

John Bunn (1802-1861) The First Metis M.D. in the West

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In 1818, Metis physician and surgeon John Bunn became the first native-born doctor to practice medicine in the Red River Settlement. John was the son of HBC employee Thomas Bunn and his Metis wife Sarah McNab. Their daughter Isabella, married John Edward Harriot who was appointed HBC Chief Trader in 1829 and a Chief Factor in 1846. John Bunn married Catherine Thomas the daughter of Thomas Thomas and Sarah Cree at St. John's Parish on July 23, 1829. They had three boys.

John's grandfather was HBC Chief Factor John McNab. In addition to being a professional fur trader, John McNab was also a surgeon, and he assuredly influenced his grandson's choice of career. Although not much is known about the rest of Bunn's childhood, he did go to school in Edinburgh, Scotland at age nine and began medical school at the University of Edinburgh around 1817.

Medicine as a profession was still in its infancy during Bunn's 1817 sojourn in Edinburgh. Although a sharp division had previously separated surgeons from physicians—those who dispensed physic or medicine as opposed to the surgeon who was concerned with the “art” of cutting into the body, by Bunn's day medical students studied both physic and surgery at the University of Edinburgh—as opposed to their English counterparts—if they wanted to become general practitioners. Bunn probably followed suit, with his curriculum being similar to that in 1832 when he took exams in anatomy, surgery and pharmacy.

John McNab was still looking out for the welfare of his grandson, and he planned for him to follow in his footsteps by becoming a surgeon for the Hudson's Bay Company. McNab sent a letter dated December 10, 1818 to the London head office of the HBC to request that John be considered for a position. The minute book recorded that “if a Surgeon is wanted, the merits of his Grandson will be taken into consideration.” McNab must still have had some influence because a position soon became available, and John Bunn left Scotland for Hudson Bay aboard the Eddystone the next spring. Bunn's entire career would be spent in the HBC's Southern Department, in a series of posts strung between Lake Superior and James Bay. He appeared not to have had much ambition to stay with the Company. He left York Factory shortly before Christmas in 1824, and arrived in Fort Garry on February 2, 1825 in the company of three men with dogs and sleds. He came to Red River to

settle with his father, Thomas Bunn, who had arrived in the settlement a few years earlier, after leaving the Company's employ under somewhat controversial circumstances. Dr. Bunn probably moved in with his father and soon after began his occupation as the doctor for the colony. He most likely replaced a Mr. Cuddie, who had received a £150 annual salary with a £50 allowance for living expenses in 1823, with it being understood that he was to attend to the poor who were unable to pay him. Twenty-eight years later Governor Eden Colvile was paying Dr. Bunn £100 for his services, which was not as much as Mr. Cuddie received, but by 1851 there were two doctors in the settlement and Bunn's remuneration might have reflected that fact.

Being the doctor of the Red River Colony was a huge undertaking. As the elder Bunn wrote to Nancy, his son was "much harassed by his business, & is obliged to keep 2 Horses. You will not be surprized at that when I tell you that the Settlement is upwards of 60 miles in length & there is no other medical man in it." In the summer he patrolled the 60-mile length of the settlement on horseback, and in winter he drove along the road in a parchment cariole. In 1831, Dr. Bunn returned to the University of Edinburgh to upgrade his training. Although John Bunn did not graduate in his second crack at medical school, he did pass enough examinations to become a Licentiate of the Royal College of Surgeons.

On April 30, 1835, John Bunn was sworn in as a councilor for the Council of Assiniboia. In 1856, he was made Governor of the Gaol and chair of the Board of Works. He also served the Red River Settlement as Sheriff, Recorder and Coroner. When he died in 1861 the newspaper noted "The late Dr. Bunn member of the Council and Sheriff was universally esteemed for unquestionably he was the first and foremost of our magistrates in point of ability. Besides his efficiency as a Civil Officer, his medical services had acquired for him great popularity."¹

¹ *The Nor'Wester*, June 1, 1861.

NAME: BUNN, John Dr.

PARISH: Rupert's Land

ENTERED SERVICE: 1819

DATES: b. ca 1800

d. 31 May 1861

Appointments & Service

Outfit Year*:	Position:	Post:	District:	HBCA Reference:
<i>*An Outfit year ran from 1 June to 31 May</i>				
1819	Surgeon	Eddystone (Ship)		C.1/309, C.3/13
1819-20	Surgeon	Moose Factory	Moose	B. 135/a/120
1820	Leaves for Canada			B. 135/a/ 120, B.135/e/7
1820-1821		Michipicoten, Sault Ste. Marie, New Brunswick House		B. 129/a/11, B. 145/a/42
1821	Clerk	Moose Factory	Moose	B. 145/e/11, B.135/g/1
1822-1824	Clerk	Cappoonicagomic	Moose	B.26/a/1, B.26/e/1-2
1824	Return to Moose Factory			B. 135/a/127
1824	Retired to Red River ; travelled via Union Sloop			A. 34/1
1824-1849		Red River Settlement		B.239/g/66-88
1849-1854	Surgeon	Red River Settlement		B.239/k/2-3
1855	Surgeon at Red River to Company			B.239/k/3
1856-1857	Surgeon and Clerk in RRS	Fort Garry		B.239/k/3
1858-1860	Surgeon to Company at RRS			B.239/k/3
1861	Died			
1837-1849	Magistrate of Lower District			
1849-1861	Coroner of Assiniboia			
1856-1861	Sheriff and Governor of the jail			
1858-1861	Recorder of Rupert's Land			

Father: Thomas Bunn (ca 1765 -15 January 1853) son of Benjamin and Elizabeth (Streek) (Morin, Metis Families): Biog

Mother : Sarah Mc Nab ,daughter of John and Jane (Cook) (Morin, Metis Families)

Wife: Catherine Thomas (b.ca.1810 bapt. 10 November 1822 bu. 7 January 1834) daughter of Thomas Thomas and Sarah Thomas (E.4/1)

Children: Thomas (bapt. 16 May 1830)

John (bapt. 15 April 1832)

William Thomas (bapt. 15 December 1833, bu. 9 September 1847) (E. 4/1)

Will dated 8 December 1853 (A 36/3)

Probate of Will - MG2 C20- PAM

Letters : see E.43/1 fos. 28-24



References:

Bayley, Denis, "A Londoner in Rupert's Land: Thomas Bunn of the Hudson's Bay Company"

Oliver, "Canadian North West"