



Letitia Hargrave. Photos from daguerreotypes owned by Mrs. Schofield.

Letters from Letitia Hargrave

A. A. W. Ramsay

SIMON McTavish, the head of the North West Company, was a cadet of the house of McTavish of Dunardry, an ancient Argyllshire family. When he made a success in life, he wrote and loyally offered his services to his chief. This chief, Dugald McTavish, sheriff of Campbelltown, was an able lawyer, who had never ceased to pine for the lands of Dunardry, lost by his father to greedy creditors. His family pride was inordinate: Professor Aytoun, who was his close friend, teased him about it and nicknamed him "Mic-Mac-Methuselah," making him the hero of his popular song.

"Phairshon swore a feud
Wid ta Clan McTaavish."

The sheriff had a large family, so large that it is said he did not know all its members by sight, and when he saw his youngest son playing about the stables, asked who that little boy was! His younger brother, John George McTavish, was given a position with the North West Company in 1798, and after union with the Hudson's Bay Company was made Chief Factor at York Factory. Two of the sheriff's sons, Willie and Dugald, entered the service of the

Company in 1833, the former going to Norway House, and the latter to Moose Factory. Willie was moved to York Factory in 1837, and there he met Chief Trader James Hargrave.

When Hargrave went home on furlough in 1838, he bore a letter of introduction to the old sheriff, and meeting his daughter, Letitia, then aged 25, he fell in love with her. He went back to York Factory alone, but next year returned to Scotland, married Letitia in January, 1840, and later that year they sailed together for Hudson Bay.

Her letters to her family at home have been preserved, and constitute a fascinating record of a time when few white women had ventured to the far north where she made her home. She was a remarkable woman, sensitive, witty, and intelligent, but with a keen eye and a sharp tongue, by no means either tender or tolerant.

Her first letters, written from London before she sailed for Canada, are interesting for their references to Governor Sir George Simpson (then Mr. Simpson), at whose house she was frequently a guest. Her picture of the great man's household is by no means flattering: he was mean about money, and his wife was afraid of him.

"I also had a talk with old Mrs. Simpson [her mother]. I thought all along that the Governor's lady had a melancholy look, and the old lady fairly let out that the said Governor is very fractious. We began by her speaking of her love for gardening and how she wished she had a little more money to beautify her little shrubbery, that for 34 years she had got all that her husband had got to give, and he never would look at a single account of her outlay nor ever been other than satisfied with her efforts to economize, while Frances never dared miss sixpence or there was a rumpus. She must not attempt to advise in any one way or speak in support of what he does not think fit to do or hear. I observed all this but thought it was simplicity. For one thing she sat with the tea-tray on Sunday evening, she asked if she should ring and have it taken away. Although he was done he said nothing, and there it remained for long, and two or three matters of the same kind. If she speaks at all in opposition to him, he bids her hold her tongue as she knows nothing about it. Her mother said she told her if she would exert herself and have a little mind of her own the Governor would be a better husband and she a much more useful wife. But she says she would rather submit than run the risk of an argument. I don't mean that he is bad or cross to her, but he treats her and the little girl exactly alike. He says it is the arbitrary habits he acquired in the North. Mrs. George told Hargrave (but it was strictly confidential and must not be known) that he contemplates leaving Britain next spring, crossing the Rocky Mountains, pressing up to the Russian Settlement, and so home by Siberia, making the circuit of the globe. Mr. H. did not think her very wrong for telling her husband's secret plans, so I suppose there is not more harm in my telling you tho' it is not very safe as his business is of a nature requiring secrecy. His eyes don't look bad but when he signs his name he has to turn them away from the paper." (14th May, 1840.)

Mrs. Simpson treated Letitia with great kindness. The girl was ill, and was already expecting her first child, and she appears to have gone to the Governor's lady for advice and assistance in most of her difficulties.

"Mrs. Simpson is kinder than ever. She gave me a sketch of a visit she paid at Lord Selkirk's. The young ladies keep her in misery, they look so contemptuously at her and the Lord and the Dowager's kindness is quite lost on her in consequence. . . She refused to go to the Selkirk's as she had no decent shawl, so the Governor presented her with one, 3 pounds, so she was astonished, having hard work to get gowns from him. She asks for every article, and thought 8/6 a heavy sum for wee Fanny's bonnet but could get none cheaper." (25th May, 1840.)

