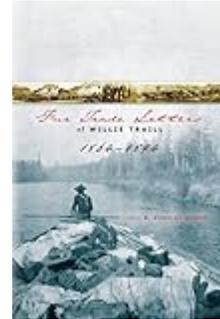




K. Douglas Munro, ed. *Fur Trade Letters of Willie Traill: 1864-1894*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2006. xxvii + 339 pp. \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-88864-460-2.



Reviewed by George Colpitts (Department of History, University of Calgary)

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This collection of later nineteenth-century correspondence from a Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) trader promises to add perspectives to western Canadian history, Canadian literary history, and fur trade studies. For scholars who have drawn from the magnificent Traill family papers at the Canadian National Archives in Ottawa or who have worked from copies in other archives, having William (or "Willie") Traill's letters published in one volume will be welcome news indeed. These letters form a convenient comparative to other published collections and narratives describing life in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fur trade: the two most directly related are the compiled letters of Traill's brother, Walter, *In Rupert's Land: Memoirs of Walter Traill* (1970) and the narrative of Isaac Cowie, *The Company of Adventurers: A Narrative of Seven Years of Service of the Hudson's Bay Company during 1867-1874* (1913). Moreover, the case of the Traill brothers, both in HBC service, is more intriguing still given the fame of their mother, none other than Catherine Parr Traill, whose renown as a writer, especially for her *The Backwoods of Canada* (1836), was well established by this time. Even without this interesting letter recipient in mind, Willie Traill's letters are engaging. They add considerably to our understanding of the rapid changes in the Western British Territories before and after its transfer to Canadian care, and the state of the fur trade in the later years of the nineteenth century.

Letters, it is often remarked, are fascinating reflections of their historical contexts. Of course, Traill's can often frustrate the reader for their narrow concerns. A fur trader, Traill often digresses upon familiar posting irritants—poor trails, broken cart axles, dilapidated housing. More intriguing, however, are the letters' omissions and abstractions. Traill was no ethnologist. He described the people in the Northwest as a bloc, not, as many of his trader colleagues and predecessors did, by tribal nationality or even band association. Instead, at least to his audiences, this fur trader generalized the "other" as non-personalized "Indians" and became party to an obviously widespread romantic discourse among the fur traders, already cultivated by the likes of Washington Irving and Charles Mackenzie. Romance, it seems, now followed these men to their postings where they referred to themselves, as Traill did, as "Magnus T—The Nor'wester" (p.16) and "your precious Nor'wester" (p. 50). Traill indeed witnessed much in his career of almost thirty years, beginning in 1864 with his posting to Fort Ellice. He recorded the last of the buffalo hunt, the uncertainty of the transfer of Rupert's Land, the news of the Red River resistance and later Riel Rebellion, and the coming of the railway. Many of his letters to his mother and later to his niece followed from postings to Touchwood Hills (1867-69), the Saskatchewan River posts (1869-74), Lac La Biche (1874-81), Lesser Slave Lake (1881-85), Vermilion (1869-89), and

finally Fort St. James (1889-93), where Traill served as Chief Factor. His falling in love with and “choosing a native for a partner for life,” Harriet (daughter of the well-known HBC man, William McKay), however, provides the most interesting reading: this individual, absorbed into what was almost a dime novel narrative, constantly felt compelled to defend his choice and distinguish the merits of a Mātis wife.

These letters, then, provide an intriguing exercise in critical reading. They are worth the effort, though, if only for the brilliant light they shed on business life and family concerns in the northwest. Traill is most candid describing his children, their early development and endearing antics. The deaths of three (of twelve) from nineteenth-century infectious diseases are recounted in the most touching passages of the collection. Traill reveals his own individuality, despite pioneer surroundings. Not a typical “Nor’Wester” by any means, he was fastidious in his post management, every bit touched by nineteenth-century ethics of proper behavior and hard work, and intensely religious—a fervent Anglican.

The edition does have shortcomings. Compiled and edited by one of Traill’s descendants, the volume pro-

vides little more than four pages of introduction and scant footnoting. Although K. Douglas Munro has provided an introduction to each of Traill’s new postings, the uninitiated will have trouble relating Traill to his times. Much more effort should have been undertaken to explain business and administrative changes occurring in the HBC, the caps on salaries and promotions with which Traill constantly contended, the changing nature of the post system itself, and the company’s now visible mark on northwestern life with steamship service more available and an almost independent and American-dominated transport system bringing in ever larger volumes of goods. The pressures on traders like Traill were enormous in a period when the company’s fortunes and power steadily declined, farming and settlement opportunities drained much of the best talent from the service, and long-service traders like Willie Traill worked for a company weakened by widespread demoralization, which Harold Innis described so well in the later sections of *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History* (1930).

That said, these published *Fur Trade Letters* provide valuable glimpses of life in various parts of the northwest, during a formidable period of change.

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