

# Letters from

# Letitia Hargrave

by A. A. W. Ramsay



York Factory, Hudson Bay, where Mrs. Hargrave wrote her letters. From a sketch made in 1853.

This is the second and last instalment of Mrs. James Hargrave's letters from York Factory in 1840-43.

THERE was none of the excitement at York Factory that one associates with the life of a pioneer. Letitia's brother Willie worked seventeen hours a day at his desk, and his only amusement was an occasional expedition to trap foxes, the skins of which he sold to the Company, giving all the profits he made in charity to the poorer Indians. James Hargrave was kept equally hard at it and, as the factory was understaffed, often for weeks on end Letitia never saw her husband except in bed. She herself had no employment whatever except making clothes for herself and her family. The cooking, even the preparation of her baby's food, she left entirely to the servants.

This baby, Joseph James, was the first white baby born at York, and the whole native population of the district came to see him. "Very fat! Very white!" the squaws exclaimed, bending over the cradle. "I suppose," said an old Indian fisherman wistfully to the nurse, "I suppose us too ugly kiss him?" Margaret answered, "Oh no," and Joseph himself was quite willing to be handed about among the braves, though he howled at the old black squaws. "They always wish to see Baby. . . . They call him *Wastrappe* (Light-Eye)."

Generally speaking, Letitia seems to have preferred the Indians to those of her own race who were at York. She rarely has a kind word to say of the whites, certainly not of the women. The only other "lady" in the factory itself was Mrs. Gladman, wife of the chief factor, and she was a half-breed, who had married a white trader at the age of twelve years and been deserted by him. Gladman then took her, and adopted her whole family of two girls and a boy. Letitia speaks appreciatively of her kindness when Joseph was born, but was not sorry when she left the station.

The ladies who occasionally visited the factory were for the most part missionaries' wives and daughters, and she did not like them any better. Mrs. Evans, wife of the Methodist missionary, she says, was sly and given to back-biting, and had the impertinence to sign herself in a letter, "Your affectionate friend." The Highland Chief's daughter made a point of replying, "Dear Madam." Then there was an elegant young person who sang to the guitar, but had never learned that the instrument required to be tuned occasionally. And there was Mrs. Wills, who "never read the Old Testament because it was really a bad book. There are such disagreeable things that she used to be ashamed in church to hear the sad stories the minister read."

The missionaries themselves Letitia did not like any better, and rarely had a good word for their activities. Attempts to convert the Indians she considered useless, at least the methods and style of teaching adopted. "It stands to reason that a set of perfect [*i.e.* absolute] animals can get no good by hearing of mysterious miracles, and I think that wretches who don't know what it is to have a full meal six times in a year are not likely to have a keen sense of the goodness of God. The very aspect of the country would in some degree chill the feelings of anyone of sound mind."

As for the mission school, her comments are biting. "Children who have had duck geese and venison three times a day" were given "breakfasts of milk and water with dry bread," and their health also suffered from "severe floggings, and the total want of the following meal after any fault. The boys and girls are constantly fainting, but McCallum wont change his system. Many girls have got ill, and as he makes them strip off their Indian clothing and adopt English fashions it is not

surprising. They must have a certain walk every day, plunging through the freezing snow. They wear Indian shoes, but without the cloth stockings or leggins over them the snow gets in, and I need not say that the feelings one undergoes are not comfortable. Then if the mothers are not legally married they are not allowed to see their children. This may be all very right but it is fearfully cruel to the poor unfortunate mother who did not know that there was any distinction and it is only within the last few years that anyone was so married."

She then instanced the case of two half-breed girls at the school, who were "of course prohibited from having any intercourse with their mother, who is in a miserable state of destitution. The poor creature sits in some concealment at McCallum's with deer's head or some such Indian delicacy she has cooked for her daughters and they slip out and see her, as she is almost naked they steal some of their own clothes and give them to her. This is a fearful fault and the young ladies suffer for it, as if any [thing] else could be looked for. Mrs. Gladman reviles the poor Indian mother but I think the father is a much more culpable character leaving children to be brought up by a starving woman, who nevertheless would be always kind to them."