On another occasion "She (Mrs. Simpson) told me she cannot get her husband to say Grace, and that having a party with the Hamiltons and Lauries she told him, as she had been disappointed in getting a clergyman, that the Hamiltons etc., were people who would be miserable at getting no Grace. He promised if he could remember one. So she desired her brother-in-law, who sat next him, to remind him. He did so and the Governor in despair exclaimed "Lord have mercy on what is now before us," and looked quite satisfied, while she was in misery and did not recover self-possession all night after." (3rd June, 1840.)

The gentlemen of the Hudson's Bay Company had in many instances "married" Indian women, and many of them (including Letitia's uncle, John George McTavish) had numerous half-breed children. It is clear from Letitia's letters that the Governor himself was no exception to this rule.

"I wish you had heard Mrs. Simpson's account of Mrs. John George McTavish's introduction to her eldest daughter, a girl of 13. [John George McTavish had recently married an English lady.] As soon as they arrived at Montreal Uncle told her. Mrs. S. says she had evidently suffered but said nothing till one day after dinner at Lachine with all the gentlemen sitting

James Hargrave of York Factory.



THE BEAVER, June 1940

and Mrs. Simpson and herself the only ladies . . . Taylor . . . threw open the door with a flourish and announced "Miss McTavish." Uncle rose and took her up to his wife, who got stupid but shook hands with the Miss, who was very pretty and mighty impudent. Her father then proceeded to caress and make much of her. Mrs. M. got white and red and then rose and left the room, all the party looking very uncomfortable except Uncle and the girl. Mrs. S. followed and found her in a violent fit of crying. . . . When they parted at Moose Mrs. M. had no idea she was to have at least 2 of a different family. . . . [The mother] was a complete savage with a coarse blue sort of woollen gown without shape and a blanket fastened round her neck. It was she who lost all her family and her husband when the Governor's son-in-law upset the canoe. Mrs. Simpson asked Hargrave the particulars of that story while her husband was present. He looked very melancholy. She has evidently no idea that she has more encumbrances than Mrs. McTavish altho' she did say she was always terrified to look about her in case of seeing something disagreeable."

After some weeks in London, Letitia and her husband sailed for the North. The voyage out lasted for four weeks, and was sufficiently unpleasant. The four ladies on board slept in bunks which opened directly on the cabin where the officers' mess was held. They were shut off by sliding doors. "I never shut my door," Letitia remarked, "but draw the little white curtain and take things coolly. The other ladies will be suffocated as they are rather fastidious." Further north, the cold became intense; one could not sleep for the noise of the ice creaking and grumbling outside. There was a cargo of gunpowder on board, and one of the ladies had a morbid terror of its exploding, and threatened hysterics at the suggestion of lighting a fire. So they sat shivering in fur cloaks and hoods. The floor was washed out twice a week, and as it was too cold ever to dry properly, Letitia's feet became a mass of raw chilblains. She was sick all the way, and when they arrived had to be lifted into the boat to go ashore, when, "My first exploit was to turn my back on the company and cry myself sick."

Thereafter she was only able to write to her family once or twice in a year. The only direct contact with home was by means of the ship which came in August, but occasionally it was possible to send a letter by dog-teams which set off overland to Canada. It was warm enough, however, in the factory, where immense stoves kept the temperature above seventy degrees; and food too was plentiful. A meal served for the four ladies only, consisted of roast venison, three geese, four ducks, six plovers, a large ham, potatoes, and boiled lettuce. Flour, peas, oatmeal, pork, and game were supplied by the Company, but tea, sugar, and butter had to be bought by the employees out of their wages. The want of green food was the most serious trouble. Letitia grew cress in boxes in the house, and sowed some mignonette seed, but only a fine crop of chickweed came up. "It flowered and looked green, and that in itself was something," wrote the girl from the green glens of Argyll.

The second and concluding instalment of these letters will be published in the September issue of The Beaver. It concerns life at York Factory, comments on the missionaries there, and the news of the strange death of Thomas Simpson.