

# LE PETIT CANADA

## John Andrew Kerr (1851-1940)

---

All John Kerr quotes, unless otherwise footnoted, are taken from his 'Reminiscences' papers, found in the Perth Matheson House Museum collection, or from the 1946 biography, *John Kerr*, by his niece Constance Kerr Sissons. Appreciation is extended to Debbie Sproule and Janet Conlin at Perth Matheson House Museum, and to Dr. Rosalind Kerr for their assistance.

---

When he was forced into retirement in 1932, a generation of Perth's citizens knew their Town Clerk of nearly four decades simply as a capable bureaucrat in dark suit and necktie, remarkable only for his physical handicap. Close friends and an older cohort, however, knew a younger John Kerr as a vagabond and adventurer. From the streets of Montreal to the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, Kerr was witness to, and often participant in, the creation of a new nation; working as a photographer, soldier, cook, surveyor, policeman, store clerk, prison-guard, baker, buffalo hunter, road and railway laborer, prairie trader, horse-breaker, interpreter, accountant, farmer, secretary, guide, amanuensis<sup>1</sup>, and teamster – all before he turned 30 years of age.

John Andrew Kerr was born at Perth on January 24, 1851, the son of George Kerr (1814-1889) and Catherine Evangeline Corry (1811-1900). His grandparents, Dawson Kerr (1794-1884) and Anne Nancy Kennedy (1786-1863) had brought their eight children<sup>2</sup> to Canada from Aghnamullin, County Monaghan, Ireland, in 1830. The family first stayed at Lachute, Lower Canada, for two years where Dawson and his eldest son George taught school. When the Kerr's moved to Perth in 1832, Dawson first kept a private school and plied his hand loom, before he and son George constructed a stone building at 67 Foster Street<sup>3</sup> in 1847 and opened a general store.

At age 13 George Kerr had qualified as an apothecary at Dublin and in 1834, aged 20 years, he married Dublin native Catherine Corry at Perth. She was the daughter of Sergeant Major William H. Corry (1795-1813)<sup>4</sup> of the 6th Enniskillen Dragoons and Jane Graham (1790-1881). Catherine and her sister Sarah Jane (1818-1872)<sup>5</sup> were seamstresses and proprietors of a Perth dress shop. When Robert Lyon (1812-1833) was felled by John Wilson (1807-1869) in the 'last fatal duel' George Kerr is credited with composing the tribute engraved on his Craig Street Cemetery gravestone.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> A literary assistant who copies manuscripts.

<sup>2</sup> George (1814-1889), James (1815-1872), Elizabeth (1816-1817), Dawson Kennedy (1818-1898), Anne (1820-1910), Eliza (1822-1884), John (1824-1899), Andrew (1826-1920), Margaret (1830-1908).

<sup>3</sup> Faced with brick in 1877; now Shadowfax Gift Shop.

<sup>4</sup> Said to have died of wounds suffered during the Napoleonic Wars.

<sup>5</sup> Married William Doherty (1812-1885).

<sup>6</sup> *Friendship Offering, Dedicated to the Memory of ROBERT LYON (Student-at-law), He fell in mortal combat 13 June 1833, In the 20th year of his Age, Requiessat in Pace.*

Between 1836 and 1858, at Tara Cottage on the corner of Craig and Drummond Streets, George and Catherine Kerr became the parents of 10 children<sup>7</sup>, the eighth of whom was son John Andrew. In due course he was educated at Perth Public School where he recalled

*.. the tender mercies – and the ‘tawse’ – of the principal thereof, a bully and tyrant, if ever there was one ... tender-hearted guides were sadly in the minority ... while not exactly in the dunces’ class, I showed more proficiency in school sports than in my studies.*

At age 17, in 1868, he escaped the schoolmaster and found employment at a local photography studio.<sup>8</sup> Having demonstrated an aptitude for darkroom work, a year later he went to work at the Notman Photography Studio in Montreal<sup>9</sup>. In October 1869 Prince Arthur (1850-1942)<sup>10</sup>, third son of Queen Victoria, visited Notman’s while serving as an officer with the Montreal detachment of the Rifle Brigade, and had his portrait taken. Kerr was assigned to make the prints but left a workmate to watch over the time-consuming process while he went for dinner. On his return he found the negative had been bumped and the print double-exposed producing two heads. He was promptly sacked.



**A self-portrait taken when he worked at the Perth photo studio. The bicycle is one on which he had won a local race. (Photo from John Kerr by Constance Kerr Sissons (1946).)**

Back in Perth, Kerr was snatched from among the ranks of the unemployed the following summer when the Métis and their First Nations allies united in resistance to Canadian government encroachment on their lands and way of life in the Red River valley of the Northwest Territories and, in response, Ottawa called up an armed force under British Army Colonel Garnet Joseph Wolseley (1833-1913) to suppress the perceived ‘Rebellion’.

The regular army provided 1,416 infantry, artillery, engineers, service, and medical corps troops, while the Canadian Militia contributed 382 men embodied as the 1<sup>st</sup> Ontario Rifles and 389 men from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Quebec Rifles. The Ontario regiment was placed under command of Captain Thomas Scott (1841–1915), publisher of the *Perth Expositor* and part-time militia officer.

---

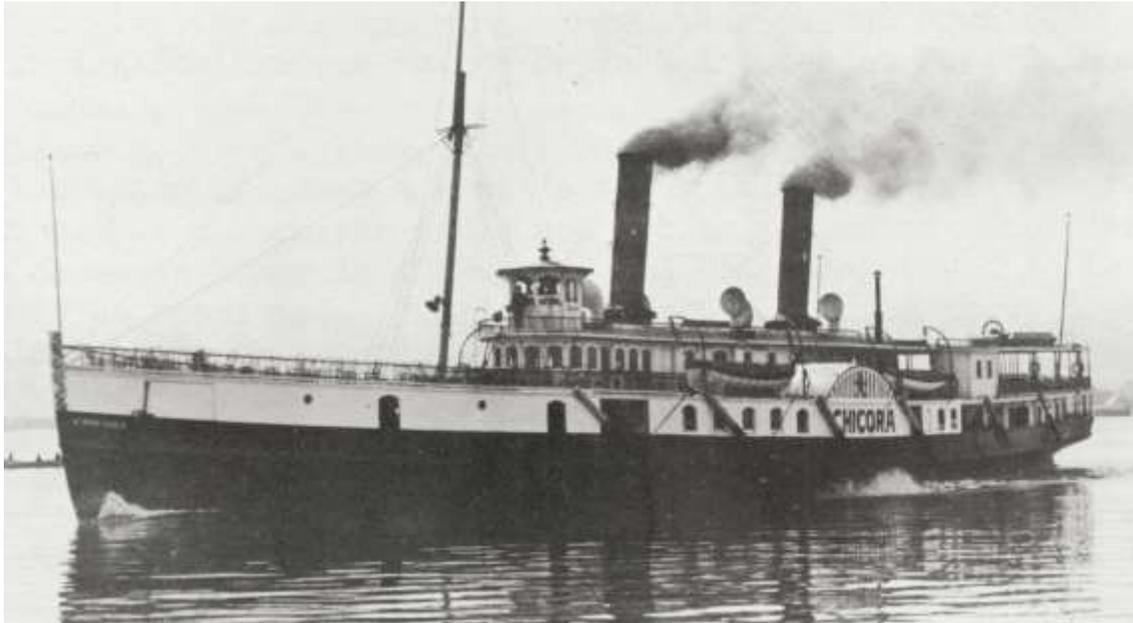
<sup>7</sup> Dawson (1834-1915), William Henry Corry (1837-1891), Sarah Jane (1838-1917), Eliza Anne (1840-1935), George Jr. (1843-1931), Theophilus Augustus (1846-1920), James (1848-1908), John Andrew (1851-1940), Charles Edward (1853-1938), Catherine Evangeline (1858-1941).

<sup>8</sup> He was employed in the studio of either Henry O’Hara or William J. Thompson.

<sup>9</sup> From his base in Montreal, photographer and businessman William Notman (1826-1891) operated a chain of 14 studios across eastern Canada and the United States.

<sup>10</sup> Seventh child and third son of Queen Victoria (1819-1901), later Duke of Connaught and Governor General of Canada 1911-1916.

