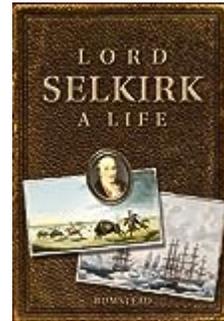




J. M. Bumsted. *Lord Selkirk: A Life*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2009. Illustrations. xvii + 517 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87013-853-9.



Reviewed by Wendy Cameron

Published on H-Canada (June, 2009)

Commissioned by Stephanie Bangarth (King's University College, UWO)

Walking in the Shoes of Lord Selkirk

J. M. Bumsted has been thinking and writing about Lord Selkirk for some thirty years of an impressive career engaged with the history of Manitoba, Canada, and Scottish emigration. *Lord Selkirk: A Life* advances these fields in the course of a detailed account of the life of Thomas Douglas, fifth Earl of Selkirk, 1771-1820. The biography is a full exploration of his early life and the people and events that influenced him as well as a stirring narrative of his wild ride as the founder of the Red River Colony and as a shareholder and leader of the Hudson's Bay Company in the contest with its North West Company rivals for the fur trade.

A fire in 1940 at the family home at St. Mary's Isle in Kircudbright on the southwest coast of Scotland left great holes in the Selkirk Papers (p. xi). Bumsted challenged himself to write around a dearth of personal material. His familiarity with all aspects of the documentary record—most of it relating to business matters—has roots in his work as the senior editor of the Selkirk Project and as the editor of the two volumes *The Collected Writings of Lord Selkirk* (1984, 1988). There are passages from the

biographical essays that introduce these volumes in the book under review, but more important is the choice of 1809 as the pivotal year in Selkirk's career. Selkirk transformed himself from a minor figure of the Scottish Enlightenment to a man of action, a man reflecting a shift in the mindset of his society away from a reasoned approach and toward Romantic Adventure (p. 179).

The fifth son to survive childhood and the only son to survive his father, Selkirk attended the University of Edinburgh and gained access to intellectual circles on an extended visit to Paris in 1791. With his title, he also inherited a family history of opposition politics. Ambitious, restless, and impetuous, in Bumsted's estimation, Selkirk initially turned to colonization and North America as a stepping-stone to a career at home. Although less radical than his father and charismatic eldest brother, Selkirk carried on their unsuccessful fight to reform the Scottish peerage long enough to complicate his relations with conservative politicians after he had made his peace with them and won election to the House of Lords. An interval of paying close attention to British politics and

his wartime duties in Kircudbright did not satisfy him, and he turned back to North America after acquiring an interest in the Hudson's Bay Company.

Selkirk's first emigrant settlers sailed in 1803 in three ships from Scotland to land he had purchased in Prince Edward Island. He had, by then, revised several times his original proposal to send Irish emigrants to Louisiana in the aftermath of the Irish rebellion of 1798 in order to find a colonization scheme that he could implement. Although the Prince Edward Island Highlanders would have preferred Upper Canada, they proved more fortunate than their countrymen who went in 1804 to the swampy and malarial Baldoon in Upper Canada. Selkirk was closely involved in planning and visited both settlements in an extended tour in North America, but they were to be run by agents. The problem was that finding loyal agents would be much more difficult in North America than in Galloway, and, more to the point, Selkirk would be thousands of miles away and unable to supervise them (p. 128). Bumsted's critique of Selkirk's operations hinges on these two points. He returned to write his well-received *Observations on the Present State of the Highlands of Scotland* (1805), which Bumsted uses to show how Selkirk had thought out his ideas about agrarian society and emigration.

The second challenge to a Selkirk biographer that Bumsted raises in his preface is logistics. Whether he was in Scotland or Canada, Selkirk learned long after the fact of events in distant places that affected him deeply. Logistics were a particular difficulty when Selkirk was in the field in Red River for most of 1817 without knowledge or much concern for the political and public relations contests that he was losing separately in Britain and in the eastern centers of power in Canada. Bumsted's solutions shaped the book. He includes necessary summaries of the positions of other players, but his emphasis is on Selkirk and what was real time for him. This approach allows Bumsted to keep a historian's distance from his subject while engaging enough of a novelist's empathy for a tragic hero to tell a great story. For any reader who is finding the politics of electing peers in Scotland a little slow and wondering about the length of the book, the pace picks up and races across the western plains.

