The British In Oregon – Dr. John McLoughlin

Sitting on the banks of the Columbia River at Vancouver, Washington, on the 4th of July, one can sit back and enjoy one of the largest fireworks displays in the Pacific Northwest. It is ironic that the explosions are directly over the fort that for 24 years administered Oregon for Britain.

The North West Company was started in Canada in 1779. The owners were known as Montreallers and the traders were called Wintering Partners or Nor'westers. An 1804 treaty specified that any Canadian could trade in US territory simply by complying with American laws, and as a result, NWC employees rushed into the upper Missouri Valley. American Indian agent Pierre Choteau objected that they were not complying with a law that allowed only one trader per tribe. Governor Wilkinson of Louisiana issued a proclamation in 1805 that barred foreign residents from his territory.

The NWC came to the Oregon Country in 1807 under David Thompson, an astronomer and map maker, guided by experienced trappers and explorers Alexander MacKenzie and Simon Fraser. They placed a small wooden sign at the confluence of the Snake and Columbia Rivers that stated, "Know hereby that this country is claimed by Great Britain as part of its territories and that the N.W. Company of Merchants from Canada do hereby intend to erect a factory."

For two years the NWC trapped side by side with Astor's Pacific Fur Company. Both companies at that time were unsupplied from home, and while they sometimes cooperated when serious problems arose, the competition hurt both companies. When confronted by a British warship in 1813 and informed of the War of 1812, Donald McKenzie surrendered Fort Astor to the NWC. Rebuffed by Astor, McKenzie returned to the fort, renamed Fort George in honor of the British king, in 1816 to work for the NWC.

The Hudson's Bay Company was originally chartered by King Charles II in 1670 -- it was a long-standing joke that the initials HBC stood for "Here Before Christ" -- and was confined to British territory around Hudson's Bay. After the French and Indian War in 1763 settled the question of colonial primacy in Canada, the HBC spread throughout eastern and central Canada. Some trappers took it upon themselves to unofficially extend the HBC charter over the Rockies into Oregon.

As early as 1819 there were some Nor'westers eager to consolidate with the HBC. They realized that competition between the two companies would soon deplete the populations of the animals they were trapping, bringing disaster upon everyone involved. Early in 1821, an agreement to unite with the HBC was reached, and that summer an act of the British Parliament amended the HBC charter to allow absorption of the NWC.

The Hudson's Bay Company came to Oregon legally and in force. Governor Simpson administered a vast territory that stretched from Alaska to California to the Rockies. The entire Columbia River watershed came under the sub-jurisdiction of Chief Factor John McLoughlin, a 6'4" white-haired trader from Eastern Canada. Fort George at the mouth
of the Columbia was abandoned in favor of Fort Vancouver, completed in 1825 five miles from the confluence of the Columbia and its major tributary, the Willamette River.

Peter Skene Ogden was assigned to Fort Vancouver as Chief Trader in 1825. McLoughlin immediately sent him to Montana to replace Alexander Ross, who was unsuccessfully trying to implement a policy of excluding American free trappers. Most of Ogden's men deserted him in Montana and became mountain men. Ogden himself would spend the next several years engaged in exploring. By the 1830s, Ogden probably knew more about the West than anyone save Jed Smith.

Ogden and McLoughlin were responsible for maintaining all of the forts along the Oregon Trail past Fort Bridger, which was maintained as a private enterprise by mountain man Jim Bridger. Fort Hall was originally built by Wyeth and later purchased by the HBC; Fort Walla Walla was originally a NWC fort; Forts Boise and Vancouver were built by the HBC.

British fur trapping in Oregon began to decline in 1833, and many trappers retired to farm the French Prairie region of the Willamette Valley. The Puget Sound Agricultural Company was established near Fort Nisqually to encourage farming in that area, as well. John McLoughlin had claimed the area around Willamette Falls in 1828 for the HBC and purchased it for himself in 1845.

Throughout his career, McLoughlin was beset with problems caused by Americans who questioned his authority and resented his presence as the representative of the former colonial masters of the United States. Hall Jackson Kelley, Nathaniel Wyeth, Ewing Young, Jedediah Smith, and Jason Lee were particular problems. Adding to his troubles, McLoughlin's boss would constantly drop in on whirlwind inspection tours.

McLoughlin was under orders to discourage American settlement. When it became obvious that they could not be kept out, McLoughlin encouraged them to settle in the Willamette Valley, probably hoping that he could contain the American presence. He was moved by the plight of newly-arrived immigrants, and many destitute and broken families got their start in Oregon thanks to supplies and equipment he loaned them. At the time of his death, thousands of dollars were still owed to him by American settlers.

Because he defied orders, he was demoted and forced to retire by the British; because he represented the British, his land was confiscated by the Americans. McLoughlin died in a home to which the title had been taken away. His land claims and citizenship were honored posthumously, and today he is considered the "Father of Oregon."

