William Fraser Tolmie: Natural Scientist and Patriot

A Review Article

> How far that little candle throws his beams!
> So shines a good deed in a naughty world.
>
> (*The Merchant of Venice*)

Approaching Cape Horn on December 28, 1832, William Fraser Tolmie (1812-1886), a young Scottish physician bound for the Columbia River in the Oregon country in the service of the Hudson's Bay Company on board their barque *Ganymede*, crossed in the South Atlantic the latitude of 54° 40″. The numbers were then meaningless to him, but some fourteen years later, referring to north latitude, the slogan "Fifty-four forty or fight" eventually produced a second dramatic change in his life, bringing him in 1859 to Vancouver Island, where he became one of the fathers of Canada's Pacific province and one of the prime advocates of its entrance into and rights within Confederation. This later important part of his life does not fall within the limits of his journals,[1] which include with gaps the years 1830-43, and although the editor(s) (unnamed) adds supplementary appendixes, the book contains next to nothing to indicate the real significance of Tolmie as a proponent of British Columbia independence from both the United States and Britain and as a builder of Canadian unity. For all this editorial obtuseness, the publication of Tolmie's journals can help in our understanding of how the Hudson's Bay Company threw away the richer half of the Oregon to the United States, as well as Tolmie's work as a trader, doctor, scientist, agriculturalist, and ethnologist.

The story of William Fraser Tolmie is something of a reverse Ancient Mariner. Rounding the Horn, he shot or hooked numerous albatrosses

[1] *The Journals of William Fraser Tolmie Physician and Fur Trader*, Vancouver, Canada, Mitchell Press, 1963.

and other creatures, dissecting, preserving, and describing them scientifically. He felt no guilt for this activity and no curse was put upon him. Neither did he return to his own country, except for two brief visits, and he felt no compulsion to tell his story. Instead, he went on to find a fruitful life in a new country, to become a builder of its economy and a politician of its emancipation.

As a naturalist Tolmie described and collected specimens of both animal and plant life, and sent examples to Great Britain, including some to the famous naturalist Sir William Hooker at Kew Gardens. Among the plants named for him are *Tolmiea Menziesii*, *Saxifraga Tolmiei*, and *Carex Tolmiei*. In 1833 he made an exploration into the Mount Rainier area, chiefly because of his interest in botany, climbing the peak now known as Mount Tolmie, and observed for the first time a living glacier within the United States (although it was then more properly to be considered part of Canada). Tolmie thus shared in the work of a number of world-travelling scientists of the time, among them David Douglas for whom the Douglas Fir is named, and whose stay in the Northwest Pacific coast overlapped the years of Tolmie's journal. (Incidentally, although he is referred to at least twice in Tolmie's journal, his name is not mentioned in the index of the published volume. Neither is William Hooker listed, although he is referred to by Tolmie several times.)

The years of Tolmie's journal include those of perhaps the greatest journey of modern natural history, Darwin's voyage in the Beagle (1831-36). Since in his youth Tolmie was an extreme conservative in politics and theology, his work in natural history was inhibited theoretically and his journal lacks the intellectual excitement of Darwin's journal, which trembled on but did not quite reach the great scientific generalizations of his maturity. It would be worth knowing whether Tolmie in his later years, when he became a liberal in theology and a radical in politics, studied Darwin for what, if any, his reactions were to Darwin's theories — theories which may well have had meaning in the context of Tolmie's work in stock-breeding.

Tolmie's intellectual development follows an interesting if laboured and tortuous course. He was a solemn man who could turn almost anything into hard work for his conscience. When he made his voyage out, and in his years in the fur trade, he read extensively in theology, literature, navigation, mathematics, and natural science, apparently without being aware of the contradictions between orthodox theology and science or within the natural science of his time. Later, after a visit to Europe in 1841-42 he became a convert not only to phrenology, but also, and more

important, to liberalism in theology, something of a Universalist, Pantheist or Unitarian. He also became an Owenite and a radical in politics. (Dr. John McLoughlin, Chief Factor for the Columbia, was with Tolmie in Paris in 1842 and introduced his subordinate to Louis Joseph Papineau, the leader in Lower Canada of the 1837 Rebellion. Tolmie comments favourably on Papineau's phrenology.) The significance of Tolmie's radicalization for his role in helping keep British Columbia out of the United States and bringing it into Canada is completely missed by the editor(s) of the journals.

