

LETTERS of LETITIA HARGRAVE

The Champlain Society's latest book,
edited with an introduction and notes
by Margaret Arnett MacLeod

Reviewed by R. O. MacFarlane

THIS volume consists of a substantial introduction, seventy-two letters of Letitia Hargrave and an appendix of fifteen letters mostly from James Hargrave, her husband. The nucleus of these letters of Letitia was discovered by the editor among the Hargrave manuscripts in the Champlain Society's collection at the University of Toronto. These have been supplemented by many other letters obtained from descendants in England and Scotland.

In her introduction, Mrs. MacLeod thus describes the scope of the work:

"Letitia Hargrave's letters describe a woman's life in the fur-trade in Rupert's Land during the years from 1838 to 1852. Valuable first hand accounts of the lives of pioneer women in Eastern Canada have long been known; but as far as can be discovered, Letitia Hargrave is the only woman to enrich thus the history of Western Canada. The letters written at York Factory, Manitoba's oldest settlement, give a unique and intimate picture of that important Hudson's Bay Company depot, and touch as well on the more general aspects of the fur-trade."

The first group of letters describes the meeting of Hargrave and Letitia Mactavish, their marriage and their preparations in England for their voyage to York Factory, where Hargrave had formerly been stationed.

The second group was written at York Factory from 1840 to 1846 during her first sojourn at the post, and it is from these that the picture of life at a trading post, as seen through the eyes of a woman, is built up.

Many details of daily life are recorded by Mrs. Hargrave that escaped the men who have left records of their life in the North in the early days. Her first impressions of York are conveyed in a letter to her mother, dated September, 1840:

"My dear Mama,

"We arrived here on Monday the 10th of Augst after an unusually short passage. We got on shore meaning stuck on the bar on Sunday evening 15 miles from York, fortunately the bottom was soft mud & except that there was much confusion & the men took the oppory, to get tipsy, the weather being calm we lay quietly altho' a good deal on one side, & no harm was done. I can give you very little idea of my feelings as for some days or weeks I had been so wretched that Hargrave thought if I went on shore at all it wd. have been rolled & carried in a blanket. I could neither eat sleep nor speak & my pulse was often 120. I cd. not take medicine as I told you we had the cuddy for our cabin & the Mess was there & the Capn always in it. My 1st exploit on being lowered into the yawl, was to turn my back to the company & cry myself sick. After which I began to look about me & feel less disconsolate. I had no sooner got out of the yawl than I felt better & have ever since got stronger & as for fatness, I am getting on well & my neck is as well covered as when I left Stromness."

In the same letter she describes her new home:

"I was much surprised at the 'great swell' the Factory is. It looks beautiful. The houses are painted pale yellow. The windows & some particular parts white. Some have

green gauze mosquito curtains outside & altogether the effect is very good. Our house is a good size, 1 bedroom off each sitting room & men servants rooms off the kitchen a very large closet off the diningrm. I had nearly forgot my piano. It is a very fine one & the handsomest I ever saw. The wood is beautiful & Mr. Finlay[son] is croaking for one the same."

In her introduction Mrs. MacLeod has been able to fill in much of the descriptive detail about domestic life at the post. This provides the best picture of these conditions that we have had to date; for example: the nice distinction that always separated a "gentleman" from the remainder of the population, even when there were few visible outward marks in dress or demeanour of the rigid line.

Another social puzzle, and it worried Mrs. Hargrave, was the status of the "women of the country." Among these was Betsy, who had been chatelaine of an officer's house within the fort, and she was a person of means, with a further choice of husbands waiting; yet Letitia found her in her kitchen as the family laundress!

Letitia's reaction to the social functions at the post is illustrated in another letter to her mother in February 1841:

"There were two balls given by the gentlemen (clerks) during the holidays. I went and sat in a room off that in which they were dancing, for a little. It was a humbling affair. 40 squaws old and young with their hair plaited in long tails, nothing on their heads but their everlasting blankets smelling of smoke and everything obnoxious. Babies almost newly born & in their cradles were with their mothers & all nursing them in the face of everyone. I turned in horror from a row of black necks and there sat Mrs. Gladman in the same style before the gentlemen and men of the fort besides a lot of Indians. I was glad to come home and when Hargve left them at 11 sundry squaws had composed themselves to sleep and others had got riotous, Madame Poukie John or Gunpowder having pinched his ear till he nearly yelled and given William such a thump on his side that he could not breathe. The younger women do not drink, but take a kettle with them into which they pour every thing, wine, rum shrub or brandy, or even porter & carry it off to drink at leisure. They were all here on New Years and a select party of 10 were allowed to come in to me. [Illegible passage] On coming into my room they were entertained with madeira, but they scarcely tasted it as they said it was too strong."

Mrs. Hargrave found these social problems very different from anything she had encountered in her experience before, and while she obviously did not approve, she soon made her peace with her surroundings, or at least she convinced her husband that she had done so, for he states: "She declared herself agreeably surprised by the superior appearance and accommodations of this place to what I had led her to expect, and accused me of having grossly libelled it."

Mrs. MacLeod draws attention to the efforts of the Hudson's Bay officers to maintain social standards at their posts: "Prominent officers usually had personal servants, and serving-men were trained for the officers' mess. Table service was important, and heads of districts usually had their monogrammed silver, and plate chests, and there was crystal on their tables. Donald Ross complained to Hargrave of the fragility of the crystal, saying, 'A man can almost blow the

bottom out of tumblers and as for the Wine glasses a person half seas over might easily swallow Glass and all without knowing anything about the matter!"

