

La Loche Boat Brigade Leader Jean Baptiste Bruce (1809-1890)

Jean-Baptiste Bruce was born on September 15, 1809 at Ile-à-la-Crosse. He was the son of Pierre Bruce and Marguerite Desrosiers. His brother, John Bruce, born in 1831 was a carpenter and was the president of the Provisional Government of Red River in 1869.

Jean-Baptiste Bruce married Catherine Perrault, born at Pembina, the daughter of Louis Perreault and Madeleine Ducharme. They were married sometime before 1846 and had four daughters and two sons.

Bruce was a leader for one of the La Loche brigades. The La Loche boat brigades had one of the most demanding jobs in the fur trade. The Methye Portage was the longest portage (20 km) in the fur trade traversing the height of land between the Hudson Bay watershed and the Arctic watershed. It lies between the top of the Churchill River system on the southeast and the Clearwater River, which flows into the Athabasca River on the northwest. Methye is Cree name for a burbot or fresh water codfish thus the voyageurs gradually supplanted the Cree name with the French term for the same fish, loche (or lotte).

Roderick Campbell writes about the La Loche Brigade of 1860:

After a long winter of festivity, fiddling and dancing through all the frozen months, a portion of the population, on the approach of spring, turned again to the labour of farming, freighting, and buffalo hunting on the plains. Early in June two fleets of boats left the fort for Portage Laloche to take the Mackenzie River goods and bring back furs on their return for transport to Hudson Bay. Two specially qualified river guides accompanied this annual expedition. Their names were Alexis L'Esperance and Baptiste Bruce. L'Esperance was a Canadian of long service, since 1815 in fact, and in 1824 was a midman in Sir George Simpson's canoe on a visit to the Island of Vancouver.¹

In June of 1862 J. J. Hargrave comments on the La Loche boat brigades from Red River lead by Baptiste Bruce and Alexis L'Esperance:

Of the two men, Baptiste Bruce is junior in point of years, born in the English River district, he commenced his career as a mid-man in the boats of that district in 1826. After two seasons passed in that capacity, he was promoted to be steersman, and on the expiry of a third year, his abilities and knowledge of the route traversed by his boats, were considered sufficient to warrant his promotion to the position of guide to his brigade. After about seven years occupancy of this situation he left the service for a time and settled at Red River. Subsequently he passed some years in the Lac La Pluie brigade, and also in the extreme north in the Mackenzie River district, where, on the western branch of the Laird River, the navigation of which is difficult and

¹ Roderick Campbell. *The father of St. Kilda; twenty years in isolation in the sub-arctic territory of the Hudson's Bay Company*. London: W.R. Russell & Co. Ltd., 1901: 131.

broken, he was considered a skillful pilot. On the partition of the Portage La Loche brigade into divisions about the year 1848, he was appointed to the charge of one of these, which he has held ever since, his duties obliging him to travel during the summer months and permitting his residence at home during the remainder of the year, between September and May.²

In 1850 Jean-Baptiste was the first guide for Dr. John Rae and Dr. John Richardson in their search for the Franklin Expedition. The expedition set out by canoe from there on 4 May and reached the mouth of the Mackenzie River 96 days later. Proceeding eastwards along the coast as far as Cape Kendall (on Coronation Gulf), the men abandoned their canoes and travelled overland to winter at Fort Confidence on Dease Bay (Dease Arm),



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² Joseph James Hargrave. *Red River*. London: Office of the Minister of Agriculture and Statistics of the Dominion of Canada, 1871: pp. 236-237.