Tolmie's first years with the Hudson's Bay Company were those of a fur trader, combined, as with Dr. John McLoughlin, with incidental medical practice. He observed the life of Fort Vancouver on the Columbia, Nisqually on Puget Sound, Fort McLoughlin (now Bella Bella) on Milbank Sound, and Fort Simpson on the Nass. In his *Journals* Tolmie does not show the interest he later developed in politics. He mentions however the expeditions the H.B.C. sent to the Snake River Country, where they deliberately trapped the beaver to extinction, hoping thereby to produce a desert for the Americans in the fur trade and keep them out of the Oregon country. The policy proved a costly delusion for Canada, for the real need was to settle the Oregon agriculturally. The Hudson's Bay Company succeeded only in holding back the development of the area until American settlers were ready to flood in, backed by an aggressive government in Washington. One of the few fur traders to see the future accurately was Tolmie's immediate superior, McLoughlin. Tolmie describes a ride in 1833 on the plains around Fort Vancouver with the doctor:

> The Dr unfolded . . . his views regarding the breeding of cattle here. He thinks that when the trade in furs is knocked up which at no very distant day must happen, the servants of Coy. may turn their attention to the rearing of cattle for the sake of hides & tallow, in which he says business could be carried on to a far greater amount, than that of the furs collected west of the Rocky Mountains. Furs are already becoming scarce & the present supply is obtained by an almost exterminating system of hunting. In 1792 the N.W. Coy. sent more furs from a comparatively small space of country than is now sent to Britain from all the HBC's country & the Government post in Canada. [178-9]

In the summer of 1834, Tolmie was with Peter Skene Ogden in an attempt to establish a fur trading post at the mouth of the Stikine, something over a hundred miles north of the present city of Prince Rupert. They withdrew under threats of force from the nearby Russian trading

post. Against great difficulties and with little support from Simpson or the British government, McLoughlin managed to keep the northern ports open until 1840, when Simpson abruptly closed them down. Between HBC fur-trade tunnel vision and British government pusilanimity, the basis was laid for the later geographical obscenity, the Alaskan Panhandle.

After a stint of a couple of years in two of the northern posts, Fort Simpson and Fort McLoughlin, even the self-critical Tolmie found himself in a typical fur-trader's syndrome, blaming the Indians for the tedium and pettiness of his own struggle for profits — "My daily occupation now is a tedious higgling with greedy savages about the price of beaver &c. . . ." [309] It is clear, however, that Tolmie knew the real source of his weariness. He was at this point thinking of how he could get out of the Hudson's Bay Company and the fur-trade country. Fortunately, he was recalled to Fort Vancouver and made responsible for developing agriculture. He was sent to Nisqually, a company farm, and eventually was put in charge of a subsidiary of the H.B.C., the Puget Sound Agricultural Company. Here he contributed greatly to the foundation of farming in an area hitherto dominated by the stagnating fur trade. Had the views of McLoughlin, lion-hearted and generous, on the importance of bringing in British and Canadian settlers prevailed, Canada might today have included nearly all of Oregon. As it turned out, for all the malarkey that the 300th anniversary of the H.B.C. will undoubtedly produce, its policy left the fertile lands of the Oregon an open invitation to land-hungry American farmers. In the mean last years of the Company's monopoly, acts and policies of men like McLoughlin and Tolmie shine out "like good deeds in a naughty world."

Indeed, their genuine Canadianism throws its light all the way to the North Pole through the succession of dreary betrayals of the Canadian boundary by the British government. The western boundary by right of exploration, treaty, and occupation should run on an average about two hundred miles south of where it is, roughly on a line from the mouth of the Columbia to the head of the Mississippi to the Lake of the Woods to the western extremity of Lake Superior. "The undefended frontier" is all too apt a phrase for the Canadian-American boundary, but not in the Pollyanna sense of peace-arch ceremonials celebrated several degrees north of their just location. Canada's borders were as aggressively violated by the United States as those of Mexico. The difference is that the Mexicans fought, even though partially defeated. Perhaps it is no time to raise the cry of "Canada Irredenta," since most of the territory seized is

now occupied by Americans. Still, there are some areas in the United States which are basically Canadian in population and should be returned to Canada. These include Point Roberts, parts of the Red River Valley, and parts of northern Maine. More important is the Alaska Panhandle, still largely undeveloped and an unmitigated blight on the development of the Canadian North. Maybe the Americans could be allowed to keep such developed centres as Ketchikan and Juneau as free ports, but the natural sovereignty of the area should be returned to Canada. If Premier Bennett could restore the Panhandle to B.C., he might find the Yukon more eager to be added to his empire of valleys open to American flooding. Trudeau could help him and both might agree to remember the Oregon and keep Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic.