The Great White-Headed Eagle
He stood six foot four inches tall. His abundant hair had turned brilliantly white. For twenty years, he had absolute control over a territory stretching from California to Alaska to Nebraska. The natives called him the White-Headed Eagle.

John McLoughlin was born in 1784 at Riviere du Loup, Quebec. He was the son and grandson of Irish farmers. His mother was a niece of Simon Fraser, for whom the Fraser River was named. Raised a Catholic, McLoughlin left home at 16 to be trained in medicine. At 19, he was practicing in Montreal. He joined the North West Company as a resident physician and fur trader. In 1812, he married Marguerite McKay, the Chippewa widow of a NWC trader who had been killed in the Tonquin disaster. She brought three children, he an older son, and together they had four more.

In 1824 the NWC was absorbed by the much older Hudson's Bay Company (Here Before Christ, it was said of it). McLoughlin was named co-factor of Fort George at Astoria, one of 25 Chief Factors in the newly-consolidated HBC. He was paid 16/17 of a share of the company -- about $8000 a year -- plus a £500 stipend.

McLoughlin was personally appointed by Governor George Simpson to head up 13 outposts from a base of operations at Fort Vancouver. He was the Chief Factor of the largest trading center west of the Rockies prior to the California gold rush. Built north of the Columbia River near its confluence with the Willamette, Fort Vancouver had eight substantial buildings within an enclosure for the 100 whites living there, and a number of smaller buildings outside the walls for a population of 300 Indians. Indians were not allowed inside and were forced to trade through a porthole in the door. Managing the post's fur trading activities was only part of the job. Fort Vancouver also boasted a farm producing food to be exported to Alaska, a small shipyard, a lumber mill, and regular harvests of the astonishing salmon runs in nearby rivers. McLoughlin ran the Columbia district like a feudal baron. He kept it free from war. His influence was wise but his word was law. He employed Kanakas from the Sandwich Islands as servants (these Hawaiians were called "Blue Men" because their skin reportedly took on a distinctly bluish hue during the winter months).

American immigrants started arriving in great numbers in the 1840s. When the overlanders arrived, quite often in dire distress, they were aided with HBC boats and food at The Dalles. McLoughlin sold them goods on credit and advised them of the best lands in the Willamette Valley. John Boardman wrote in 1843, "Well received by Doct. McLoughlin, who charged nothing for the use of his boat sent up for us, nor for the provisions, but not satisfied with that sent us plenty of salmon and potatoes, furnished us house room, and wood free of charge, and was very anxious that all should get through safe."

Immigrants were told of the Provisional Government, which was created from a desire to seek protection from HBC rules, and advised to abide by its laws. In 1845, with British subjects badly outnumbered by the more recently arrived Americans, McLoughlin agreed
to bring the HBC's local operations under the Provisional Government's jurisdiction. Clark County was created north of the Columbia River, and two HBC employees became officers in the government.

This cooperation with the Americans was McLoughlin's downfall. Governor Simpson demoted McLoughlin following an exchange of increasingly argumentative letters. Accused of violating the spirit of his contract with the company and engaging in business on his own, his stipend was eliminated. On November 20, 1845, McLoughlin sent off one last angry letter to Simpson and retired to Oregon City.

In 1829, Dr. McLoughlin had taken possession of a claim at Willamette Falls which would grow into Oregon City. The claim was for the HBC, although he later purchased it from the Company. He surveyed, platted, erected buildings, and made improvements. In 1846 he built his retirement home, but McLoughlin remained a public figure during his retirement. He donated land for a jail and female seminary, and in 1851 he was elected mayor of Oregon City.

The last years of his life were not pleasant. Many Americans could not see beyond McLoughlin's years of service to the British Hudson's Bay Company, and despite the aid he rendered to many overlanders and his willingness to compromise with the Provisional Government, a conspiracy to strip him of his claim and ruin his reputation began as soon as Oregon became a part of the United States in 1849. Samuel Thurston, the Oregon Territory's Delegate to Congress, had written into the Donation Land Act a section giving most of McLoughlin's HBC claim to the legislature. Thurston and Jason Lee made false statements about McLoughlin before the US Supreme Court in an effort to publicly discredit him.

McLoughlin continued to live in his house and became a naturalized American citizen in 1851, while he was serving as mayor of Oregon City. However, the legal challenge continued, and McLoughlin died in 1857 before the injustice could be rectified. In 1862, the state returned portions of his claim to his family. In 1909, his house was spared from encroaching industrial development by moving it up the hill to where it now stands proudly restored as a National Historical Site. In 1957, Dr. John McLoughlin was named "Father of Oregon" by the state legislature.

Written by Dr. Jim Tompkins, a prominent local historian and the descendant of Oregon Trail immigrants