Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton, then Secretary of State for the Colonies. Moody selected a wonderful site for the capital at New Westminster, where amidst the stumps a town steadily took form. The Governor and most of the officials of British Columbia resided in Victoria, Vancouver Island, until complaints from the mainland colony caused the British authorities to order Douglas to send the "truant officials" to New Westminster. Even then some of them remained in Victoria to be near the Governor.

Vancouver Island progressed slowly but steadily during the period of joint rule. Victoria profited much from the mining, especially after the discovery of the Cariboo gold fields in the early 1860's. There was an ever growing demand for responsible government, but on the whole the people were satisfied with the administration of Governor Douglas. Douglas's chief opponent was the rather erratic but able Amor De Cosmos, who had been born as William Alexander Smith at Windsor, Nova Scotia. On the mainland the demand for representative government rose higher and higher, headed by the Honourable John Robson, then editor of the New Westminster *British Columbian*. A Legislative Council, two-thirds appointed, one-third elected, was finally set up in 1864.

Douglas was noted for his road building. It was essential that proper means of communication be opened from the seacoast to the interior. After the rich mines of the Cariboo were discovered this necessity was greater than ever. Douglas tackled his problem bravely and with the assistance of the Royal Engineers and private contractors planned and constructed the great Cariboo Wagon Road from Yale on Fraser river to Barkerville, the capital of Cariboo. It was a grand achievement. An alternative route by way of Harrison lake to Lillooet on Fraser river, the so-called Douglas-Lillooet route, was already in existence, and the two roads met at Clinton. Douglas even planned a road to connect British Columbia with the Red River Settlement. He took up the matter with the British Government in 1863, but nothing came of it.

In 1864 Douglas retired from both governorships and went on a long planned trip to Europe. He returned in 1865 and settled down quietly in Victoria, where he lived until his death in 1877.

The career of James Douglas was in its way rather remarkable. He was a fur trader who through unforeseen circumstances became a Colonial Governor. But he did not resemble in his training the great "proconsuls," the British Colonial Governors, who like Sir George Grey spent their lives in administering the affairs of one colony after another. When he became Governor Douglas knew little about Colonial administration. But he knew the country and

understood the natives. He was very successful in his handling of the miners, who early learned to respect him. In the service of the Hudson's Bay Company James Douglas had received a training which enabled him to grapple with the difficult situation he faced in 1858. He had learned, as a youth, to obey. In one of his letters he states that "Obedience is the very first and most important of our duties, like the A. B. C. in literature the groundwork of all our acquisitions and in fact the great principle which all persons entering the service should be taught to revere." As a result, later in life, he was able to command and to enforce obedience. Only once in his career as Governor did James Douglas play any part in international politics. This was in connection with the San Juan dispute, and then, on the whole, he kept his head under very trying circumstances. But he had not a free hand, especially after the arrival of Admiral Baynes, the commander of the British Pacific Fleet.

But James Douglas was by nature an autocrat. He did not approve of democracy, and could never have accepted the role of a limited monarch. He belongs to the school of "Old Colonial Governors." He could not have held office with any degree of comfort after the commencement of responsible government.

None the less Governor Douglas did much for British Columbia. He guided the colonies through their critical formative period and bridged the gap between the fur trade and responsible government. The following tribute taken from the *Victoria British Colonist* for August 4, 1877, two days after his death shows that the people of British Columbia appreciated what he had done for them:—

"No history of the Province can be written without Sir James Douglas forming the central figure around which will cluster the stirring events that have marked the advance of the Province from a fur-hunting preserve for nomadic tribes to a progressive country of civilized beings, under the protection of the British flag and enjoying a stable and settled form of Government. 'There were giants in those days'—the days when a country had to be created out of crude materials. Other, and honourable names, are associated with the early history of the Province and enrolled on the scroll of fame; but high above them all, shining with a lustre that time can never dim, is recorded the name of James Douglas."