

Captain William Kennedy. (1814-1890)

By Audreen Hourie.

William Kennedy was a bit unusual for a Metis of his times as he earned his claim to fame not on the Prairies but on the oceans of the Canadian north.

Kennedy was born at Cumberland House in 1814 to a Cree woman named Aggathas and Alexander Kennedy, a Hudson's Bay Company post manager. When he was seven, he traveled to Scotland for his education, returning to Canada seven years later to become a clerk with the Hudson's Bay Company. He worked for them until 1846.



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In 1850, Kennedy's life took a new direction. He accepted a request from Lady Franklin to search for her husband. Sir John Franklin and his crew had become lost in the Arctic some four years earlier and several search parties had failed to locate him. So, on May 25, 1850, the Kennedy team left from Aberdeen Scotland to begin their search. In September, Captain Kennedy and four of his men were accidentally separated from their ship, the Prince Albert, while they were out walking on the ice floes. Being lost in the Arctic would mean certain death for most men, but not Alexander Kennedy. His Indian mother had taught him survival techniques, and he had learned them well. The crew of the Prince Albert found the five men tired but safe and healthy nearly six weeks later.

The voyage continued for months afterward and Kennedy returned to Britain without a trace of Franklin. However, the mission was successful in other ways. Kennedy had explored and mapped territories yet uncharted, one of these was the tip of North America. A total of twenty-three expeditions were to search for the lost explorer before a stone cairn was discovered that told the fate of Franklin and his men. Kennedy also gave public lectures about his voyage and gave advice on how to survive in the Arctic. This was a popular subject in those early days of Arctic exploration in Canada.

In the 1860s, Kennedy returned to the Red River district where he took up the cause of Metis Free Trade rights. He was a trusted and admired friend of Metis and non-Natives alike. He returned to live near Lockport and built a beautiful stone house on the banks of the Red River. This home is today the Red River House Public Museum.

From his home, Kennedy continued to be active in local affairs. He played a major role in the establishment of the Manitoba Historical and Scientific Society, giving a lecture called "The Northwest Passage" at its first meeting.

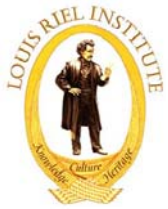
William Kennedy died in 1890. His memory has been honoured in several ways. In northern Canada, three sites bear his name; Port Kennedy, Kennedy Channel, and Cape Kennedy. Closer to home a brass plaque hangs on the wall of St. Andrews Church,

dedicated to Kennedy by the famous Antarctic explorer, Sir. Edward Shakelton, in 1910. Finally, a painting of Captain William Kennedy, renowned Metis explorer, hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in London, England.

Reference

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