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PERTH IN THE YEAR 1833

By Helen MacGregor, London, England

On December 17th, 1833, my grandfather's cousin, Duncan Crerar¹, wrote his first letter home to his folk in Glen Quaich², Perthshire, Scotland, since his arrival in "*Perth, Upper Canada, North America*", three months before. The four closely written pages give us a good idea of the hardships endured by so many of those highland pioneers, and the disappointments.

He explained that he had not written before because he had taken so long to "*settle down*" after his journey. He told how he had sailed up the St. Lawrence from Montreal in an open boat for sixteen days, on five of which the rain had never stopped falling "*which made it very disagreeable having no place to put off our wet clothes, and no bed to get into*". Then, after leaving the boat he had to make his way, by very bad roads, to Perth.

As soon as he reached Perth, he journeyed on another forty-five miles to see his cousins, "*but I thought very little of their place, the most part of their land being all bogs and swamps, but I believe there is no other kind in this country, at least I have not seen any in my journeyings. Although the place where I landed is 1,300 miles from here, it is the same kind of land*".

Duncan had already found a job at what looks like "*Mr. Laggart's*"³ who had a mill on the upper reaches of the Tay, "*and*" he adds "*I daresay I will continue with him for some time*" because, apart from what he earned, Duncan had no money!

Although the weather was so cold that he had to wear three pairs of stockings, he had managed to keep well, but many of those who had emigrated with him had suffered much sickness brought on by the different conditions under which they now lived.

¹ Duncan Crerar does not appear to have taken up permanent residence locally, or even in Canada. His name does not appear in Sargeant & Miller's *Lanark County Land Transaction 1820-1847*, nor in local cemetery indexes, nor in Donald Whyte's *Dictionary of Scottish Emigrants to Canada Before Confederation*, nor in the ancestry.ca *All Canada Grave Index*. He may have returned to Scotland or, more likely, settled in the United States.

² Glen Quaich is a glen in Perth & Kinross, situated almost midway between Crieff and Aberfeldy. Its upper reaches approach Loch Tay to the west. To the south-east, the lower part of the glen contains Loch Freuchie. At its east end the glen opens onto Srathbraan and the village of Amulree.

³ Not 'Laggart', but 'Haggart' i.e. John H. Haggart (1786-1855), father of John Graham Haggart (1836-1913).

"I do not like this place so well as other people say they do", admitted Duncan, "and I now know that they are not so well off as they word their letters home to their friends to encourage them to come here, and telling great news about their living better than the lairds at home. Indeed, they may have sugar of their own making, but there is no word about the starvation. How they are working among snow up to their knees the whole day, running from tree to tree".

Although the people had turkeys, melons, and cucumbers (all unknown in Glen Quaich) on their tables, Duncan thought *"very little of the manner of living here"*. He warned the folk at home in the Glen that, if they decided to follow him to Canada, they must take Perth as they found it. *"But I do not intend to encourage you"*, he added.

Then followed some facts and figures about employment at Perth and district in 1833.

A good tradesman earned a dollar a day without board, a common labourer, nine dollars a month with board; a woman, three or four dollars a month; and a boy two dollars a month. *"I do not hear of the 18 dollar labourers"*, he adds ruefully.

He told them how the population of Perth was about 2,000 and that there were four churches, though he was horrified at the way in which people behaved on the sabbath day. *"There is much business done here on Sunday"*, he wrote *"fishing and skating is very common. The old stumps are in the street of the town, making it dangerous if travelling on a night when there is no moon"*.

He admitted that Perth was a "bonny" town with the Tay running through the middle of it *"so large as to bear a boat of 100 tons burden to the upper part of the town where Mr. Laggart's new mill is"*. This mill was to cost £3,000. *"There is an old mill, too, and a sawmill.⁴ The boats come to the mill door. The forge is a little below on the bank of the river".⁵*



Haggart Mill c1945

(Archives of Ontario, Eric Arthur Collection, 24 A2/2)

"Fish is very plentiful here; nothing to do but make a hole in the ice; some of them have horns and a beard like a cat. I never trouble myself catching them as I have not seen any fish like the old Glen trout since I came here".

⁴ Duncan Crerar seems to have been employed constructing the "new" £3,000 Haggart mill. John H. Haggart (1786-1855) came to Perth in 1832 and, in partnership with lumberman George Buchanan, leased the "lumber mill" and "old (grist) mill", mentioned in the letter. Those mills had been established, in 1817 and 1819 respectively, by Dr. Alexander Thom (1775-1848). Haggart bought the site and mills in 1833 and added the "new" flour mill, as well as a carding mill and oat mill. The flour mill Crerar helped build, was updated and remodelled in 1870-1871, but was destroyed by fire in 1948. The surviving stone shell was torn down in 1964.

⁵ The forge, "a little below on the bank of the river", was probably that of George Miller (1811-1886), son of saddler Charles Miller St. (1785-1842) and Elizabeth McEwen (1783-1851). Two years later Miller established a foundry on Herriott Street in partnership with his younger brother Charles (1822-1879), an enterprise that prospered for nearly four decades.

This absence of fish like the trout from a highland burn did not surprise Duncan unduly. *“I do not wonder. Even the whole face of Nature itself is different from what it is at home”*.

He says, *“The people pride themselves telling lies and a lot of false stores”*. And he then tells some of the stories which seem to me to be a pathetic attempt on the part of the tellers to maintain their ‘highland pride’.

One highlander had persuaded another to emigrate. He described the wonderful house he had near Perth, the large orchards. On arrival, the newcomer spent the whole day tramping trying to locate the house. When, finally, he discovered that he had passed it unrecognized. And no wonder, because it was a wooden shack *“not so good as our old peat house”*, scoffs Duncan.

He told of another highlander lured to Perth by the rumor that for working in a store he would get the equivalent of £20 the first year and £30 two years later – high wages for that time. On the contrary, the wages proved to be £12 a year in English money!

Duncan himself had been told of a relation who was supposed to own 100 acres of land. Actually, he had none. Some friends he visited proved to have plenty of home-grown food, but no money. The reason was that they were over 40 miles from the nearest market, the roads were so awful that Duncan exclaimed, *“You never saw the like”*, and the cost of sending surplus food to market would have swallowed up all profits.

“Donald MacIntosh⁶ (Duncan’s cousin, living at what looks like ‘Beckwith’ where Duncan frequently visited) has the best land I have seen – forty acres with the old tree trunks still standing three or four feet above the ground, which gives it a dismal appearance”. And there, Duncan tells with awe, it was so cold that the tea was frozen in the cups at breakfast time!

No wonder that, having read the letter, my great-great-grandfather, and his then unmarried daughter, who later was to become my great-grandmother, decided not to follow Duncan to Perth. If they had, instead of being a Scot’, I would have been a Canadian. Odd to think that a letter written almost a hundred and twenty years ago should have affected the destiny and nationality of future generations!

⁶ Probably Donald McIntosh, ticketed July 24, 1819, for Beckwith Township C-8/L-23(SW), patent issued February 4, 1824.