More than a dozen young men from Perth volunteered to serve with Scott, but only five were accepted for enlistment; Ensign Charles Napier Bell (1854-1936)<sup>11</sup>, Private J. Jones Bell (1845-1931)<sup>12</sup>, Private Thomas C. Nixon (1851-1928)<sup>13</sup>, Private George Kerr (b.1852)<sup>14</sup>, and Private John Andrew Kerr. While training at the Crystal Palace<sup>15</sup> in Toronto John Andrew Kerr was assigned to No.7 Company and detailed as batman/orderly to Captain Scott. Jones Bell was made batman to Ensign Charles Bell.



**Steamboat Chicora**

Ordering a military force to Manitoba was one thing. Getting it there was quite another. The United States Government refused to allow passage of a Canadian army across its territory<sup>16</sup>, construction of the Dawson Road westward from the head of Lake Superior was incomplete, and the Canadian Pacific Railroad was still no more than a political promise. The Wolseley expedition therefore left Toronto on May 20, 1870 and travelled to Collingwood on Georgian Bay. It crossed Lake Huron by the steamer *Chicora*<sup>17</sup> but when it reached the Sault Canal, which passed through American territory, both men and equipment had to be disembarked and moved overland on the Canadian side of the border.

---

<sup>11</sup> Son of James Bell (1817-1904) and Jane Judd (1818-1864), grandson of Perth's first Presbyterian pastor, Reverend William Bell (1780-1857).

<sup>12</sup> Son of Robert Bell (1808-1884) and Emmaline Sedate Jones (1810-1858), grandson of Reverend William Bell.

<sup>13</sup> Son of Charles Richard Nixon (1824-1895) and Ann Tomlinson (1826-1908), immigrants from County Cavan, Ireland, who arrived at Perth in 1861 where Charles was employed at the Templeton tannery.

<sup>14</sup> Son of Dawson Kerr Jr. (1818-1898) and Martha Sharp, first cousin to John Andrew Kerr.

<sup>15</sup> Built for the Provincial Agricultural Exhibition in 1858 the Crystal Palace was destroyed by fire in 1906.

<sup>16</sup> By rail from Duluth to Moorhead Minnesota, and then down the Red River by steamboat.

<sup>17</sup> The steamer *Chicora* was built in the shipyards of Miller & Son at Birkenhead, England, for the Chicora Import and Export Company of Charleston, South Carolina, and launched in 1864 for service as a Confederate States of America blockade runner during the Civil War. She was purchased by Canadian owners and brought to Toronto in 1867. She sailed the Great Lakes as a freighter and then passenger vessel until 1920 when she was stripped to her hull, renamed *Warrenko*, and used as a barge. *Warrenko* was rammed and sunk in Kingston Harbor in 1938.

Once re-embarked the men and equipment were shipped across Lake Superior and landed at the Thunder Bay Department of Public Works station, renamed Prince Arthur's Landing by Wolseley (in honor of the man whose portrait Kerr had spoiled less than a year before).

From the Landing there was an incomplete road of 50 miles to Lake Shebandowan, then a three month journey of 550 miles over lakes, rivers and portages to Fort Frances, across Lake of the Woods, down the Winnipeg River, across southern Lake Winnipeg, and up the Red River to Fort Garry (Winnipeg) at the junction of the Assiniboine River. The trek had hardly begun when Kerr came down with dysentery;

*... they made a stretcher, loaded me into a lumber wagon, and I was painfully jolted over the rough roads to the hospital tent at the Landing. As per doctor's instructions I was placed on the ground. A blanket was wrung out of a tub of hot water by two orderlies, each supplied with a pair of tongs. This steaming object was laid upon my anatomy regardless of my yelling bloody murder. I was virtually parboiled; but they dipped, wrung, and applied that blanket with true military precision. It did the work, and in four days I was on my way.*



**Captain Thomas Scott (1841-1915)**

Kerr's company reached Fort Frances August 8, 1870 and remained there for "*protection of reserve supplies*" as the rest of the force moved on. They missed nothing, however, as by the time the main body of troops arrived at Fort Garry on August 24<sup>th</sup> Metis leader Louis Riel (1844-1885) and his most prominent followers had fled to the United States. The 'rebellion' was over without a shot being fired and as No.7 Company moved toward Fort Garry from Fort Frances it met Wolseley, who spent a night in their camp at the Northwest Angle<sup>18</sup>, leading the British regulars back to Montreal.

The 1st Ontario Rifles were stationed at Upper Fort Garry. "*A pretty place, at a distance*", Kerr recalled, "*but go near and you are disgusted with the filth and dirt ... wood is a very scarce article, hardly any timber around the place, and cold!*" That winter Kerr and his fellow riflemen stood sentry duty in temperatures as low as -52 F (-47 C).

Shortly after arrival at the fort, Corporal Sam Steele (1848-1919)<sup>19</sup> was transferred from No.4 Company to serve with Kerr's No.7 Company and became his "*... comrade and barracks bed-fellow*". On one occasion, when a barrack-room dispute escalated into a knife fight and Kerr was stabbed in the leg, Steele stepped in and saved him from more dire consequences. Thereafter, Kerr and Steele were close and lifelong friends.

---

<sup>18</sup> An exclave of the United States extending into Lake of the woods between the borders of Manitoba and Lake of the Woods. It can only be reached by land from Canadian territory (Manitoba).

<sup>19</sup> Steele would go on to join the North-West Mounted Police and famously command the NWMP Yukon detachment during the Klondike gold rush. During the South African War (Boer War) he was commanding officer of Lord Strathcona's Horse.

For several weeks Kerr was detached to serve as batman to Regular Army Lieutenant William Francis Butler (1838-1910)<sup>20</sup>, with specific responsibility to care for his dog team. Butler, author of *The Great Lone Land* (1872) and *The Wild North Land* (1874) was just back from a lengthy exploration of the western plains and his tales fired Kerr's imagination and thirst for new adventure.

On May 1, 1871, "after serving my country for one year, receiving forty cents per day and rations", Kerr was discharge and received "scrip for one hundred and sixty acres of land". Most of the discharged volunteers returned to their homes in Ontario and Quebec, but many chose to remain in the west. These included John Kerr who went to work with a team of land surveyors.

In spite of failures in 1866 and 1870 in Ontario, Quebec, and New Brunswick, the Fenian Brotherhood had not quite abandoned all hope of seizing at least a part of Canada to ransom for Irish independence. In the fall of 1871, the brotherhood launched their final attempt. A small Fenian band organized at Saint Paul, Minnesota, 'invaded' Canada from the Dakota Territory – or so they thought.

On October 5th, 35 Irishmen captured and sacked a Hudson Bay Company (HBC) post and a Canadian customs house at Pembina, 60 miles south of Fort Garry, only to learn that they were not in Canada at all, as surveyors had recently determined that the border lay two miles further north<sup>21</sup>. That day in October 1871, John Kerr was with a survey crew working on the road between Fort Garry and Pembina. He immediately left his job and enlisted with the Winnipeg Rifle Company; a volunteer force raised by Captain William Nassau Kennedy (1839-1885)<sup>22</sup>. The Winnipeg Rifles had marched less than 10 miles toward Pembina, however, when word arrived that the U.S. cavalry had 'liberated' the village and the Fenian leaders were all in irons.<sup>23</sup>

When the Winnipeg Rifle Company was disbanded, Kerr found work in the Winnipeg bake-shop of Jack Hackett (1845-1884)<sup>24</sup> and then clerked in the general stores of John Higgins (1807-1884)<sup>25</sup> and Dr. John Christian Schultz (1840-1896)<sup>26</sup>.



**Vicomte Louis Nathal Frasse de Plainval (1841-1890)**

---

<sup>20</sup> Later Lieutenant General Sir William Francis Butler, GCB, PC.

<sup>21</sup> Shortly afterward the International Boundary Commission restored Pembina to Canada.

<sup>22</sup> Kennedy, a native of Newcastle, Ontario, had arrived at Fort Garry in 1870 as a Lieutenant in the 1st Ontario Rifles.

<sup>23</sup> Although none of them were ever convicted of a crime.

