GLIMPSES OF THE LIFE OF CATHERINE MOIGNON PATENAUDE SIMPSON 1832-1906

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In the census of 1901 there is an entry from Onion Lake, North West Territories (Saskatchewan) for Catherine Simpson, age 70. She is identified as "Iriquois" [sic] under the column "Racial or Tribal Origin," her "Nationality" is "Indian" and her "Mother Tongue" "Cree."[1] This is almost the last document I can locate for Catherine Moignon Patenaude Simpson who led a long and eventful life in the Canadian West. Her ancestry reflects the diversity of the people of what became Canada; her father was Haudenosaunee, her mother Métis. Her language was Cree.

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There is a famous 1863 photograph of her, her husband, son, and the English tourists she helped guide from Fort Pitt (Saskatchewan) over the Rockies to the coast through arduous

1 Library Archives Canada. 1901 Census Item no. 87313. Sub-district Onion Lake. Available here. Her husband James Keith Simpson is 76 and he is listed as "Scotch" under the "Racial or Tribal Origin" and "Nationality" columns. Some of the findings in this article also appear in Sarah Carter and Inez Lightning, *Ancestors: Indigenous Peoples of Western Canada in Historic Photographs*, Bruce Peel Special Collection, University of Alberta, Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2021, pp. 18-20

conditions.[2] However, her erasure from history (outside of her family and community) has been so complete that recent publications clip her out of the photo. From the glimpses we can capture of her life, she was an exceptionally courageous, resourceful and resilient Indigenous woman who was swept up and carried along by the momentous events of that era related to the acquisition of the West by Canada, the treaties, and the resistance of the Métis. This short article takes a takes a step toward reviving and restoring her history and legacy.

Catherine Moignon had a long family history in the region of Frog Lake; she was born there in 1832.[3] This is in the parkland or transition belt that divides the plains from the northern forested regions, (on the Alberta side of the border with Saskatchewan). It is the home of the Woods Cree including her band under the leadership of Chief Seekasskootch.[4] Her mother, Marie Nadeau, was Métis. Her father Joseph Moignon was the "Iriquois" of the 1901 census. Haudenosaunee men were employed by the fur companies because they were expert voyageurs, hunters and trappers, and they also worked as interpreters and guides. When their contracts expired, some of the Iroquois remained, making their living as freemen, marrying and raising families. The Métis, including Catherine's mother, also occupied this region, where after the establishment of Fort Pitt in 1830, the locals provided buffalo hides, meat and pemmican to the Hudson's Bay Company. As Cree historian Joe Dion wrote, the Cree called Fort Pitt *Waskahikanis*, or the Small House, and it was located at an ancient crossing of the Saskatchewan River.[5]

In 1848, at age sixteen, Catherine was married at Fort Pitt to Louis Patenaude. He was known as "The Assiniboine" as he had been raised among them.[6] He spoke a mixture of Cree and French. They had two sons, Benjamin and Louis, who survived to middle age, and were also members of the Seekaskootch First Nation, and two daughters, Margaret and Catherine who died young of smallpox.[7]

We have Viscount Milton (William Wentworth-Fitzwilliam) and Dr. Walter Butler Cheadle to thank for the glimpses they provide of Catherine in 1863 through the records they created of the

2 See the covers of Walter B. Cheadle, Cheadle's Journal of Trip Across Canada, 1862 – 1863 (Victoria: Touchwood, 2010) and Michael Shaw Bond, Way Out West: On the Trail of an Errant Ancestor (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2001).

3 Library Archives Canada. Scrip record of Catherine Moignon. A genealogical site indicates that Catherine's last name may not have been "Moignon" as in the scrip application, but "Mondion" or "Mondlon".

4 Catherine appears as "Mrs. Simpson" on the treaty annuity paylists. See LAC, RG 10, Reel C7146, Canada Heritage Online. Her sons Louis and Benjamin Patenaude were also members of the Seekaskootch First Nation.

5 Joe F. Dion, *My Tribe the Crees* (Calgary: Glenbow Museum, 1979) 76.

6 Viscount Milton and W.B. Cheadle, *The North-West Passage By Land* (London: Cassell, Petter, and Galpin, 1865): 176. There is no record of which Assiniboine/ Nakoda/ Nakota people he was raised among.