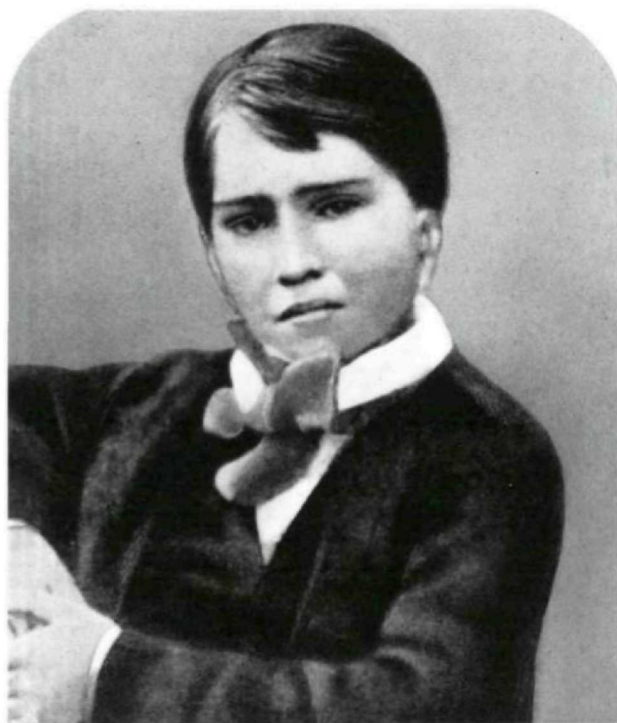
Mr. Evans had made a good beginning. "We are all sick of church and churchmen and are going it very strong with the Methodists who assuredly give us plenty of buttering if they cannot get up genuine gratitude. . . . I don't deny that we are anxious to get a good word even from Wesleyans, for no Episcopalian has come who has not reviled the Company for everything that was execrable. They may for what I know be right in all things, but in one, viz., the maltreating of the Indians, they are very far wrong and they must know it too. For in summer the Indians are employed out of charity and till the ship arrives it is ludicrous to see a band of 15 or 16 with their spades or whatever they are using lying beside them, and they all squat on their faces asleep. This is in the forenoon, at night they either work in their own way . . . or else they sit chattering or gambling . . . till the bell rings and they jump up and run as hard as they can in a long string along the platform to the provision stores where they get their allowances and go to their tents." (16 Sept. 1841.)

Soon, however, the Wesleyans were less in favour. "I suspect there is something not very agreeable . . . in the Wesleyan reports this year, as Mr. Evans has not given us one although Hargrave asked for it, and last season they were poked at us by the quarter of a hundred. . . . There must be some reason as Evans admits that he has the reports. . . . They have got a college of Jesuits among the Blackfeet and the Company have given Dr. Blanchette the head £100 a year. . . . M. Blanchette is an excellent old man who appears to mind his own affairs, while the Episcopal missionaries here attend to other peoples. Mr. Smithurst, Red River, goes about re-christening Indians and children who have been baptised by Mr. Evans, while the Wesleyans revile the Roman Catholic clergy of the Settlement, and there are no missionaries left in it but old Mr. Cochrane, all the others having retired to combat each other among the Indians. Mr. Evans says his instructions are to go only where there is no minister of another sect, but the others hate him with all their hearts. He has been busy making a tin canoe all the time he has been here. It looks very stylish but I don't know how it will paddle." (8 Sept. 1842.)

In another year Mr. Evans had completely fallen from favour, and apparently members of the Company were intriguing to get him removed. "When I first saw him I could not conceive how everyone praised him and said he was a gentleman and a man of independent fortune, besides so perfect as a missionary that he was encouraged to forget what he really was. Now all hands have turned on him. He got a very sharp letter from Sir George and has been informed that he must live at the Indian village and leave the Fort [Norway House]. What he has done I can't say but I think the whole affair has been caused by Mrs. Evans and her daughter's successful rivalry over Mrs. [Donald] Ross and her children. For they were the derision of the whole passers-by for their finery and exhibition of good education and knowledge of astronomy, as Mrs. E. used to say, whereas Mrs. Ross and Jane did not know the names of the commonest stars! The Rosses have been quite intimate with them, and have repeated every word and action to Mr. and Mrs. Finlayson. Indeed Mr. Gladman boasts that while he was in charge of Norway House he took notes of a private conversation he had with Mr. Evans, signed, and sent them to the Governor, and he thinks this was very spirited and correct. I suppose Mr. Evans will leave the country soon." (9 Sept. 1843.)