The published Tolmie journals omit, among other things, passages recording the daily weather and some descriptions of animals and plants. On the grounds of interest to the general reader this may be justified, although this material should be made available to the scientific world by some such form of publication as microfiche. The weather records, for example, could be very useful to meteorologists studying the trends and cycles of the Canadian climate. Less excusable is the choice of supplementary material. Tolmie's seventh son, S. F. Tolmie, a veterinary surgeon, who became a Conservative premier of B.C. (1928-33) was, for all his success, a stodgy character who inherited his father's industry without his imagination and vision. His memoir dominates the appendixes, and neither it nor any of the accompanying pieces give anything more than a concealed hint of Tolmie's eventual opposition to the international financial clique who ousted the original owners of the Hudson's Bay Company, victimising him and the other Canadian factors of the Company. Neither does the supplementary material give any indication of Tolmie's eventual and determined association with Canadians like Amor de Cosmos in their fight to have the C.P.R. live up to its promises to B.C. Some mention is made of Tolmie's work for universal free education in the province. But nothing is said about his support for female suffrage or his opposition to the United States annexationist movement in B.C.

Some claims might be put in for a sense of humour in editorial work. Because of his opposition to the imperial die-hards, Tolmie found it hard to win recognition for his outstanding work in cattle-breeding. Surely among the supplementary documents there could have been included some of the letters in the Victorian *Colonist* which tell how cattle-show judges opposed to Tolmie's politics consistently gave the prizes due him

to politically tame farmers. As far as supplementary documents are concerned the *Journals* indicate how many letters and reports Tolmie wrote. Assembling the sources for a Tolmie biography would in itself be a worthwhile basis for a number of theses — in political history or the history of science or agriculture.

A significant contribution of Tolmie's later years was his collaboration with George Dawson in compiling a comparative vocabulary of the B.C. Indian tribes. This work was not published until three years after his death, but the basis of it was laid in his years as a fur-trader in the part of his life described in the published journal.

Considering the interest of Tolmie's journals, it is sad to have to say that the publication is sloppy. Most of what is good about it is probably due to the staff of the B.C. Provincial Archives in Victoria.

Surely the Mitchell Press should feel responsible for finding editors who know their subject, typesetters who can set type, and proof-readers who can read proof. It is interesting to speculate on which is responsible for calling a poet a "pet" on page 273. But there is no doubt that Howard T. Mitchell is pleased enough with himself to take credit for the biographical introduction which contains the following gem:

> [The servants of the H.B.C.] might be Indians and French-speaking Métis or halfbreeds who paddled the canoes, packed over the portages, guided exploration, loaded and goaded the packhorses and rapidly wore themselves out in strangely resigned and cheerful service to the great fur trading company. In the Company's service were the wintering partners and their traders and clerks . . . [5]

What is there to say about a writer in Canada in the second half of the twentieth century who uses the pejorative term "halfbreed"? Or of the pretension to historical knowledge which refers to factors of the H.B.C. as "wintering partners"? (Even if the term is admissible for the H.B.C., it should include, not exclude traders.) And then, what of the objectivity which speaks of "the strangely resigned and cheerful service" of the voyageurs, when the description refers to a book in which a very gentlemanly overseer tells at least twice of beating his subordinates for insubordination?

The beginning of the publication of books in Western Canada is in itself a hopeful breach in the dependence of the West on eastern and foreign publishers. However, if such ventures are to succeed, they need to be done professionally, not by editors unready to master the background and full significance of their subject. My criticisms are made in the hope

that local publishers will make it their practice to produce books in a manner worthy of our history and tradition, books which will command respect anywhere among discriminating readers. As for Tolmie's *Journals*, they deserve to be re-issued, the second time with introductory and supplementary material which will make clear the total and unique quality of their author.

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