

Primary Source

North West Company's William McGillivray March 14 1818 Letter to Honorable W.B. Coltman who was hired by the Governor of Lower Canada to investigate the Battle of Seven Oaks.

The **first epoch** or stage of the conspiracy, commences when Lord Selkirk, in 1811, obtained...so decided an ascendancy in the courts of the Hudson's Bay company. Whatever views of colonization the Earl may have had at an earlier period, it is pretty apparent that a knowledge of the great profits, so tempting to speculative cupidity, arising from the trade in furs of the North-West,...made the Noble Lord's colonizing schemes subside into second rank in the objects of his pursuit...Lord Selkirk denies being individually a fur trader; but what must that person be called who is a partner to the amount of nearly one-half of the whole trading stock of a fur trading company, who directs their affairs, engages their servants and in the Indian country, at Fort William to wit, has actually in his own person traded with the Indians for furs? Who plans an establishment in the interior of the country for the purpose of raising recruits, whose own servants are engaged under the express stipulation of being liable to be drafted into the trading service of that company; and who, in fine, instructs his agent to establish as soon as possible, distilleries in his colony, for the purpose of supplying the company's trade with spirituous liquors? It may be permitted to us in this place to observe, that this is the man who in his Sketch of British Fur Trade, published in 1815, has so unblushingly accused the North-West company of speculating on the vices of their servants and of the natives; who tells the public, that "if an effectual restraint can be put on the sale of spirituous liquors to the Indians in British America, it would contribute most essentially to their welfare and progress in the arts of civilized life;"...whilst the year before...he had directed his agent to erect distilleries for the purpose of supplying those very Indians with ardent spirits..

But had Lord Selkirks's primary object been that of colonization, still **the establishment of a settlement...in the heart of a country whence our people derived by far the greater part of their provisions; a country, the extensive inclosure and cultivation of which, would destroy or remove to a most inconvenient distance, the hunting ground on which we chiefly depended for the means of subsisting our numerous voyageurs, would of itself have been pregnant with distress and injury to our trade.**

Early did we predict that the formation of a settlement, in its ostensible objects of cultivation, so diametrically opposed to the habits and prejudice of the natives of the soil, would produce dissatisfaction, disturbance and bloodshed, between the newcomers and the native inhabitants; and our prediction has been too mournfully fulfilled. ...And early and candidly did we state, both

William Coltman was hired by the Governor of Lower Canada (now the province of Quebec) to investigate to the Government and to our opponents, that we...viewed this projected settlement as in its essence, both injurious to our trading interests and pregnant with the seeds of its own dissolution.

...This pretended scheme of a colony was no other than a cloak thrown over the avaricious designs of the Earl of Selkirk to become a monopolizer of the fur trade...

This leads us to the **second epoch** of these transactions, when Miles McDonnell, the ...governor of Assiniboine issued his proclamation of the 8th January 1814. The cloven foot had before appeared by the assertion of his dominion, as well over the Indians, as over the other inhabitants of the country, of his having the right to interdict them both from fishing and hunting at his pleasure, and requiring them to bring their provisions to him alone for sale; and still more by the pains taken to impress upon the minds of the natives and of the North-West company's servants, that the ruin of that association was at hand, and that their traders would soon be compelled to leave the country, the whole soil of which was arrogantly asserted to belong to the Hudson's Bay company, and under him to their grantee, the Earl of Selkirk.

That the settlers were trained and exercised in arms, for the purpose of forcibly putting into executions the plans of Lord Selkirk for the expulsion of our people from Red River, and eventually from the whole of the North-West, could not be doubted.

The leading events of the **third epoch**, which we consider as commencing with the arrival of Colin Robertson at the Red River, in the Summer of 1815, and terminating at the second dispersion of the colony, after the death of Mr. Semple, though numerous and important, being only consequences arising from antecedent circumstances, require little more than the enumeration of them. They were **1st**, The seizure in October 1815 of the persons of Mr. Duncan Cameron and others, the temporary taking possession of Fort Gibraltar, and the carrying away all the arms from that post. **2d**, The ultimate capture of Fort Gibraltar on the 17th March 1816; the taking of furs and canoes of the North-West company, and sending them together with Mr. Cameron, as a prisoner, to England...the further robberies and provisions and other articles there, and the final destruction of the fort;... **3d** The interception of the North-West express, and breaking open the letters. **5th**. ... **6th**. ... **7th** ... **8th** ... **9th** ... **10th** ... **11th**. The wanton and wicked attack made by Mr. Semple and his party on the detachment who were conducting our provisions, which terminated so fatally to the aggressors.

No one could doubt, that the successive seizure of all the North-West company's posts ...would be followed up by their total expulsion, and to have tamely sat down under these unprovoked aggressions, robberies, and oppressions, was more than could be expected from any set of men;...

The assemblage of the half-breeds requires a little further comment; we need not dwell here upon the organization of that class of men. You are yourself, Sir, personally aware, that although many of them, from the ties of consanguinity and interest, are more or less connected with the North-West company's people, and either as clerks or servants, or as free hunters, are dependent on them; yet they one and all look upon themselves as members of an independent tribe of natives, entitled to a property in the soil, to a flag of their own, and to protection from the British Government.

Now, if a person is aggrieved or in imminent danger, will not the law of nature, which is the foundation of all other law, both bid and entitle him to seek for aid and protection against the injuries and dangers with which he is threatened, amongst those who are able and willing to assist him? And who more able, who more willing, who more bound to assist their relations, their friends, their employers, than those contemned half-breeds?

...The affray of the 19th of June 1816--...it will appear that Mr. Semple and those who perished with him, fell sacrifices to their own illegal and inconsiderate aggression.

Citation:

Great Britain. Colonial Office. (1819). *Papers relating to the red river settlement [electronic resource]* : Viz. return to an address from the honourable house of commons to his royal highness the prince regent, dated 24th june, 1819 pages 133-143 Retrieved at <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=aeu.ark:/13960/t3cz3sf1n;view=1up;seq=155>