In this tense and unnatural atmosphere such intrigues were common enough, and worse things too. Many of Letitia's letters report the murder of the Company's men by Indians or half-breeds, often their own men; and her first winter in the country saw the tragic and mysterious death of Thomas Simpson, cousin of the Governor, just after his triumphant return from his Arctic exploration.

"When the packet arrived from Red River it threw us all into horror and consternation by the intelligence of poor Tom Simpson's fate. No one that I have heard speak except Hargrave believes the deposition of the



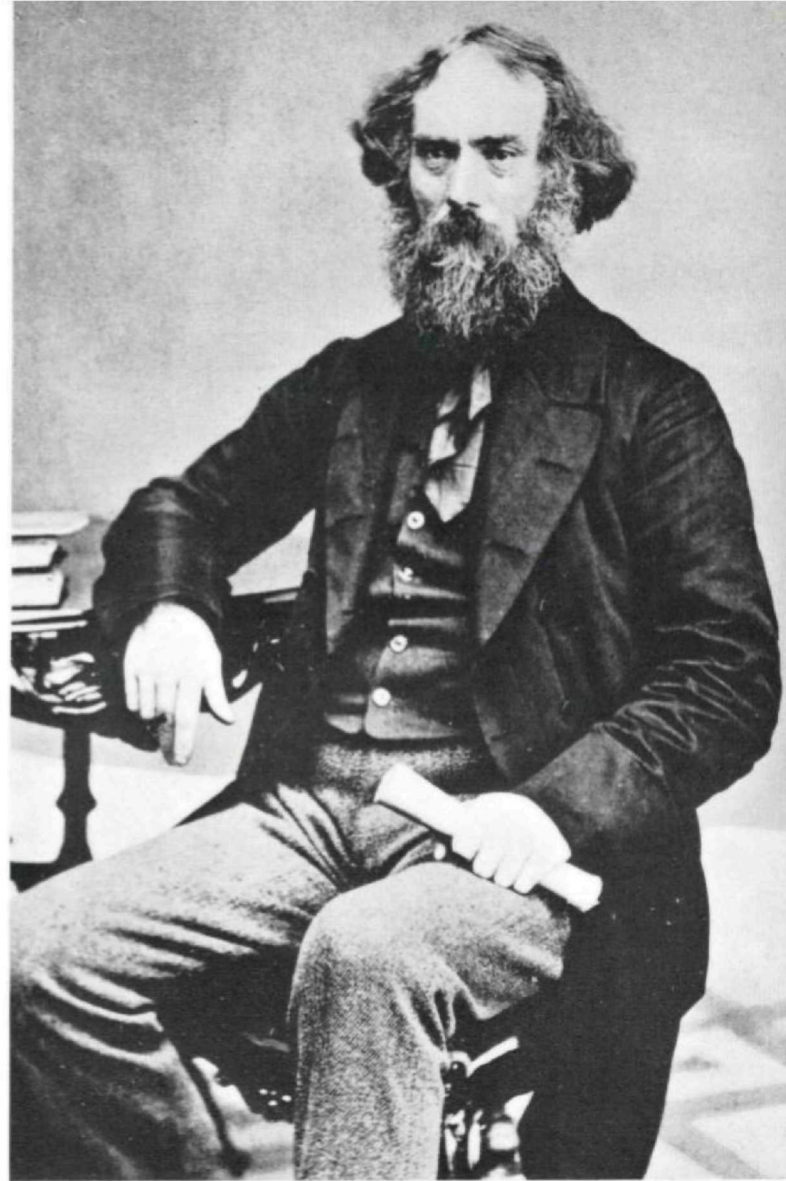
Joseph James Hargrave, Letitia's son.

witnesses that he deliberately shot two men at once and when the other two of the party left him that he passed the night walking up and down before the bodies and on their return shot himself. Mr. [Duncan] Finlayson writes that he concludes he was insane, and expresses no doubt, but others say there must have been a quarrel particularly as there was an old grudge between the Red River half-breeds and him. I daresay his head was a little turned as he evidently imagined from his letters that he had done what no one had performed before and expected great applause and notice in London where he expected to be on the 1st August, and evidently went by the States to get before Dease, who sailed from this in September by the ship.