<sup>24</sup> Winnipeg's first baker, elected city alderman in 1875. Popular at Winnipeg entertainments of the day for playing his bag pipes.

<sup>25</sup> Operated his business in the Red River Settlement from an ox car for nine years before building a general store on Main Street in 1865. Founding member of the Winnipeg Board of Trade in 1873, elected alderman in 1874.

<sup>26</sup> Winnipeg physician and merchant. When Louis Riel formed his Provisional Government in 1869 Schultz played a leading role in opposing it. In December 1869 he and a party defending his house were captured by the Métis and imprisoned at Upper Fort Garry. He was later elected an MP representing Manitoba 1871-1873, 1874-1882 and served as Manitoba Lieutenant Governor 1888-1895.

Seeking more excitement than could be found behind the counter of a store or bake shop, in early 1872 Kerr joined the Manitoba Constabulary (aka Manitoba Mounted Police), commanded by Vicomte Louis Nathal Frasse de Plainval (1841-1890)<sup>27</sup>. As a policeman, he was initially assigned to the Stone Fort which had become Rupert's Land Penitentiary, but he immediately clashed with the Warden, Colonel Warden Samuel L. Bedson (1842-1891).

*I disliked the work. The head turnkey was a petty tyrant who made life almost unbearable for the prisoners. After two or three differences with him, I sent up an application for transfer to Winnipeg headquarters.*

Kerr was shortly reassigned to the Main Street police station, and spent the next few months corralling drunks, breaking up brawls, chasing escaped prisoners and posting notices up and down the valley for the July-October 1872 Federal election.

While policing provided its moments of excitement, in the summer of 1872 new opportunities beckoned. Kerr turned in his badge and joined fellow Perthite Charles Bell, two other eastern Canadians, and about two dozen families of Métis hunters and traders, heading west with a train of 40-50 Red River carts. After a month on the trail they reached the tiny Métis settlement of St. Laurent on the South Saskatchewan River. Charles Bell and the other Canadians carried on to Saddle Lake, in present day Alberta, but Kerr chose to winter at St. Laurent. There he met Métis leader Gabriel Dumont (1837-1906), who, he wrote, "*was to become my staunch friend*".

Gabriel Dumont was, "*the last, and in some ways the greatest, of the traditional Métis chiefs whose status was based upon prowess as hunters and fighters and extensive kinship networks*".<sup>28</sup> Dumont emerged as a Métis leader in 1863 when he was elected to head a 200 member buffalo hunt in the area of Fort Carlton, Saskatchewan, a position he would hold so long as the buffalo lasted. After failure of the 1869-1870 Red River resistance, many Manitoba Métis sought refuge among Métis communities along the South Saskatchewan River. In response to the increased traffic along the Carlton Trail<sup>29</sup>, in 1872, the year John Kerr arrived at St. Laurent, Dumont established a river ferry there and opened a small store near his ferry landing. The following year Dumont was elected president of an eight member council established to govern Métis affairs in the St. Laurent area, according to rules and regulations based upon the traditions of the buffalo hunt. A dozen years later Dumont would find his place in Canadian history as Louis Riel's military commander during the resistance of 1885.

One of the family heads in the caravan from Fort Garry was an English-speaking Métis named Louis Marion (1840-1921). "*We two*", *Marion and I, struck up a friendship that lasted for many a year*", Kerr explained. The two men decided to throw in their lot with Dumont's buffalo hunts of 1872 and 1873, during most of which they slept in Dumont's tent,

---

<sup>27</sup> After a short stint as chief of police Louis de Plainval organized a theatre company and toured a program of romantic drama and light opera across the United States and Canada.

<sup>28</sup> *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, profile by Roderick C. MacLeod.

<sup>29</sup> The Carlton Trail was the primary land transportation route in the Canadian Northwest for most of the 19th century, connecting Fort Carlton to Edmonton. It was part of a trail network that stretched from the Red River Colony in Manitoba, through Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan, then north and across the South Saskatchewan River to Fort Carlton on the North Saskatchewan River and onward along the north side of the river to Fort Edmonton.

*It was through the intimacy thereby engendered, during that fall and the succeeding year, that I grew to know and respect the redoubtable Gabriel – chief outstanding figure of the plains. He adopted me into his family and never called me by the name bestowed upon me by the rest of his band, namely 'le Petit Canada' (referring to my age), but invariably addressed me as 'mon frère', while his family and relatives called me son, nephew, cousin and so on. Gabriel couldn't talk English, and so it came about that I just had to learn to talk French and Cree ... I was the only white man in the whole camp ...*

As Kerr's biographer would note, "*John never attempted to deny the fact that the powerful personality of Gabriel Dumont became a major influence in his life ...*".<sup>30</sup>



*Gabriel Dumont (1837-1906)*

In October and November 1872, the Dumont camp hunted in the foot-hills of the Rockies. As Métis buffalo hunters always worked in pairs, Kerr partnered with mission-educated Ambroise Fisher (1833-1913)<sup>31</sup>, nephew of HBC trader Henry Fisher (1800-1871). Spending days on horseback and nights in the tented camp, Kerr sometimes lived exclusively on pemican (which he despised) and became "*reconciled to the taste of dog*". He engaged in horse-trading with the Blackfoot and was accidental witness to a Sun Dance. He endured the violent pounding of thunder and hailstorms, narrowly escaped a wildfire, and survived a buffalo stampede that nearly wiped out their camp. He became a skilled broncho breaker, competed in Indian horse races, won and lost at the games of chance so much a part of Métis and First Nations camp life, and came to deeply admire his hosts.

*The Métis were misunderstood from the first, and especially after the '85 Rebellion. Many white Canadians would have experienced a change of heart if they could have been brought into as close touch with these people as I was, during my life on the plains.*

Kerr spent the winter of 1872-1873 in a shack he built at St. Laurent, and shared Christmas dinner there with Lieutenant William Butler who visited on his way from Fort Garry to the Pacific Ocean. Describing life at St. Laurent Butler later wrote of,

---

<sup>30</sup> *John Kerr*, by Constance Kerr Sissons (1946).

<sup>31</sup> The son of George Fisher (1802-1846) & Genevieve Courville (1809-1916), born at Fort Winnebago Wisconsin. He had been educated at St. Boniface mission and could speak English. Fisher married Rosalie Charlifoux (1845-1896), had 14 children, died at Duck Lake, Saskatchewan.

*... huts crowded together, the horses, dogs, women and children; hunters idle, lazy and drunk; the women drawing water and carrying wood; wolf skins and remnants and wrecks of buffalo lying everywhere, meat on stages, robes stretched and drying.*

*At dusk, the glow of firelight through parchment windows, the sound of a fiddle scraped with rough hunter hand, and the quick thud of hunter heel as Louis, Batiste or Gabriel foot it ceaselessly on half-hewn floors. Unquestionably these French half-breeds are wild birds, hunters, drinkers, rovers, rascals, if you will – yet generous and hospitable withal”.*<sup>32</sup>

In mid-winter Kerr made a short visit to Prince Albert on the North Saskatchewan where he crossed paths with Charles Adam Mair (1831-1927)<sup>33</sup>, a native of Lanark Village back in Ontario who had attended Perth Grammar School with Kerr's older brother William. Mair was a leading light of the 'Canada First' movement whose agitation had done so much to foment the Métis resistance of 1870 and had been among those taken prisoner by Riel.

In the spring of 1873, the HBC factor at Fort Carleton arranged with Gabriel Dumont to recruit a work gang of St. Laurent Métis to build 100 miles of road from the North Saskatchewan River at Fort Carlton to Green Lake. John Kerr signed on for the job,

*... the one white man in a big gang ... As I was not exactly an expert axeman, I elected to do the cooking for our tent, in which was Ambroise Fisher, Gabriel Dumont, Petit Jean Dumont [1833-1889]<sup>34</sup> and four or five others ...*

While working on the road project Kerr accepted a dare to jump from a newly constructed bridge, diving some 16 feet (4.9 meters) into a stream only four feet (1.2 meters) deep. When he plunged into the creek, he recalled his *“hands struck a stone at the bottom, and so saved my body, though I received one nasty cut that rasped the flesh from my chest. The curve I essayed did my back no good. I felt the effort for days”*. Indeed, he would suffer periodically from that back injury until, 40 years later, it was compounded by even worse injuries that left him a cripple for the remainder of his life.

