

James Ross (1835-1871)

The grandson of an Okanagan Indian Chief, James Ross graduated with honours from the University of Toronto, earning the university's gold medal in 1857. He then returned to Red River settlement, joining *The Nor'Wester* in 1861 where he worked as editor and proprietor until 1863. In the spring of 1864 he left for Toronto to study law. He clerked for John McNab, and in the summer, he wrote and passed his exams for admission to the Law Society of Upper Canada. He also received his MA from U of T in 1865.

James Ross was part of a family that played an important role in the Red River Settlement. His father, Alexander Ross (1783-1856), upon retirement from the fur trade, brought Sarah (née Timentwa), his Indian wife, and their children from British Columbia to Red River just after the amalgamation of the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company. He was a historian and administrative functionary in the settlement. He held the position of Sheriff of Red River and was a member of the Council of Assiniboia.

His son James took over many of his roles. This family, prominent in the settlement for over fifty years, can be considered to be representative of the English-Protestant mixed-blood elite of Red River. James later served on the editorial staffs of *The Hamilton Spectator* and *The Toronto Globe* before returning to the West again, this time in the capacity of a lawyer. In 1870, he was appointed chief justice under the provisional government of Louis Riel. In 1871, he became the third man to be admitted to the bar of Manitoba

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James Ross was a master's degree graduate of the University of Toronto and taught briefly at Upper Canada College. He worked for two Upper-Canadian papers, the *Toronto Globe* and *the Hamilton Spectator* and was co-publisher of the first western newspaper, *The Nor'Wester*. Upon his return to Red River, he was appointed sheriff, postmaster and governor of the gaol. Ross was a supporter of Riel's Provisional Government, but declined the nomination to be delegate from St. John's Parish. He then left politics, studied law and was admitted to practice by the Law Society of Manitoba. He later accepted appointment as the Chief Justice of Assiniboia.

Alexander and Sarah Ross raised their children to be adults who were proud of their ancestry. All of the children became prominent citizens, but James was the best known.

Upon the death of his father, James wrote home to his Half-Breed sisters urging them not to lose pride because of the loss of their father. James took great pride in his heritage and challenged anyone who thought him inferior for being a Half-Breed.

During the Red River Resistance James Ross' allegiance was torn between the Old Settlers of Red River and his sympathies, which lay with the Indians and Half-Breeds. Ross quickly became the spokesman and leader of the English mixed-bloods in the November 1869, council meeting with the Métis, to which he was a delegate from Kildonan. His advocacy of cooperation with the Métis at this council, although falling far short of an advocacy of rebellion, separated him from the Canadian Party in the settlement. Ross served as a delegate from St. John's to the Convention of Forty, and was chosen as the convention's interpreter and a member of the influential Bill of Rights committee. He opposed provincial status for Red River but supported the general aims of the resistance, and was appointed chief justice in the Provisional Government. His debates with Louis Riel during this convention make most interesting reading since they were well matched in intellectual prowess.

James Ross died of tuberculosis on September 20, 1871. His death and the exile of Riel deprived Red River of its two most dynamic political leaders.

References

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