"From the whole story I cannot believe that he killed himself although he most likely destroyed the other two, as he said to the survivors that they had nothing to fear as he shot Legros and Bird because they meant to kill him. They likewise say that they saw no symptoms of insanity but I daresay you have seen the whole affair as the Yankee papers got possession of it immediately. He had just got his commission as Trader and has left two children at Red River. Everyone seemed to like him and poor Mrs. Finlayson has suffered dreadfully as he was her first cousin and they were all much attached to and very proud of him. . . . It must have been fearful for her as one of the victims was the son of old Mr. Bird a gentleman at Red River, the other being a well-known Canadian whose son was of the party, who being a half-breed would think it quite right to shoot one who killed his father. William knew them all." (20 Feb. 1841.)

Later she wrote: "Mr. Cochrane of Red River . . . objected to giving Tom Simpson Christian burial. His body and those of his victims were disinterred and brought to the Settlement. The others were entire but poor Tom was not but I never liked to ask any questions but Mr. Manson told me that his limbs were not there and he inferred that he had not had fair play, and that the story of the survivors was not true, but I daresay wolves may have reached him. When I thought of the letter, so kind and full of glee, that we found here on our arrival, I could not persuade myself that he had killed himself, and Mr. Gladman and Manson both think that he had killed the others in self-defence and been shot by one of the survivors who being half-breeds would do it spontaneously on seeing their father shot by him whether on provocation or not. At any rate his friends believe or say nothing to the contrary so that no other one has any business. William and Hargrave both knew every one of the parties. The survivors are about William's age and he doubts their veracity. No more will ever be known as the half-breeds even in dying don't find any relief in confessing." (9 Sept., 1841.)

"When Thomas Simpson died he had just got a commission which was afterwards given his younger brother Alexander who had rushed home from the Sandwich Isles on hearing of Tom's death. I think he must be a little touched as he has either retired from the service or thrown up his commission. I can't ascertain which. If the former he will have a half share for 7 years, or a sum of money from the Directors, according to what they expect the 7 years share to be. If he has thrown it up he gets nothing. . . . They are an ill-fated family as the eldest killed himself in Scotland, Tom here, and a step-brother died on the Columbia—I believe he was drowned, poor man. So that of the 3 who were expected to get on so well in the service



Letitia's brother, Chief Factor William Mactavish, who served the Company from 1833 to 1870. He was made Governor of Assiniboia in 1858, and later of Rupert's Land. In the latter capacity he was in charge of Fort Garry when it was captured by Riel and was made prisoner.

no one has succeeded and I really think poor Alexander must be deranged, from the way he has gone on since his brother's death." (Sept. (no date) 1842.)

A more cheerful episode was the visit of little Bobby (R. M.) Ballantyne. "He brought me a letter of introduction from Lady Simpson who calls him her cousin. He is barely 15 and a very clever boy. The Governor ordered that he should have a winter here but Hargrave thought the Simpsons would like his being with Mrs. Finlayson so he sent him on to Red River with old Mr. Charles. Mrs. F. will be the better of him as he is smart and very gentlemanlike and diverting, straight from the Stockbridge Academy." Young Ballantyne was to profit by his experience by writing those books which have been the delight of generations of boys and girls.

A great grief to Letitia was the loss of her second child, which only lived three weeks. She almost broke her heart over it. Several other children followed, all of whom were sent to Scotland to be educated. One daughter married Sir Alexander Ogston, the famous surgeon. Their eldest daughter was the wife of Sir Herbert Grierson, by whose courtesy these letters are here published.