Bumsted disagrees with those who speculate that the Red River project was long in the planning even though Selkirk had had thoughts of a settlement there in the past. Selkirk's mixture of careful planning and impulsive disregard for problems led Bumsted to speculate that the agitated energy and stubborn obsessions of his later life fit

the recognized pathologies of consumption (p. 97). An investment in undervalued stocks turned into a successful request for Selkirk's huge grant only after he joined his brothers in law in trying to revitalize the Hudson's Bay Company. What follows in the second half of the book are the events of the most familiar years of Selkirk's life: the slow and slogging hardships for his people of reaching and trying to establish the Red River settlement hundreds of miles from York Factory, as what could have gone wrong went wrong, and rising confrontations with the North West Company during which the advantage swung from one side to the other (p. 233). In a situation not unfamiliar on the frontiers of British colonies, both imperial and local governments refused to move in and take responsibility for law and order and left private citizens to resort to force.

Selkirk was in North America and in charge from late in 1816 until the end of 1818. He was on his way West at the time of the Seven Oaks massacre in which the company's Governor Robert Semple and twenty-one of Selkirk's settlers died. Bumsted describes Selkirk's rapid journey and his use of his small private force of ex-soldiers to reassert control over the fur trade as brilliant in the military terms of a field commander. Yet it was clear even to Selkirk that he had overstepped a shaky legal position. After remission in the symptoms of tuberculosis in the West, his health broke for a final time under the stresses of a string of court cases in Upper and Lower Canada in 1818. Bumsted steps neatly through his difficulties as an outsider and the political and legal issues that stacked these cases in favor of his opponents. Selkirk returned home and died in France in 1820, still working to clear his name and having spent his personal fortune with little visible return. A coda reviews briefly how the various parties fared as a result of a merger of the two fur trading companies in 1821 with the final advantage going to the Hudson's Bay Company.

The author's emphasis on what mattered most to Selkirk ensures that this book will spark discussions and quite possibly new work. If the early date has excluded Selkirk from many studies of the waves of British colonization following the Napoleonic Wars, Bumsted makes a strong case for more consideration. On the side of possible omissions, questions have been raised already as to whether Bumsted gives native peoples due attention. In Britain, Selkirk's Scottish agents must have thought hard about their priorities for his estates under the pressure of his demands for money. War and revolution marked the span of Selkirk's life. A bit more prominence for the signposts to major events would have been an aid to the

non-specialized reader. A single map is a disappointment in such a visual story spread over so wide a canvas. The only map at the front of the book identifies key places in North America and outlines the western grant, but it is of limited help in following the territorial disputes of the fur trade and the Red River settlement is not labeled. Mapping Selkirk's other land holdings in Canada, the United States, and Scotland, and perhaps some of his routes, would have underscored his ambitions and the difficulties of his undertakings.

Lord Selkirk fulfills the claim on the dust jacket that it is a definitive biography of the fifth earl which super-

cedes earlier accounts of his life. The book won the J. M. Defoe Book Prize for 2009. It presents a life described in terms of its context—an interesting approach with wider implications for the writing of other historical biographies. Selkirk's assumption of privilege, his paternalism, and his version of imperialism are woven into his actions. Bumsted gives the last word on Selkirk to his wife who went with him to Canada where she seconded his efforts with spirit to good effect. She believed that time would restore his name and reputation and that his memory would live after the North West Company was forgotten. His biography meets her wish for vindication to some extent (p. 428).

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Citation: Wendy Cameron. Review of Bumsted, J. M., *Lord Selkirk: A Life*. H-Canada, H-Net Reviews. June, 2009.

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