Road work paid only \$3.00/day, and even that was paid out only in HBC script, which compared poorly to the \$10.00 to \$50.00 per day that could be earned on the buffalo hunt, but Kerr's labor paid enough that when he returned to St. Laurent he bought his own horse and cart and set out for the plains. He joined Dumont's mixed hunt of Métis from St. Laurent, Qu'Appelle and Wood Mountain, and Cree Indians from the Fort Carlton and Fort Pitt areas. Describing a scene along the north branch of the Saskatchewan River that summer, Kerr later wrote,

*We descried thousands of buffalo quietly slaking their thirst in its muddy waters; thousands dotted the plains as far as eye could see, cropping the tall, lush grass; while thousands more, having eaten and drunk to repletion, were lying about in groups of from a dozen to a hundred. Three years later I passed along this same section of country and only the merest shadow of these immense herds remained, far out on the plains.*

---

<sup>32</sup> As quoted in *John Kerr*, by Constance Kerr Sissons (1946).

<sup>33</sup> See *Canada First: Charles Adam Mair* elsewhere on this website.

<sup>34</sup> A cousin to the Dumont brothers Gabriel and Édouard Dumont.

As he had during the previous season, in 1873 Kerr lived with Gabriel Dumont's family group that included Gabriel's brothers Édouard (1845-1907) and Elie (1847-1925)<sup>35</sup> and their families. One night a buffalo stampede swept so close their camp that the hobbled horses were

*... knocked down and trodden to jelly... I'll never forget that night. Judging from the herds I've seen by daylight, there must have been not less than half a million in the lot, and that was the estimate arrived at also by experienced hunters.*

As the 1873 summer hunt wound up, Kerr set out on his return to Fort Garry, travelling with St. Laurent merchant Baptiste Boyer (1845-1895)<sup>36</sup>. He reached Fort Garry in September, "deeply tanned, ... straight black hair to his shoulders ... dressed like a half-breed and far from immaculate".<sup>37</sup>



Louis Riel (1844-1885)



Ambroise-Dydime Lépine (1840-1923)

A few days after his return, on September 16, 1873, a joint murder warrant was issued for the arrest of Louis Riel and Ambroise-Dydime Lépine (1840-1923) for the 1870 execution of Orangeman and Canada-Firster Thomas Scott (1842-1870)<sup>38</sup>. That same day John Kerr, Edwin Doidge (1846-1910)<sup>39</sup> and John S. Ingraham (1853-1905)<sup>40</sup> were sworn in as special constables with the specific assignment of arresting Riel and Lépine.

---

<sup>35</sup> Killed at the Battle of Duck Lake on March 26, 1885.

<sup>36</sup> Jean-Baptiste Boyer Jr., a merchant/trader then living at St. Laurent, later resident at Batoche. He was a member of Riel's 16-man Council (Exovedate) at Batoche during the 1885 Resistance and served in Captain Phillippe Gariepy's company, one of the 19 dizaines (companies of 10) led by Gabriel Dumont during the 1885 Resistance.

<sup>37</sup> *John Kerr*, by Constance Kerr Sissons (1946).

<sup>38</sup> Not to be confused with Captain Thomas Scott (1841–1915) of Perth, Ontario, and commander of the 1st Ontario Rifles.

<sup>39</sup> Edwin Doidge joined the Winnipeg Police Department when it was formed in 1874, later ran a grocery store and became a Winnipeg city councilman.

<sup>40</sup> John S. Ingraham became the first chief of the Winnipeg Police Department in February 1874 but was shortly forced to resign when he was found patronizing a local bordello. He moved on to become Police Chief in Calgary, Alberta. Writing in an article entitled *Ambroise Lépine: His Arrest, Trial and Conviction*, John Kerr says that Ingraham was "... killed in a brawl in a house in Montana I think" (the implication being another whorehouse).

In October 1869, as the Red River resistance gained momentum, a band of Métis led by Lépine waylaid Lieutenant Governor designate William McDougall (1822-1905)<sup>41</sup> at the Dakota Territory border and refused him entry into Manitoba. In December it was Lépine, acting on Riel's orders, who led 100 Métis in the capture of a group opposing the Métis provisional government garrisoned in the house of trader and 'Canada Firster' John Christian Schultz (1840-1896). On January 8, 1870, Riel's Provisional Government appointed Lépine Adjutant General to administer justice in the Red River Settlement and in February he arrested another group of men when their plan to capture Upper Fort Garry from the Métis aborted. Among the prisoners taken was Thomas Scott, whose constant, obscene, racist and anti-Catholic abuse greatly angered his Métis guards. Riel ordered Scott court martialled for attempting to overthrow the Métis regime and refusing orders to shut-up and, as military leader, Lépine headed the tribunal that found him guilty of rebellion against the Provisional Government. On March 4, 1870 it was also Lépine who commanded the firing squad that executed Scott.

As Colonel Garnet Wolsely's troops approached Fort Garry that August, the Provisional Government collapsed, and the leadership fled into North Dakota exile. Riel and Lépine,



Thomas Scott (1842-1870)

nevertheless, frequently crossed back and into Manitoba and were soon living, more or less openly and permanently, on their farms near St. Vital, a short distance south of Fort Garry. In October 1871 Lépine was even chosen to captain troops from St. Boniface who volunteered to defend against the Fenian incursion, and in June 1872 Riel was nominated to run for election to Federal Parliament for the riding of Provencher.<sup>42</sup> They had hoped such demonstrations of loyalty might lead to amnesty. No amnesty was immediately forthcoming, but neither did the government show much interest in stirring the simmering political pot by bringing them to trial. However, some of those who had been imprisoned with Thomas Scott eventually brought to bear sufficient political pressure to force the issue. Late on Wednesday, September 17th, Kerr, Ingraham, Doidge, and Dupont set out to apprehend Louis Riel and Ambroise-Dydime Lépine.

*It rained 'cats and dogs'. We crossed the Red River on the old scow, scrambled up the bank, and took the road to St. Vital. The guide lost his bearings and didn't know just where we were. I got down from the wagon, tied a white handkerchief to my hat, and went ahead on the road, the team following the kerchief.*

---

<sup>41</sup> Considered a father of Canadian confederation, as he attended all three Confederation conferences, in 1867 McDougall was elected MP for the constituency of Lanark North, Ontario, and served as Minister of Public Works in John A. Macdonald's first government.

<sup>42</sup> Before election day, however, Riel stepped aside in favor of George-Étienne Cartier (1814-1873), who favored granting Riel an amnesty, and who won by acclamation.

Lost in the dark, the posse eventually stumbled upon the homestead of a Métis farmer where they spent the night.

*To this day I believe that he managed to get word to Riel, who lived not far away .... When we reached the Riel homestead, our bird had flown. [While searching the attic of Riel's house] I slipped, and down through the ceiling I fell, right on to a four-poster bed. I made profuse apologies to the sisters of Riel, who were already sufficiently upset by our incursions. We promised to pay for damage and drove along to the abode of Lépine.*

They found Lépine at his home, just about to eat breakfast, showed their warrant and informed him he was under arrest.

*When our prisoner had eaten, he left the large front room, entered a bedroom at the rear, and shortly emerged with a revolver in his hand. 'I could kill every one of you!' he announced firmly, sweeping us all with the fire of his black eyes. I was standing near a large box stove, my own little bulldog<sup>43</sup> trained on him. 'You'd better not try it', I advised him. He muttered something as he cast a glance in my direction, turned, re-entered the bedroom and soon appeared in his suit of store clothes ...*

*Ambroise accompanied us without show of violence, after taking leave of his weeping wife and child. He was even cheerful and companionable on the drive towards the ferry, and, finding that I could speak French fairly well, he addressed his conversation to me as well as to Dupont.*

*I knew many of his friends on the plains. I remembered a night jollification, when my chum Charles Bell and I had pitched our tent among some bushes on the banks of the Assiniboine River [near Headingly, Manitoba]. I recalled that Lépine had been the name of a visitor to a neighboring tent [that of Louis Marion] – a visitor scarcely seen in the darkness. I spoke of the occasion to Lépine and he remembered it well.*



**Webley Bulldog Revolver**

Kerr and Doidge were put in charge of guarding Lépine in the lock-up of the Fort Garry bastion, where Lépine had held Scott and the other prisoners in 1870.

