

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

JOHN McLOUGHLIN, JR., AND THE DICKSON FILIBUSTER

One of the most mysterious characters in Minnesota's history is "General" James Dickson. His story has been told on a number of occasions.¹ One of the latest versions appeared as a novel of "best selling" quality, *The Phantom Emperor*, by Neil H. Swanson (New York, 1934). Though some fiction is added to the tale, as told in that volume, the book gives in general a fair outline of Dickson's career and of his "army," with which he planned to fall upon Santa Fé and establish himself as an emperor in the Southwest.

Bits of information on Dickson and his men keep coming to light. The most recent discovery is the correspondence of one of the participants in the expedition, John McLoughlin, Jr., the half-breed son of that Dr. John McLoughlin whose career as a fur trader in Minnesota and the adjacent parts of Canada has been overshadowed by his fame as an administrator and friend of immigrants in the Oregon country.

These letters form part of a large collection of the correspondence of various members of the McLoughlin and Fraser families, one group of which appeared in the *Oregon Historical Quarterly* for December, 1935.² These cover the years from 1805 to 1826 in Dr. McLoughlin's life

¹ See Martin McLeod's diary of the expedition, *ante*, 4: 351-439; other documents from or about the expedition, in *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 10: 264-273 (September, 1923); "The Dickson Filibuster," *ante*, 8: 77; and Anna Heloise Abel, ed., *Chardon's Journal at Fort Clark, 1834-1839*, 117 (Pierre, 1932).

² The entire body of manuscripts is now preserved in McLoughlin House, Oregon City. A notice of their publication may be found *ante*, 17: 111.

and were edited by Jane Lewis Chapin. They add many details to the Minnesota career of the doctor as well as to other phases of his young manhood. In her preface the editor remarks on other material recently made available on this part of McLoughlin's life, but she omits two sources that might be mentioned: Dr. McLoughlin's own account of the fur trade of the Fort William-Lake of the Woods area written about 1805 and now in the Redpath Library of McGill University in Montreal; and a series of his reports of the early twenties from the Hudson's Bay Company's fort on Rainy Lake, now filed in Hudson's Bay House, London. These last are being used by the present writer in the preparation of an article on the Rainy Lake trading posts.

The March issue of the *Oregon Historical Quarterly* carries on the story of Dr. McLoughlin and his family to 1849. In this group of letters are found several by young John. They afford, what has been lacking hitherto, a complete explanation of a member's motive for joining the Dickson expedition. One other member, Martin McLeod, reveals his motives, but only partially, in his papers and diary.

Young McLoughlin's letters and the correspondence occasioned by them set forth a story now prosaic, now full of high adventure. After several years in Paris as a medical student living with his paternal uncle, he returned to Canada in bad repute with his relatives for being an idler and a spendthrift. After he had spent several months in Canada without completing his medical course and had been refused money by his family, he applied to Sir George Simpson for a place in the ranks of Hudson's Bay Company employees. He was refused both that favor and a place in the brigade of canoes en route to Oregon. These facts account for the young man's acceptance of General James Dickson's offer of a place as "major" in his "army." One letter from the young man, written from La Pointe on October 11, 1836, to his cousin, John Fraser, describes his trip to that place.

It also reveals something of the mentality of the young half-breed, especially his concern for duly impressing upon others the rank that he had achieved so quickly and easily:

I wish you would do me a favor that is to order at Boulanget an uniform of Cavalry for me for the Spring to send up by Mr Mackenzie and the Money will be send down early in the Spring by one of our party going down with dispatches the coat must be red work with silver lace on the chest and collar with large silver epauletts and two pair of pantaloons one black and the other the same as those he already made for me, with gold lace on the sides. In fact just an English Life guard dress do not be afraid of the Expense.

Other letters in the correspondence of the Fraser and McLoughlin families refer to General Dickson's plan to capture Santa Fé, to his worthless character, and to other phases of the enterprise. Most enlightening, perhaps, for the student of Dickson's enterprise is a statement in John Fraser's letter to Dr. McLoughlin, written from Terrebonne on April 13, 1837:

You will learn from all quarters that your Son John left Montreal last July, to join one named Dixon, whom he qualified the title of General Dixon. He, this individual had collected Twenty Young Men in the United States along with five from this Province all born in the Hudson Bay's Company territories to proceed and meet him at Waterloo U. S. on 1st Augt & from thence to proceed to Santa Fee Mexico by the way of Lake Superior and continue their Expedition inland, engaging the Natives to join as they went along, and endeavour to take St Fee by surprise.

The fact that twenty of the expedition had been recruited in the United States is new information and it throws some light on Dickson's methods.

It has been a matter of conjecture what happened to young McLoughlin after Dickson's expedition petered out at the Red River settlements. It appears from his letters that he spent the winter of 1837-38 at Fort Vancouver; crossed Canada to Norway House in the spring and early summer of 1838; was very ill in the spring of 1839; went East again that summer; and in 1840 established Fort Sti-

kin. There on April 20, 1842, he was murdered by one of his own men. He appears to have shown great aptitude for a trader's life, in contrast to his half-hearted attempts to become a physician. In this respect he seems to have been a chip of the old block, for his father, though a qualified doctor, seldom practiced, and won his fame as a trader.

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