These efforts were sometimes strained, as when a Mrs. Turner from Norway House arrived at York in the summer of 1841. She had come out as a servant for Mrs. Duncan Finlayson, but had been dismissed upon landing. The Reverend James Evans took her into service and tried to reform her but without much success. While she awaited the next ship she sore distressed poor Hargrave, who wrote to Donald Ross:

"Aye, you have sent a fine specimen of morals in your export of the Madam Turner. I wish the ship would come were it only that I could get rid of her—also I fear there may be heads broken for her yet, before she leaves. In a flame colored gown, she flounces at all hours through our men's houses, and if it does not set something else on fire, 'tis neither her nor its fault."

Mrs. Hargrave could be tart with some of the women with whom she came into contact at York. She did not like Mrs. Evans, the wife of the missionary, a fact which she saw little reason to conceal. "Mrs. Evans also wrote me a letter that I could hardly stand from a Methodist. I replied by a middling stiff note commencing with dear Madam. I feel satisfied that she is dangerous. She had ended hers with yr affecte friend."

The Hargrave children were born at York and the letters describe the many problems encountered in raising a family at a remote post, and the inevitable strains that had to be faced as the problem of educating each member arose in turn. There was also the problem of religious instruction to be met.

There are numerous references to the food that was available, to the methods of preparing and serving it. At York itself the staples of the country were readily supplemented by supplies from the Company's ships, and Mrs. Hargrave had little but praise for the fare that they enjoyed, although at times there was difficulty in having it prepared as she liked.

York was something of a cross-roads to the western fur trade. Many of the personalities that loomed large therein passed through York during the period the Hargraves were stationed there. Mrs. Hargrave's comments on some of these great names make extremely interesting reading although they are not always flattering.

"The ladies did not leave us till Monday & I was pretty sick of Misses Allan & Ross. As the Finlaysons had one sitting room & bed room we of course had but one too & altho' the others had a room each & parlor between them at the other side of the Fort, yet they came here at ½ past 7. A.M. & remained generally till ½ past 9 at night unless Hargrave put them out while he was busy, & the moment he left the house they were back at me. The more I might be ill or wish a little peace the surer they were to persecute me & the favorite subject was a lamentation about what I shd. suffer from loneliness when they left me. Mrs. & Mr. F—both repeatedly told Miss Ross that altho' they eat here, that they ought not to torment us but they never minded—I have not seen Willie [her brother] alone yet. I liked Mrs. Finlayson all along & felt very sorry to part from her more particularly as she did not seem in such good spirits & I rather think she will be ill. She suffers well poor thing & was a great contrast to Miss Allan who kept up constant grumbling till the moment she left us."

The Hargraves finally enjoyed a furlough in 1846-47. They left their eldest son at school in Scotland, and after a hard voyage returned to York. In spite of the improvement as a result of the furlough, Hargrave's health remained poor.

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He was also dissatisfied with the rate of his promotion, and it was becoming evident to him that he was being held back in spite of his personal friendship with Sir George. Mrs. Hargrave wrote in March 1844:

"I have not a word of any sort of news, nor will there be any till after the Meeting of Council when we will know where people are going & who are applauded & who admonished. The Govr. is to be at Red River & Hargve. seems to think he will be here, but I suspect he wd. rather *praise* York than visit it. The people constantly maintain that every year will be his last trip into this country. Why they say so I cant imagine, as I can see no symptom of his intending to give it up. He will not get two thousand 3 hundred a year so easily. There are a great number of commissions to be given but we will not hear of them either till he comes. Hargve. is as sure of a 2nd. share as a promise can make him. There will be another Factor and 5 Traders."

Hargrave was anxious to get away from York. The Governor was not very co-operative. They were learning the lesson that other officials of the Company had learned (under Sir George) "that promises, friendship, and even family ties, did not exist when the Company's interests and those of the individual clashed: the man was sacrificed." The whole situation was telling upon Mrs. Hargrave, especially as hope after hope of leaving York vanished. "Year after year her husband had gone down under the rigours and responsibilities of York, from which there seemed no relief. . . 'I can't help thinking he is looking worn and old.' Year after year they had looked for an upward trend in their fortunes, but even Hargrave's factorship had brought little in honours or emoluments."

In 1850 Hargrave was promised a move to the post at Sault Ste. Marie, and the next summer he made the trip, via Red River. It was too difficult a voyage to ask of his wife and children. They returned to the Old Country on the autumn ship. The following summer Mrs. Hargrave joined her husband at the new post, and so ended her contacts with the Canadian West. The Hargraves were very happy at the Sault, until two years later, Mrs. Hargrave was stricken by cholera and died within a few days.

Mrs. MacLeod is to be commended for the excellent introduction which provides not only a commentary on the letters, but a history of York during the period that the Hargraves resided there. The work has been done with painstaking care and it adds much to the literature of the Canadian West.

Page 2 of Letitia's letter to her mother, written at York on Dec. 1st, 1840, which went via Moose Factory to the Sault. Note the postmarks—Sault de Ste. Mar(i)e, Mich, May 6; New York, May 17; Campbellton, June 19. Page 1 is solid with cross-writing.