*Lépine was a man of huge stature, six feet three inches at least, and splendidly proportioned ... Straight, lithe, and graceful, he was also quick and sure-footed. He was known as a dangerous man in conflict, a rough-rider, and a marksman ... The days passed until the law was brought to bear on our prisoner.*

---

<sup>43</sup> The .44 caliber British Bull Dog was a popular type of solid-frame, five-shot, pocket revolver manufactured by Philip Webley & Son of Birmingham, England, from 1872.

*The proceedings at first were carried on in English only, but at Lépine's request an interpreter was called for. No better being at hand, I acted in that capacity for a short time, until replaced by a French-Canadian named Garneau.*

Disputes over jurisdiction resulted in Lépine being released on \$8,000 bail in June 1874. His trial finally got underway in October and on November 4th the jury found him guilty with a recommendation of mercy. He was, nevertheless, sentenced to death by hanging, although, in the end, the sentence was commuted to two years in prison and forfeiture of his civil rights. In April 1875, both Lépine (in custody) and Riel (in exile) were offered the amnesty they had sought, on condition that they accept a five-year banishment from Canada. Riel accepted but Lépine refused the offer, choosing to serve out his sentence. While on bail and after his release he returned to his St. Vital farm and often crossed paths with John Kerr.

*I frequently met him on the streets of Winnipeg, or in the bowling-alleys with the inevitable bars which flourished in those wild-west days. 'Jack you, rascal!' he would exclaim, 'how much did you get for arresting me?' If I failed to see his point, he would become somewhat ugly. As a mater of fact, the Government divided \$1,000 between the three of us who participated in the capture and I had realized the sum of \$333.33, a circumstance which induced Lépine to parade me jocosely before his half-breed friends.*

John Kerr was well known around Fort Garry for his musical talent and fine singing voice. One night, in a bar called 'Pride of the West', Lépine, in his cups, demanded that Kerr sing.

*I seated myself at the dance-hall piano [and] sang a verse from one of our old marching-songs of 1870 – which we of the Red River Expeditionary Force used to shout to the tune of 'Marching Through Georgia' ...*

*Our flag has been insulted by the murder of poor Scott,  
Who by Riel's order was so very foully shot,  
The murderers, if captured, will be hanged upon the spot –  
As an example, at Fort Garry.*

*Lépine descended upon me, hammer and tongs, and if a French-Canadian called Gingras had not intervened till others came to the rescue, this page might never have been written, for Ambroise was possessed of almost superhuman force.*

When Lépine was released on bail in June 1874, John Kerr's job as special constable and jail guard ended, but he continued to work for a time as a bailiff and deputy to Manitoba Sheriff Edward A. Armstrong (1820-1907). Later that year he engaged as a bookkeeper for another Perth native George D. Northgraves (1838-1924)<sup>44</sup>, a watchmaker and jeweller, and William Chambers (d.1877)<sup>45</sup>, a gunsmith, working for both simultaneously because their shops were located in the same building.

---

<sup>44</sup> George D. Northgraves was born at Perth, the son of George Northgraves Sr. (1803-1873) and Harriet Hancock (1811-1881). His father ran a jewelers' and watch maker's shop at 23 Gore Street 1832-c1840, later operated until 1874 by George and his brother William Northgraves. In about 1874 George moved to Winnipeg leaving his brother (1843-1908) to operate the shop at Perth until 1888 when William moved his business to Calgary.

<sup>45</sup> Little is known of Chambers except he died on June 28, 1877 and was buried in Kildonan Presbyterian Cemetery, Winnipeg.

After a few months hunched over the ledger books of Northgraves and Chambers, Kerr was happy to be invited to join a party headed west. In a loose partnership with surveyor and sometime trader John McLatchie (1842-1908)<sup>46</sup>, he bought a pony and some trade goods, joined yet another Perth native Frederick Henry Sache (1849-1911)<sup>47</sup> and Thomas Isbister (b.c1830)<sup>48</sup>. In company with a freighter hauling HBC goods to Edmonton, two Methodist ministers and a female teacher assigned to an Indian mission school, they left Fort Garry in September and, after two hard months on the trail, reached Edmonton in November.

At Edmonton, Kerr heard reports of plentiful buffalo in the Bow River country and joined a party heading in that direction. He spent much the winter of 1874-1875 based at a large Métis and Indian camp at Buffalo Lake (90 miles south of Edmonton). Sometimes living as the guest of Indians in their teepees, he traded for buffalo and other hides in the First Nations camps and with hunting parties in the Battle River district.

In the spring Kerr, McLatchie, Sache and Isbister set out to sell their hides at Fort Benton, Montana. On their way, however, they met traders travelling north with supplies for Forts Whoop-up and Standoff who told them prices at Fort Benton were exceptionally low. Taking their advice, the Kerr party turned back and made for Winnipeg. The extended trip meant that supplies ran short.

*We were in that belt of country between the big game and the small game, and for about a week we had nothing to eat except pemmican which, although life-sustaining, becomes monotonous when entirely unaccompanied by other food ... For two meals we ate skunk, but two sufficed to assure us that Providence never intended skunk to be placed on the bill of fare ... For two days we lived on mushrooms – nothing else, except the pemmican grease we fried them in.*

Having sold his furs to the HBC at Fort Garry, Kerr turned his face south and east and set out for his hometown. He took passage on a Red River steamboat boat sailing to Moorhead, Minnesota, but low water forced him to make much of the journey by stagecoach. From Moorhead to Duluth he travelled by rail, then by the steamer *Keweenaw* to Port Huron, Michigan, and finally to Perth by rail.

On April 20, 1876, at Perth, John Andrew Kerr married Mary Margaret Wallace-Wade (1846-1902), the widow of Robert Simpson Wade (1845-1871). Mary Margaret had been born at Alnwick, Northumberland, England, the daughter of Sergeant John Wallace (1785-1852), a Chelsea Pensioner<sup>49</sup>, and his wife Christina Tirrias (1806-1880). She had come to Canada in 1853 with her widowed mother and two sisters, joining her brother, Charles (1828-1872), who had settled at Perth a few years earlier. The Wallace sisters established a millinery shop at 18 Gore

---

<sup>46</sup> A Dominion Land Surveyor, whose work included extensive surveys in western Canada and the maritime provinces, surveys of the western international boundary and the Alaska boundary. He was President of the Dominion Land Surveyors Society 1892-1893.

<sup>47</sup> Born at Perth, the son of lawyer Henry William Sache (1819-1911) and Mary Corbett (b.1827).

<sup>48</sup> Anglo- Métis son of HBC trader Thomas Isbister (1793-1836) and Mary Elizabeth Kennedy (1807-1841) and brother of Alexander Kennedy Isbister (1822-1883), HBC trader, educator, lawyer.

<sup>49</sup> A British Army pensioner.

Street East.<sup>50</sup> Mary had married her first husband at Smiths Falls in 1868 and when she married John Kerr, he became stepfather to her six-year-old son Alfred Seeley Wade (1870-1938).

*I arrived at Perth a bachelor of 24; I departed a benedict of 25, weighted down with my share of the white man's burden ...*

Over the winter of 1875-1876 Kerr invested his \$333 share of the Ambroise Lépine reward money in “a small load of horses, with harness, wagons, and other settler's supplies”. Shortly after his April wedding, leaving his new wife at Perth to follow him later in the season, he took his consignment of horses and supplies to Brockville and loaded them aboard a Great Lakes steamboat. At Windsor, Kerr and his cargo transhipped to the steamer *City of Montreal* “a river boat unsuited to the route, in charge of a captain who had never made a trip up the lakes and knew nothing at all about lake navigation”.

After a long struggle through late ice, on their approach to Duluth the boat ran aground. The struggle to refloat her left Kerr stranded on the barren ice-bound Lake Superior shore for two days, but the horses and other gear survived the mishap, were loaded on rail cars at Duluth and taken to Moorhead. At Moorhead Kerr double-hitched his teams and struck out overland, 225 miles to Winnipeg, through floods sometimes reaching the horses' bellies. “Of the first 100 miles, quite 50 were under water ... near Pembina there was less water, but mud, mud, a sea of mud, all the way from the border to Winnipeg”.

