

Joshua Fraser (1838-1888)

Preacher, Author, Prospector

When Joshua Fraser died at age 50 in a fire that destroyed the Shibley Hotel at Sharbot Lake, Ontario, he left as his legacy two books that, a century and a half later, are much valued by Ottawa Valley historians, and others interested in backcountry life during the 1870s-1880s -- *Three Months Among the Moose, A Winter's Tale of the Northern Wilds of Canada* (1881) and *Shanty, Forest & River Life in the Backwoods of Canada* (1883).

Fraser was born in New York State, USA, the youngest of five children¹ born to Reverend Thomas Fraser (1791-1884) and Margaret McNaught (1795-1865). His father was a native of Paisley, Renfrewshire, Scotland, and a Presbyterian minister who emigrated to Upper Canada in 1826 to settle briefly at Niagara before moving to the United States in 1827. In the U.S. he worked as a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church for 17 years until he returned to Canada in 1844 to occupy the pulpit of the Presbyterian Churches at Lanark and Middleville, Ontario. He retired in 1861 and died at Montreal in 1884.

Joshua was educated at the local school in Lanark under the tutelage of the infamous law-wielding Dominie Robert Mason (c1785-1862) and then at Queen's College Kingston 1855-1862. He taught at high schools in Whitby and Gananoque until 1865 when he was ordained and took up the ministry at St. Matthew's Presbyterian Church, Montreal, where he also served as chaplain to the 78th (Highland) Regiment of Foot.

Fraser moved to Kingston in 1872 to oversee the Presbyterian mission of Harrowsmith and Wilton and was then minister at Whitby. In the latter half of 1870s he was also attached to the Lumberman's Mission of the Presbyterian Church, employed in the upper Ottawa Valley and at Glenvale (near Englehart).

The Lumberman's Mission was established by the Presbyterian Church in 1868 and introduced to regions lying along the Ottawa River and its tributaries in 1875, to meet the spiritual needs of lumbermen cut off during the winter months from religious ordinances. Ministers and colporteurs² visited and preached in the shanties for a few weeks or months each winter. Of that work, Fraser recalled,

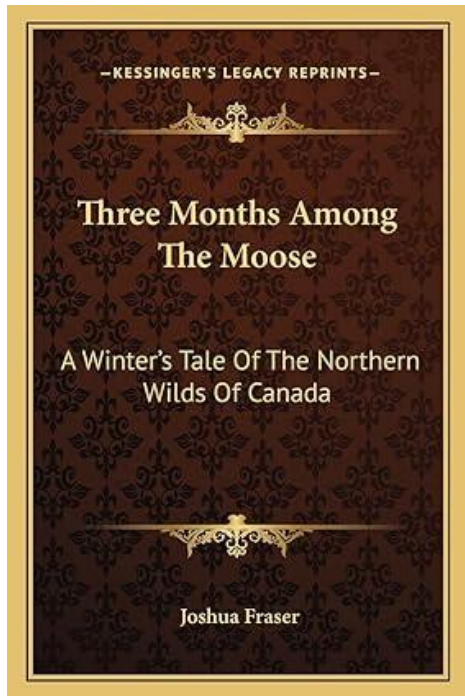


Rev. Joshua Fraser (1838-1888) c1864
(Photo courtesy of the McCord Museum)

¹ Thomas Jr. (1820-1903), Margaret (1823-1861), Mary (1826-1913), Janet (b.1831) and Joshua (1833-1888).

² Distributors of publications, books, and religious tracts.

... as for the shanties, services are never held, except on casual occasions by individuals, and only at great intervals, or by the instrumentality of the Lumberman's Mission, which is an attempt by the Presbyterian Church to overtake this wide and scattered field. Whenever, and whatever, I found it expedient and agreeable to the men, I have held services, esteeming it both a privilege and a duty to do so.³



Fraser's first book, *Three Months Among the Moose*, was published in 1881, but exactly when his extended hunting trip took place is uncertain; presumably at some date in the late 1870s. The book is an enthusiastic account of a winter spent hunting and trapping on the Rivier Noire, a tributary to the Ottawa, east of Chapeau, Quebec. Fraser's adventure, he explains, was made at the behest of his doctor, who warned that,

... unless you give up work and take some months of perfect relaxation and entire change of scene, you will be a dead man in six months.

The demands of ministering to the Presbyterians of Ontario's Kingston-Toronto Presbytery had apparently outstripped Fraser's strength.