7 LAC, Métis scrip application of Catherine Moignon, 1886.

expedition.[8] Milton, from a wealthy, noble British family, suffered physical and mental ailments, and his companion Cheadle was a medical doctor. They sought adventure, and after the fact, claimed they were in search of a direct route through British territory to the gold regions of the Cariboo, though a recent study explains that Milton was ordered out of England by his father, as he was "mixing with bad company in gaming houses and brothels."[9] The father paid for Cheadle to accompany his son. On his return to England, Milton's reputation was restored, as he was "received as a conquering hero," and his talks and publications with Cheadle became hugely popular.[10]

Catherine and her husband met the hapless travelers at Fort Pitt, in April 1863. A child of theirs had just died (according to Milton and Cheadle) after an unspecified illness, and the Assiniboine, an accomplished voyageur and hunter, agreed to assist the party across the mountains, but only if his family could accompany him. The Englishmen were reluctant, fearing so many mouths to feed, but later admitted the arrangement "proved our salvation."[11] They soon met up with another helpless foreigner, eccentric Irishman and scholar Eugene Francis O'Beirne, ("Mr O'B") who would prove a nuisance and a handicap.[12]

> **"They were obliged to butcher their horses to survive and she dried the meat. One day the party survived on a tasty porcupine."**

The Assiniboine was resourceful, knowledgeable, adept and strong (though he only had one hand) but so was Catherine. She cooked, gathering what she could en route; one day when the party was weak with hunger she made a paste of a large quantity of bilberries [small blueberries] mixed with a small amount of flour.[13] On another occasion she produced some dried meat she had saved for when they were near starvation.[14] They were obliged to butcher their horses to survive and she dried the meat. One day the party survived on a tasty porcupine. She did the laundry and patched together shreds of moccasins.

8 There are several works created by William Wentworth-Fitzwilliam, Viscount Milton and Walter Butler Cheadle. These include "An expedition across the Rocky Mountains into British Columbia,by the Yellow Head or Leather Pass," Royal Geographic Society, *Proceedings* (London) IX (1864-65, 17 – 21; *An Expedition across the Rocky Mountains into British Columbia, by the Yellow Head or Leather Pass* (London, 1865); and *The North-West Passage by Land: Being the Narrative of an Expedition from the Atlantic to the Pacific... to British Columbia... by one of the northern passes in the Rocky Mountains* (1st ed. London, 1965, 9th ed., London, 1901). Cheadle's journal was first published as *Cheadle's Journal of A Trip Across Canada, 1862 – 1863*, intro. and notes by A.G. Doughty and Gustave Lanctot (The Canada Series, ed. F.P. Grove, I, Ottawa, 1931).

9 Catherine Bailey, *Black Diamonds: The Rise and Fall of an English Dynasty* (London: Penguin Books, 2007): 36.

10 Ibid., 41.

11 Milton and Cheadle, *North-West Passage*, 177.

12 Lewis H. Thomas, "O'Beirne, Eugene Francis," Dictionary of Canadian Biography, v. 9 (1861 – 1870).

13 *Cheadle's Journal*, 204.

14 Ibid., 209.

Catherine hacked through dense underbrush with an axe; Cheadle noted she "cut away much better than I can, "chopping away with "untiring perseverance."[15] She saved horses stuck in bogs, in one case having "taken off the packs & trying to whack [a horse] into sufficient exertion to get out again."[16] She was angry at Mr O'B for not coming to her aid and she "relieved her feelings by a torrent of violent language in the Cree tongue, eminently abusive of Mr O'B, who she declared… took to his heels and bolted, afraid lest he should be left behind with only a female protector! She was very indignant, and declared she would never lift a finger to help him in anything for the future."[17]

> **"Without her and her family, these English greenhorns would not have been able to defy starvation and fight their way across torrential rivers and dense forest for eighty-seven days."**

The trip ended in Victoria where their photograph was taken, and where Milton and Cheadle claimed to have "clothed them in gorgeous apparel, seated them in a 'buggy' drawn by a pair of fast-trotting horses" and showed them the sights.[18] They all attended a performance of the dancers, singers, actors and comedians the Marsh Troupe. In his journal Cheadle noted that in Victoria "Everyone knew 'Our Indians,' & they had numerous visitors in the old cabin they lived in by permission of the Hudson's Bay Company."[19] (While Milton and Cheadle stayed in the rather more posh Hotel de France.)