Kerr had hardly arrived back in Winnipeg when, in July 1876, he was recruited to serve with a government delegation tasked with negotiating Treaty No.6 with the First Nations bands around Fort Carleton and Fort Pitt (Saskatchewan). He was signed-on to the expedition by Commissioner James McKay (1828-1879), a Métis member of the Manitoba Legislative Council. The other commissioner was William Joseph Christie (1824-1899), formerly Chief Factor for the Hudson's Bay Company. Kerr was hired as an assistant to Dr. Albert G. Jackes (1844-1888), secretary to the Commissioners.

*I was to provide my own team and democrat<sup>51</sup>, and would be paid so much per diem from the time of departure until our return. I was also to furnish provisions for myself and team at my own expense.*



**Manitoba Lieutenant Governor  
Alexander Morris (1826-1889)**

---

<sup>50</sup> Charles Wallace worked for cabinet-maker Walter Hogg. Sister, Jane Wallace-Maxwell (1831-1871), married Samuel Maxwell (1824-1899), who ran a saloon at 73 Gore Street East, and sister Christina (1839-1922) married a man named Youngson and moved to Montreal.

<sup>51</sup> A type of horse-drawn sprung buggy, often a four-seater.

Led by yet another Perth native, Manitoba Lieutenant Governor Alexander Morris (1826-1889)<sup>52</sup>, they set out on July 27th. Secretary Jackes travelled in Kerr's democrat, Commissioner Christie in another with driver Joseph Genton, and Commissioner McKay, driven by guide Pierre Lavallier, in a buggy custom-built to accommodate his 400 pound weight. As they made their way across a landscape Kerr had traversed only a year earlier, he observed that *"Not a single buffalo darkened the plain. As if by magic they had vanished"*.

At Fort Carlton, while the Lieutenant Governor's delegation met with the first Nations Chiefs on a hilltop about mile from the fort, Kerr found many old friends among those who had gathered to watch the proceedings. These included Sam Steele, now a Troop Constable with the North West Mounted Police (NWMP), and the Dumont brothers, Gabriel and Elie. The gathering at Fort Carlton would be the last time Kerr and Gabriel Dumont would meet, and he would not see Steele again until 1901 when Steele, by then a legend, visited Perth.

As Kerr later made clear, there was much pageantry and flowery talk on that hilltop but no actual negotiations. On August 6th,

*The governor delivered a short address and then outlined the terms of the treaty ... 'I have taken the Indian by the hand ... When I say 'yes' I mean it. When I say 'no' I mean it too. What I promise, and what I hope and believe you will take, is to last as long as the sun shines and yonder river flows'*.<sup>53</sup>

For his part, Commissioner Christie told the chiefs, *"we did not come here to barter or trade with you for the land"*.<sup>54</sup>



**Cree Chief Poundmaker (c1842-1886)**



**Cree Chief Big Bear (1825-1888)**

---

<sup>52</sup> Another Perth native, son of the town's first merchant William Morris (1786-1858) and Elizabeth Cochrane (1784-1857).

<sup>53</sup> *The Indian Treaties of 1876*, by John Andrew Kerr, *Dalhousie Review*, Vol.17, No.2, 1937.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

The Chiefs three times asked for adjournments to consider the offer, but no changes were made to the government dictated terms. By August 28th all had signed except Chief Poundmaker (c1842-1886)<sup>55</sup>. The Commissioners moved on to Fort Pitt where more chiefs signed on September 7th, with only Big Bear (c1825-1888)<sup>56</sup> holding out. Among the official witness signatures on Treaty No.6 is that of John A. Kerr; the others being A. G. Jackes, M.D., Joseph Genton, Pierre Lavallier<sup>57</sup>, W. D. Jarvis, NWMP<sup>58</sup>.

Treaty No. 6 ceded approximately 121,000 square miles (313,400 square kilometers) of land and of that bargain John Kerr would later write,

*If we whites had not come 'to barter or trade for the land' then what exactly were we doing? The indemnities granted the red men on submitting [were] small initial sums of money, certain equipment in tools, livestock and seed, twine for nets, ammunition, medical supplies, promises of educational aid, and five dollars annual cash payment per head with twenty five dollars to each chief, and fifteen dollars to each headman or councillor not to exceed four to a band ...*

*The Commissioners complained that 'negotiations were difficult and protracted', that 'it took five tedious days', in another 'we had great difficulty owing to the excessive demands of the Indians'. Difficult negotiations! Excessive demands! Did the red man get a square deal? My own opinion is perhaps of little consequence. I am but a scribe who can recall these scenes from actual experience. But the text 'For whosever hath, to him shall be given, and from him that hath not ...'<sup>59</sup> – one of the 'hard sayings' of Scripture – seems applicable here. The natives were bamboozled from the start ... history shows that the Indians got the worst of it every time.<sup>60</sup>*

Kerr left Fort Pitt on September 13th and travelled back to Fort Garry via Battleford, arriving October 6th. The round-trip covered 1,800 miles (2,900 Km). *"I received \$4.50 per day from Hon. James McKay for my services. The Governor gave me \$20 for writing out four copies of the Treaty, so that my trip was not unprofitable".*

When he reached Winnipeg in October, he found his wife had arrived from Perth and rented a house. In December, their first child, George Terrace (1876-1937), was born.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> Plains Cree Chief Pîhtokahanapiwiin. In 1885, during the Metis Resistance his band was attacked by Canadian troops at Battleford, Saskatchewan. After the Resistance was suppressed, he surrendered, was convicted of treason and imprisoned. He died of illness soon after his release.

<sup>56</sup> Plains Cree Chief Mistahi-maskwa. At both Fort Carleton and Fort Pitt he tried but failed to persuade other chiefs not to sign, but the withholding of government rations from his band (because he refused to go onto a reservation) forced him to sign in 1882.

<sup>57</sup> Lalvallier was illiterate and signed with an 'X'.

<sup>58</sup> Inspector William Drummer Jarvis (1834-1914).

<sup>59</sup> Matthew 13:12.

<sup>60</sup> *The Indian Treaties of 1876*, by John Andrew Kerr, *Dalhousie Review*, Vol.17, No.2, 1937.

<sup>61</sup> Mary Margaret's son by her first marriage remained in Lanark County with relatives.

Kerr had sold one of the horse teams he brought west in 1876 and kept the other for his own use. In 1877 he contracted as a teamster to deliver nitro-glycerine from St. Boniface to the North-West Angle, from where it was shipped via Lake of the Woods to the Rainy River locks project.<sup>62</sup> Hauling nitro-glycerine by wagon was a risky business but it paid well and that summer he bought a house in Winnipeg, paying cash. He also “*hauled material for construction camps (food supplies mainly) from Winnipeg to the new [CPR railway] line being constructed by the Government from Port Arthur to Winnipeg, in 1878 and 1879*”. Kerr also worked for a time at a Winnipeg soft drink bottling works owned by Samuel West.<sup>63</sup>

In Manitoba Kerr took an interest in Conservative Party politics, working on the campaign of his former commanding officer and fellow Perthite, Thomas Scott, that saw Scott elected to the Provincial Legislature in 1878<sup>64</sup> and as the Member of Parliament for the constituency of Selkirk in 1880. In 1879 Kerr was elected secretary of the Winnipeg Conservative Club.

In 1880 the Kerrs' second child, John Corry Kerr (1880-1903), was born at Winnipeg. During the early years of that decade Kerr was employed as a book-keeper for the *Winnipeg Daily Times*<sup>65</sup> and, always interested in music, served on the management committee of the first Philharmonic Society of Winnipeg. In 1883 the Kerrs moved across the line to the Dakota Territory where John took up farming on tracts of land near Larimore and Inkster. Their third son, Robert Bryce (1883-1883), was born at Larimore, but died there as an infant.