For some years, week in and week out, I had been doing the work of two men. There had been a constant and heavy strain upon both my mental and physical energy. I hardly

*knew what it was to have an hour in the week in which I had not an engagement or some professional work to attend to.*⁴

The original holiday plan, he says, had been a trip to Scotland but, at the last moment, he was invited by his "old and trusty friend C___", to join him "on his annual winter trip to one of his far-off shanties on the Upper Ottawa".⁵

Fraser's "friend 'C___'" was Lanark-born William Clyde Caldwell (1843-1905)⁶, son of Alexander 'Sandy' Caldwell (1815-1872) and Mary Ann Maxwell (1818-1872), who had inherited his father's lumber company and timber limits in the upper Ottawa Valley and along the Clyde and Madawaska Rivers. Caldwell also owned a sawmill at Almonte and a woolen mill at Lanark and represented the constituency of North Lanark in the Ontario Legislature.⁷

³ *Shanty, Forest & River Life*, Pg-96.

⁴ *Three Months Among The Moose*, Pg.7.

⁵ *Three Months Among The Moose*, Pg.9

⁶ *Three Months Among The Moose* is dedicated to "Wm. C. Caldwell, B.A., M.P.P. ... whose liberal aid and wise counsels, and genial companionship have afforded me some of the highest pleasures and most substantial benefits of my life".

⁷ Caldwell held the North Lanark seat in 1872-1875, 1879-1886, 1888-1894, 1898-1905.

Fraser joined Caldwell and two of his employees at Sand Point on the Ottawa River. Travelling by sleigh, drawn by a team of fast horses, they passed through Renfrew, crossed the river at Portage du Fort and continued along the river's north shore. In two days, they reached Manitou on the Black River (Rivière Noire), near the present-day community of Waltham, Quebec, across the Ottawa River from Pembroke. "At Manitou [he wrote] *we left behind us the last vestige of civilization and fairly entered into the great piny wilderness of the backwoods*".⁸

After another two days, travelling northeast along the Black River, the party reached the Caldwell shanty and supply depot known as 'The Farm', run by James Maxwell Caldwell (1850-1913), William's younger brother.⁹



William Clyde Caldwell (1843-1869)
(Photo courtesy of LAC)

From 'The Farm', Fraser pushed onward six miles to an Indian encampment where he engaged guides for his moose hunt.

Seymo, was one of the smartest Indians I ever met with. Though over sixty years of age, he was a tall, powerful and active man; a full-blooded Aboriginal and considered a rogue to boot ... Old Seymo had but one son, a smart, active boy of twelve years.¹⁰ The remaining member of the family was a fellow about nineteen. He was called Nick, and was the dirtiest, ugliest lout I ever saw [and] in love with Seymo's eldest daughter, who, I could see, hated him.¹¹

In the dead of winter, with temperatures plunging to -30F (-35C), Seymo, his son, and ugly Nick, led Fraser on a week's long moose hunt through the frozen hills, lakes and forests of mid-north Quebec. "We had no tent, and only one pair of blankets for each man, rather scanty protection ..." ¹².

Having bagged his moose after a lengthy chase, Fraser moved on to spend several weeks with Quebécois trappers Steve and Xavier at their camp a day's hike away from 'The Farm', learning the mysteries of trapping otter, beaver, wolverine, martin, fisher, and mink.

Fraser writes that, on his return to Kingston,

I reported myself at headquarters, on the last hour, of the last day of my furlough, I was not a little amused at the different receptions I met with from my clerical friends. Some congratulated me most warmly on my improved appearance, and the general tone of vigor and redundant health which animated me. Others were somewhat dubious and lukewarm in their greetings. They were not quite sure as to the orthodoxy of my late proceedings.

⁸ *Three Months Among The Moose*, Pg.12.

⁹ In summer 'The Farm' produce hay to feed the many horses required for winter timber cutting.

¹⁰ *Three Months Among The Moose*, Pg.25.

¹¹ *Three Months Among The Moose*, Pg.26.

¹² *Three Months Among The Moose*, Pg.34.