If Milton and Cheadle are to be credited with helping "prepare opinion in both Britain and Canada for the ending of Hudson's Bay Company rule, confederation, and the inclusion of the west in the union" through their 1863 trek, then Catherine deserves some of that credit.[20] Without her and her family, these English greenhorns would not have been able to defy starvation and fight their way across torrential rivers and dense forest for 87 days.

Catherine and family parted company with the Englishmen in late September heading to Kamloops where they intended to spend the winter. They made it back to Fort Edmonton in 1864. Her husband died there of an unspecified ailment just after their return.[21] That same year, she married James (Jim)

15 Ibid., 207.

16 Milton and Cheadle, *The North-West Passage*, 183.

17 Ibid., 263.

18 Ibid., 352.

19 *Cheadle's Journal*, 234.

20 V.G. Hopwood, "Wentworth-Fitzwilliam, William, Viscount Milton", *Dictionary of Canadian Biography V. 10* (1871-1880).

21 In a postscript to 1865, 2nd edition of *The North-West Passage By Land*, Milton and Cheadle wrote that the Assiniboine and family arrived safely at Edmonton in 1864, but "a few weeks afterwards, the strong, untiring man, who had escaped so many dangers… with such wonderful resource and skill… fell a victim to some epidemic or acute disease." Postscript p. 1.



Unknown Photographer, Hand-tinted version of photograph taken in Victoria, B.C., 1863. Left to right: Catherine Moignon Patenaude Simpson, Louis "The Assiniboine" Patenaude, Dr. Walter Butler Cheadle, Viscount Milton, Benjamin Patenaude. Image courtesy of Bruce Peel Special Collections, University of Alberta.

Keith Simpson, the "natural" son of Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company Sir George Simpson, at Lac La Biche. Simpson had worked with the HBC but at this time was raising horses and hunting buffalo with a home at Lac la Biche. The couple were never to share in the Governor father's riches.

After the Treaty Six negotiations at Fort Pitt in 1876 Catherine was on the paylist of the Seekaskootch First Nation at Onion Lake, as "Mrs. Simpson."[22] Her sons Louis and Benjamin Patenaude were also members. A member of the Nehiyawak (Cree) First Nation led by Chief Seekaskootch (Cut Arm), she became a "treaty Indian" in 1876.

At time of the 1885 resistance the Simpsons lived at Frog Lake where "Misi Jim," as he was known to the locals, managed a small HBC store.[23] Frog Lake had become a tinder box of tension and starvation by 1884-5 following the arrival of Chief Mistahi-maskwa and his people, placed there by the Canadian government. The resources of the district were severely strained and only the old and the ill got rations. Mistahi-maskwa was unable to

22 See note 5.

23 Dion, 89 – 90.



Viscount William Fitzwilliam Milton & Walter Butler Cheadle, *Mr. O'B Triumphantly Crosses the River* in The North-West Passage by Land (London: Cassel, Petter & Galpin), 1865. Image courtesy of University of British Columbia Library, Rare Books and Special Collections.



Viscount William Fitzwilliam Milton & Walter Butler Cheadle, *Our Party Across the Mountains* in The North-West Passage by Land (London: Cassel, Petter & Galpin), 1865. Image courtesy of University of British Columbia Library, Rare Books and Special Collections.

stop the bloodshed on April 2, 1885 perpetrated by young men of his band led by Wandering Spirit that resulted in the murders of nine men, including two priests and employees of the Department of Indian Affairs.[24]

Catherine, whose husband was away at Fort Pitt, was visited by Mistahi-maskwa on the morning the shooting began; he warned her that he could not control his men, and that there was going to be trouble. While there the shooting began, and the chief ran out shouting that the firing must be stopped. According to eye-witness accounts, Catherine saved the life of HBC clerk W.B. Cameron, assisted by another Cree woman (Mrs. John Horse) who together put a big red shawl over him, concealing him.[25] Cameron however, did not credit Catherine with saving his life. Like Mr. O'B of decades earlier, Cameron perhaps did not want to acknowledge a female protector. In Cameron's account Catherine was described only as the "elderly half breed wife" of Jim Simpson who herself had to be told to seek protection.[26] She was fifty-three in 1885.