For the first time in more than a decade, John Kerr could only watch events from a distance when Louis Riel led a second Northwest Resistance in 1885. Kerr was still farming in North Dakota when his good friend Gabriel Dumont, serving as Riel's military commander, led the Métis to victory at Duck Lake<sup>66</sup> and Fish Creek<sup>67</sup>, and then suffered bitter defeat in the rifle pits of Batoche<sup>68</sup>.

As the tragedy unfolded, Kerr was deeply conflicted. His Irish Protestant attachment to the British Crown and his commitment to John A. Macdonald's Conservative Party, rubbed hard against his understanding, sympathy, admiration, and love for the Métis people, and for Gabriel Dumont in particular. His rationalization was that the Métis had been 'duped' by Riel. He would later write that although his friend Dumont of the 1870s was,

---

<sup>62</sup> Construction started in 1875 on a canal and lock to open navigation on the Rainy River which joined Rainy Lake and Lake of the Woods. However, construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway led to abandonment of the project in 1878.

<sup>63</sup> The bottling works was established in about 1872 by Alexander Begg (1839-1897), businessman and publisher of the *Manitoba Gazette and Trade Review*, and in 1874 sold to Samuel West who imported \$3,000 worth of machinery from Boston to equip his 'Soda Manufactory' on Bannantyne Street where he produced soft drinks of plain soda, lemon, ginger ale, and spruce beer.

<sup>64</sup> Kerr's Perth friend Charles Napier Bell worked for opposing/losing Liberal candidate Donald A. Smith (1820-1914), later 1st Baron Strathcona and Mount Royal GCMG GCVO PC DL FRS.

<sup>65</sup> Published by Charles Richard Tuttle (b.1848), author of *Tuttle's Popular History of the Dominion of Canada* (1877), *Royalty in Canada* (1878), and *Our North Land* (1885).

<sup>66</sup> March 26, 1885. Gabriel Dumont was wounded, and his brother Isadore killed at the Battle of Duck Lake.

<sup>67</sup> aka Battle of Tourond's Coulée, April 24, 1885.

<sup>68</sup> May 5-12, 1885. Following the defeat at Batoche, Dumont fled to Montana where he worked for a time with Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show. He eventually accepted amnesty and returned to Saskatchewan where he died in 1906 at the age of 68 years. Louis Riel was hung at Regina, Saskatchewan, November 6, 1885.

*... afterwards a rebel, he was then one of the finest half-breeds in the west. Sometimes Dumont was intemperate, occasionally violent, but the genuine kindness he showed me when I was little more than boy, drew me to him. A quality hard to describe, fascinated me. He used a queer trick that has been traced back to older generations of plains hunters – he could call the buffalo in some mysterious manner. Possibly he used some mesmerism on me, as well.<sup>69</sup>*

*They were good to me, and as long as I live, I'll remember them with a kindly regard. I felt very bad indeed to read of my old friends being sent down [to Stony Mountain Penitentiary]; Philip Guardepuy - 7 years, a kindly-disposed, good-natured man; Louis Marion – 3 years, [the English-speaker who had shared Dumont's tent with Kerr during the hunts of 1872-1873]; Alexander Fisher (1841-c1915) – 3 years, a relative of my partner Ambroise Fisher; Moise Ouellette (1840-1911) – 3 years [Dumont's brother-in-law]; Pierre Parenteau (1817-1894) – 1 year [a St. Laurent man and chairman of the Exovedate, Riel's 16-man council]. Their memory lives fresh and green in the heart of le Petit Canada to this day.*

*These Métis have been misunderstood from the first, more especially in the 1885 rebellion. Had the government listened to their grievances at the proper time and given heed to them, for they had grievance, no one now disputes, there would have been no fighting in 1885, but they dilly-dallied too long and waited till the tinder had caught fire.<sup>70</sup>*

*They were simple, kindly people, easily led, but of course had an amount of Indian blood in their veins, some more than others, and once their passion got the upper hand, were more or less ruthless.<sup>71</sup>*

By virtue of the European part of their ancestry, the Métis always stood higher in Kerr's estimation than did tribes of the First Nations. Although he praised First Nations hospitality; "... never was I refused the best they had", and at other times readily shared his own limited provisions with them, Kerr could only be described as a racist in 21st century terms. First Nations people were "Redskins and savages" and like Big Bear (Mistahi-maskwa)<sup>72</sup>, with whom he hunted buffalo in 1873, "a lying, tricky rascal".

*Indians never greatly appealed to me ... By nature, many of the red men were treacherous ... born gamblers, who sometimes gambled even their wives away ... There were jewels among them, loyal chiefs like old Crowfoot, Star Blanket and Mistowasis [but] the tribes as a whole had some pathetically child-like characteristics.<sup>73</sup>*

---

<sup>69</sup> The Indian Treaties of 1876, by John Andrew Kerr, *Dalhousie Review* Vol.17, No.2, 1937.

<sup>70</sup> From *Pemican & Gambling for a Wife*, by John A. Kerr (MS).

<sup>71</sup> *Pemican & Gambling for a Wife*, by John A. Kerr (MS).

<sup>72</sup> Big Bear led the Cree when they were defeated by the Blackfoot at the Battle of Belly River, the largest Indian battle ever fought on the Canadian Plains. The Cree lost 200-300 warriors to Blackfoot losses of about 40. Big Bear initially refused to sign Treaty No. 6 and was arrested for treason after the Frog Lake attack of 1885, although it had been his son who led the Cree warriors that day.

<sup>73</sup> *The Indian Treaties of 1876*, by John Andrew Kerr, *Dalhousie Review*, vol.17, No.2, 1937.

His view of First Nation's women was both racist and misogynistic. In his reminiscences and letters, they are always referred as "squaws" (as was a white woman he met who had married an Indian). He found "a cold-blooded quality in many squaws, particularly as age advances" and described one Cree woman as "... like all the rest. You couldn't tell her age. They nearly all looked alike, though there was an odd good-looking one among them".

On his 85th birthday in 1936, John Andrew Kerr received best wishes, in the form of a poem, from a reader of his newspaper and magazine articles. The admiring widow, who signed herself only as "L.D.E.", captured his racial attitude with considerable accuracy.

*You certainly led an adventurous life  
(I've been reading your tales of the West)  
What with buffalo hunting, and skinning, and such,  
You kept up your end with the best.*

*Of the 'breeds' and the Indians. Played all their games,  
Bet on their ponies, and won all their dames;  
Then handed them back – (not over polite) –  
For this trifling fault – their skins were not white.*

But John Kerr was a man of his times, sharing the racial and other prejudices of his generation, and his surviving letters, articles and reminiscences are crafted in the language of his day. Nevertheless, the fact that a very young man from a small eastern Ontario town not only survived but thrived for five years on the western plains, successfully integrating himself into the Métis-Cree buffalo hunt, speaks volumes about his innate humanity, his ability to learn and to learn quickly, and to set-aside as false the racist prejudices he so casually repeated.

In the same year as the rebellion, the Kerr's fourth son, Homer MacDowell, was born in North Dakota. The following year the family returned to Perth. With Mary Margaret and the children settled in, however, John returned to the west each summer. He worked on the St. Paul, Minneapolis & Manitoba Railway in 1886 and 1887, and in 1888 ran a threshing outfit in Saskatchewan.

Over the winter of 1889-1890, Mary Margaret Kerr's failing health dictated an end to John Kerr's nomadic ways. He became manager of the Hicks House Hotel at the corner of Wilson and Foster Streets.<sup>74</sup> Then, in 1892, at age 41, he was hired as Town Clerk for the municipality, a position he would hold for the next four decades.

As those 40 years in the post testify, John Kerr was a dedicated, capable, and competent Municipal Clerk who played a significant role in the development of the town we know today. In his own words, however, those were "drab years" in comparison to his life in the northwest. These were also years of frequent sadness. His wife Mary Margaret died in 1902, "a sufferer of paralysis for 13 years"<sup>75</sup>, and over the same decades both of his parents, eight of his nine siblings and all three of his surviving children predeceased him.

---

<sup>74</sup> Now the Red Fox Tavern.

<sup>75</sup> *Perth Courier*, November 28, 1902. Samantha Ann Cole-Kerr was buried in the Cole plot in Elmwood Cemetery, Perth.