*One, in particular, railed at me for what he was pleased to call “the impropriety and scandalousness of leading such a life as I had been doing for the last three months, that I might have been much better employed than in roaming the forest, sleeping out in the snows, associating with Indians, and other wild men,” and much more to the same effect.*¹³

It would seem, however, there were issues beyond “*associating with Indians and other wild men*” creating friction between Fraser and the elders of the Presbyterian Church. In both 1880 and 1881 he was “*summoned before the presbytery for irregularities*”¹⁴ when the Synod of Toronto and Kingston considered a,

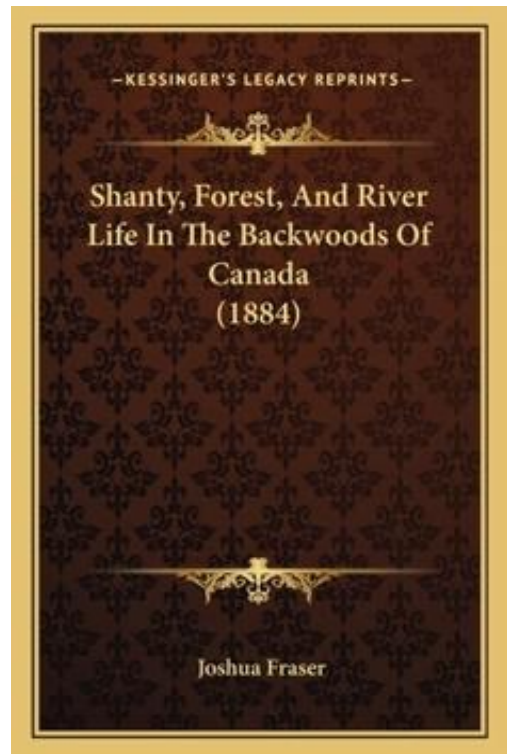
... memorial and petition, containing recitals ... bearing hardly upon his character and standing as a Minister of the Gospel”.¹⁵

*... the offences were proven, and he was later deposed from the ministry. His unsteady habits were against his advancement. He was a victim to drink. He drifted to the backcountry as a mineralogist [prospector] and as a descriptive writer.*¹⁶

Expelled from the ministry, Fraser once again sought solace in the cathedral of the pines. In the early pages of his second book, *Shanty, Forest & River Life*, published in 1883¹⁷, Fraser alludes to his enforced change in career from clergyman of backwoods scribe.

*In one of the vicissitudes of my professional life I found myself in the Fall of 188_,¹⁸ thrown upon my oars, and for some months to come practically my own master ... At this juncture my friend C___, who always turns up at my right elbow in the most opportune style, wrote me most urgently to pay a visit to his shanties ... telling me to “Make myself at home there, and stay as long as I pleased, months, years, a century if I choose”.*¹⁹

The K&P [Kingston and Pembroke Railway²⁰] would carry me within seven miles of C___’s nearest shanty ... near Mississippi Station²¹ ... Manahan’s shanty, ... accommodating 40 men



¹³ *Three Months Among The Moose*, Pg-168

¹⁴ Obituary, *Kingston Wig*, December 28, 1888.

¹⁵ *Handbook – Presbyterian Church in Canada (1883)*.

¹⁶ Obituary, *Kingston Wig*, December 28, 1888.

¹⁷ 361 pages.

¹⁸ Fraser’s winter in the shanty was that of either 1880-1881 or 1881-1882.

¹⁹ *Shanty, Forest & River Life*, Pg-14/15.

²⁰ As the name indicates the railway was intended to connect Kingston with Pembroke but never reached beyond Renfrew.

²¹ North Frontenac County

...²² C__ has five shanties in active operation within a radius of four miles ... distinguished by the names of their respective foremen: Manahan's, Larocque's, Rice's, Craig's and Stoughton's ...²³ situated in a wild, rough country of rocky hills, tangled swamp and boggy marshes.²⁴

Shanty Foreman James Warren Manahan (1837-1909) and Fraser had been classmates at the Lanark Village school in the 1840s.

Fraser's account of his winter at Manahan's shanty paints a colorful, detailed and very human portrait of life deep in the winter-bound forest. He describes the work of fellers, scorers, teamsters, and rivermen; the dangers of falling timber, forest fires, log jams and river rapids; injury, illness and medical treatment; the management regime and discipline of the foreman; diet and the power of the cook; social life; housekeeping; wildlife and hunting; and river driving and rafting to Quebec City.



*Sibley Hotel c1885, Sharbot Lake, Ontario
(Image courtesy Illustrated News)*

was buried in the family plot at Mount Royal Cemetery, Montreal. According to his obituary in the *Kingston Whig*,

*Many of his sketches of backwoods life were realistic and had wide publicity. He was also an author of note. His publications were largely read. He was a man of more than ordinary ability, possessed of much eloquence and energy, and would have honored any profession had he been possessed of an ordinary share of stability.*²⁵

Ron W. Shaw (2025)

²² *Shanty, Forest & River Life*, Pg-16.

²³ *Shanty, Forest & River Life*, Pg-18.

²⁴ *Shanty, Forest & River Life*, Pg-20.

²⁵ Obituary, *Kingston Wig*, December 28, 1888.