Chief Seekaskootch arrived at Frog Lake the next day, and he admonished Wandering Spirit for killing innocent people.[27] In June, Seekasktootch was among four Cree killed by the scouts led by North West Mounted Policeman Major Samuel Steele at Loon Lake. Catherine, her husband and sons were with the Cree and many others of the Fort Pitt and

24 Sarah Carter, introd. *Two Months in the Camp of Big Bear*, by Theresa Delaney and Theresa Gowanlock, (1885 rpt.: Regina; Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1999) XVI – XX.

25 Account of George Stanley, in Frog Lake Community Club, *Land of Red and White* (Frog Lake Community Club, 1977), 42.

26 William Bleasdell Cameron, *Blood Red the Sun* (Calgary: Kenway Publishing Co., 1950), 52.

27 Account of George Stanley, 42.

Frog Lake communities chased by the field force until they emerged at Fort Pitt on June 2.

The Simpsons both testified in favour of Mistahimaskwa who was none-the-less convicted of treason, sent to Stony Mountain Penitentiary, and died of tuberculosis shortly after his release in 1888. Speaking through an interpreter Catherine said at the trial that the chief tried to stop the bloodshed, telling her to "gather up your things, I can't be everywhere to look after my young men. I think there is going to be trouble," and when they heard the shots he ran outside saying "don't do so, stopping it."[28]

In 1886 at Onion Lake Catherine received Métis scrip in the amount of $160.00.[29] To do so, she had to withdraw from Treaty, leaving a record through that process that details her family history. She and her husband then ranched near Onion Lake. James is identified as a "rancher" in the 1901 census. He died later that year.[30] Catherine was likely responsible for the Cree words that are on her husband's grave marker. Below "In Memory of James Keith Simpson, Who Died 28 December, 1901" the words "at rest" are written in Cree.[31]

"Catherine should be remembered more widely, as she helps us understand the lives of resilient, strong Indigenous women of the 19th century, a time of rapid and tumultuous change."

Catherine dies on November 9, 1906, and she was laid to rest at the Notre Dame du Rosaire Cemetery, Onion Lake, Saskatchewan[32]. She left many descendants through her Patenaude sons. One descendant, Judy Half, was pleased in 2013 when Edmonton's Royal Alberta Museum acquired two dessert plates commissioned by Milton to commemorate their trip, one with the famous photograph featured here. Curator Judy Half is the fourth-generation granddaughter of Catherine and Louis.[33] Catherine should be remembered more widely, as she helps us understand the lives of resilient, strong Indigenous women of the 19th century, a time of rapid and tumultuous change.

28 Testimony of Catherine Simpson in Joseph-Adolphe Chapleau, *Return to an address of the House of Commons*, dated 1st March, 1886 (Ottawa: Department of the Secretary of State, 1886), 203-5.

29 Library Archives Canada. Scrip record of Catherine Moignon.The document signed by Acting Indian Agent George Mann, dated June 10, 1886 discarhging her from treaty, is in this digitized file.

30 Robert W. Hendriks, *William Bleasdell Cameron: A Life of Writing and Adventure* (Athabasca: Athabasca University Press, 2008): 199n41.

31 Thanks To Betty Karpinski, Edmonton, for this translation. Email 15 Feb., 2021. Betty wrote "The Main Verb is Animate Intransitive – meaning to "make rest" or to "be at rest" and is marked for the 3rd person (he/she). It would loosely be equivalent to the commonly used epitaph "Rest in Peace" although Peace, Death and Eternity are not included, they would be implied by the marker on the gravestone: James Keith Simpson makes rest or is at rest literally."

32 Saskatchewan Catholic Church Records, 1846-1957, Family Search Website. Thanks to Laura Hanowski, Saskatchewan Genealogical Society.

33 Alexandra Zabjek, "Museum's Rare Plates Commemorate Alberta Trek," *Edmonton Journal*, 25 July, 2013, p. A4.