There were, of course, many compensations, among these his garden and a life-long love for fine horses. He owned and raced trotters and was always in demand as a judge at horse shows across the breadth of Ontario. In 1901 his 1870-1871 barracks bunkmate from Fort Garry, Sir Sam Steele, came to visit, home on leave following the South Africa War.<sup>76</sup>

On December 1, 1913 John Kerr, aged 62, married 39-year-old Samantha Ann Cole-Chamberlain (1874-1933). Born at Belleville, Ontario, the daughter of George R. Cole (1820-1901) and Samantha Sweet (1845-1925), she was the widow of a man named Chamberlain<sup>77</sup>. John would rely heavily upon her for as long as she lived.



*John Andrew Kerr (1851-1940)*

*Monday afternoon [September 11, 1916] shortly after four o'clock, Mr. John Kerr, town clerk, was driving towards town on the 2nd Line of Drummond, just out of town, when suddenly he overbalanced and fell backward from the light cart in which he was driving. When he fell, his head and left shoulder were severely injured, with the result that a clot of blood formed at the back of his neck and is causing considerable anxiety as to his recovery ...<sup>78</sup>*

*... an accident that nearly cost him his life and left him a cripple at the age of sixty-five for the remainder of his days. He finally returned to his office, driven there daily by his faithful wife, but his injuries were so extensive that it was impossible for him to regain more than a fraction of his former strength and agility.<sup>79</sup>*

As the economic catastrophe of the 'Dirty Thirties' struck Perth, the Town Council entertained a crisis motion at their inaugural meeting of January 1932.

*In view of the necessary increase in the tax rate for the current year, as well as subsequent years, it is advisable to curtail all expenses. As a first step .... Council [should] declare all offices vacant and hereby dispense with the services of all officials and employees of the Town of Perth.<sup>80</sup>*

---

<sup>76</sup> Kerr's son George Terrace (1876-1937) had joined Lord Strathcona's Horse during the South African War and served as Sam Steele's batman. In 1910 George established the 'Perth Bottling Works', manufacturing a wide range of soft drinks including iron brew (Irn-Bru), cream soda, lemon soda, ginger beer, strawberry, raspberry, lemon sour, aerated water, siphon soda, etc. In the same year he was the last man to fire the 3-pounder cannons displayed on the forecourt of the Lanark County Court house – see *Perth's Verbruggen Guns* elsewhere on this website.

<sup>77</sup> Constance Kerr Sissons names her as Maud Chamberlain.

<sup>78</sup> *Perth Courier*, September 15, 1916.

<sup>79</sup> John Kerr, by Constance Kerr Sissons (1946).

<sup>80</sup> *Perth Courier*, January 15, 1932.

That motion was narrowly defeated, but was replaced by one creating a 'Financial Retrenchment Committee' tasked with investigating the municipality's personnel costs and "authorized to ask for the resignation of all officers and servants in the employ of the town"<sup>81</sup>

That decision by the Town Fathers brought an immediate protest from some Perth and area residents, in the form of a joint letter to the editor of the *Perth Courier*.

*A scaling down of salaries, temporarily or permanently, may be a reasonable measure of economy, but the wholesale dismissal of officials under the guise of economy is a misplaced and misguided step and one which is associated with injustices and sheer cruelty. This is particularly true under certain circumstances such as pertain to the Town Clerk of Perth.*

*Mr. John A. Kerr is eighty-one years of age. He has served the Town as Municipal Clerk for forty-one years. He is a veteran of the North West Rebellion Expedition. (How they were acclaimed as heroes all, as they marched away, and when they returned). Today Mr. Kerr is physically incapacitated but is mentally keen and alert, a man of splendid intellectual qualifications. While exceptionally competent as a municipal clerk, no man at four score years can adjust himself to a new occupation. What dismissal means to Mr. Kerr is too painful to elaborate upon.*

*Mr. Kerr has reached the period when the citizens of Perth should delight to give him the honor due his years and his long, courageous, and faithful public service. To withhold that tribute is not discreditable to Mr. Kerr, but to the people of Perth. If Mr. Kerr had not been competent, he should have been dismissed several decades ago. This is not an appeal for sympathy on behalf of Mr. Kerr. It is an appeal to the self-respect of the citizens of Perth.*<sup>82</sup>

That the retrenchment of an 81-year-old man should be seen as "cruel" and "discreditable to the people of Perth" may be understood in part by the times in which pensions and social safety net programs were nearly unknown, but the protest also spoke to the high regard in which John Kerr was held by his fellow citizens.

Nevertheless, a month later, under the headline, "Civic Appointments Made by Town Council— On recommendation of Financial Retrenchment Committee",<sup>83</sup> the *Courier* reported that as part of the plan to save the Town of Perth \$2,500 annually, the committee had accepted the resignation of Town Clerk John A. Kerr and appointed Edward Young (1869-1944)<sup>84</sup> to the post of Clerk Treasurer, effective April 1, 1932.

---

<sup>81</sup> *Perth Courier*, January 29, 1932.

<sup>82</sup> *Perth Courier*, February 12, 1932.

<sup>83</sup> *Perth Courier*, March 11, 1932.

<sup>84</sup> Edward A. Young would serve as Perth Clerk Treasurer until 1942 when, at the age of 75 years, he was struck by a car and killed while crossing the road at the corner of Gore and Harvey Streets.



**Major General Sir Samuel  
Benfield Steele (1848-1919)  
KCMB, CB**

For the next eight years, largely housebound by his injuries of 1873 and 1916, John Kerr demonstrated that despite his age he was indeed “*a man of splendid intellectual qualifications*”, living the final chapter of his many-storied life as an author and historian. His articles appeared in *The Canadian Magazine*, *The New Outlook*, *The Canadian Motorist*, the *Winnipeg Tribune Magazine*, the *Dalhousie Review*, and of course the *Perth Courier*. These were mostly tales of his life on the plains and explorations of Canadian history of the period, leavened with a few items of fiction.<sup>85</sup> He was also frequently consulted by other historians and authors, as he was by Sir Sam Steele for his memoir, *Forty Years in Canada* published in 1915.

From the time they shared a bunk at Fort Garry in the winter of 1870-1871 Kerr and Steele had been in regular correspondence and, as Kerr’s biographer observed,

*Without applying to John so hackneyed a term as ‘prince of letter-writers’, it may be said that the letter was his true medium of expression ... in his own opinion ‘The daily life – that is what makes a good letter’. A pen that is seldom idle can turn out quantities of copy. But much of John’s work was written with no thought whatever of publication – a series of articles on old songs, another on favourite hymns, a small collection of dog stories, childhood tales, meditations with a religious cast.*<sup>86</sup>

Little more than a year after he had been sacked by the Town of Perth, his second wife, Samantha Ann Cole-Chamberlain-Kerr, died unexpectedly on August 23, 1933. Kerr moved to live with his son George T. who died in 1937, leaving him in the care of his daughter-in-law Sarah Jane Nagle-Kerr (1881-1957) and his granddaughters.<sup>87</sup>

On the morning of the January 23, 1940, the day preceding his 89th birthday, “*John arose from the breakfast table, reached for a doorknob on which he was accustomed to lean as he hobbled from one room to another, missed it, and fell heavily, fracturing his hip*”.<sup>88</sup> He spent his birthday in

Perth hospital, faded away over the following week and died on February 8th. He was buried beside his first wife Mary Margaret in the Methodist Cemetery<sup>89</sup> at Perth.



- **Ron W. Shaw (2020)**

Those interested in a more detailed account of John Kerr’s life should seek out his biography - *John Kerr*, by Constance Kerr Sissons, Toronto, Oxford University Press © 1946. Long out of print but available in some libraries and on-line at <https://archive.org/details/johnkerr0000siss/page/n1/mode/2up>

<sup>85</sup> The *Perth Courier* published some of his fiction in serial form.

<sup>86</sup> *John Kerr*, by Constance Kerr Sissons (1946).

<sup>87</sup> Mary Margaret (1914-2005), Georgina Gertrude (1926-1996), Alfreda (b.1918).

<sup>88</sup> *John Kerr*, by Constance Kerr Sissons (1946).

<sup>89</sup> #1 Robinson Street, Perth. Now managed by St. Paul’s United Church.