

James “Jemmy Jock” Bird. (ca. 1798-1892)

The Metis son of James Curtis Bird Sr., “Jemmy Jock” was born around 1798 at Sturgeon River north of Prince Albert. His father was a Chief Factor for the Hudson’s Bay Company and his mother Oomenahowish was Cree. Her husband called her Mary (after his sister). Mary died in 1806 shortly after the birth of her last son. James Sr. then married Elizabeth Montour the daughter of Nicholas Montour dit Bonhomme. His half-brother, Dr. Curtis James Bird was a member of Riel’s Council in 1870 then served as a Manitoba MLA.

James began a five-year apprenticeship in 1809 and started his education at the York Factory School of the Hudson's Bay Company. He attended this school with William Sinclair, a future brother-in-law whose brother James married Elizabeth Bird.



He spent his early years at Edmonton House, Rocky Mountain House and posts on the upper North Saskatchewan. Fluent in both Cree (from his mother) Michif, French and English from his stepmother as well as Blackfoot, he ranked as an interpreter by the time he left the company in 1821. He is reputed to have been fluent in eight languages. "Jimmy Jock" then lived with the Piegan¹ people, adopting their way of life and gaining great influence among them. In 1825 apparently married his Piikani wife Sally, baptized under the name Sarah, a marriage that was to last for over 65 years. She was the daughter of Bull’s Heart from Tete que Leve’s Band. They had the following children:

- Elizabeth;
- James, born c.1824;
- John, born 1825, died Oct. 12, 1827;
- William, born c. 1826;
- Mary, born 1832, died before 1885;
- Letitia, born 1834, named after his sister, died before 1885;
- Maria, born 1836, died before 1885, named after his niece, Charles McKay’s eldest daughter;
- Charles, born 1837, died before 1885;
- Edward, born 1839, married Isabella Sinclair;
- Nancy, born 1843, married Peter Knight (Medicine Shield), they lived on a Blackfoot Reservation;
- Joseph, born 1845, married Sarah Louis;
- Catherine, born 1846;

¹ *Piikani* or alternately, *Peigan*.

Thomas, born 1849, married Isabelle Metaska-nik, daughter of Baptiste Metaska-nik and Isabelle Flamand; married Anne McKay;
Agnes, born 1850, married Thomas Hourie; died near Duck Lake
Alfred, born c. 1850;
Philip, born 1852, married Mary Kipling then Louise Lucier

His other wives were purportedly, Crane (mother of Susie "Ear Rings" Bird) and "Kills the Water" (mother of Annie "Long Time Good Success"). Charles Bird, born in 1837 was also thought to have been the son of Se-no-pa or "Kit Fox" in Blackfoot language. John Jackson, in his 2003 biography of Bird speculates that Jemmy Jock was also married to his wife's sisters and may have had over 18 children.

He became recognized as a chief among the Piegans and, purportedly, had a number of Aboriginal wives. In the late 1820s, he received payments from the Hudson's Bay Company to encourage the Piegans to trade at Rocky Mountain House and Edmonton House.

In a dramatic about-face in 1831, he went to aid the American Fur Company in its efforts to establish trade on the Missouri with the Blackfoot nations: the Piegan, Blood and Blackfoot peoples. Two years afterwards, Governor George Simpson re-enlisted "Jim Jock" on the English company's side but they suspected he was still working for the Americans.

A fiercely independent man, Bird's loyalties were more with the Aboriginal people than the trading companies. In 1841 Bird acted as a guide for the Sinclair Expedition, headed by his brother-in-law James Sinclair. Sinclair-led this group of Red River Half-Breed and Metis emigrants for the Columbia making a 1700-mile trip from White Horse Plains to Fort Vancouver and finally Fort Nisqually. Jemmy Jock Bird acted as their guide for the part of the journey that crossed Blackfoot territory. On October 12, 1841, after a 130 day journey the group reached Fort Vancouver on the Columbia River. Bird accompanied the party from Carlton House taking them as far as the last Peigan post in the Rockies. His sisters Charlotte Flett, married to John Flett; Chloe Flett married to James Flett; Letitia McKay married to Charles McKay were among the Metis emigrants to the Oregon Territory in 1841.

He quit the Hudson's Bay Company in 1841 but was looking after Rocky Mountain House in 1847-48 when the post was closed. He was here when Paul Kane visited. Kane found him "trustworthy and hospitable." But two missionaries, Father Pierre-Jean DeSmet and the Reverend Robert Terrill Rundle, who at different times had engaged him as both guide and interpreter, found him "quite unreliable." In 1855, he acted as interpreter in the American treaty with the Blackfoot, signed at a site opposite the mouth of the Judith River near the ruins of Fort Chardon. In 1877, he filled the same role in Canada's negotiation of Treaty Number 7, signed at Blackfoot Crossing. "Jemmy Jock" died on the Blackfoot reservation in Montana in 1892.

He was described at this time as “a splendid specimen of the native race, he was over six feet tall, sinewy, athletic and handsome. The brown hair, steely blue eyes and sandy mustache derived from his Orcadian ancestry...”².

On his way to join the Blackfeet he learned many different languages. He was widely known and everyone stayed clear of him because he was considered a dangerous man. He began working for the Hudson’s Bay Company as an apprentice in 1809. Over the years his greatest contributions were as a linguist and interpreter who spoke Blackfeet, Gros Ventre, Stony, Cree, Sarsee, Michif, English and French. By the 1820s he had become an agent for the HBC among the Blackfoot tribes. Bird earned quite a reputation for being a practical joker. His favourite trick was to leave a note tied to a stick at a campsite, which gave directions to another campsite, a treasure or some other great place. The next person to find the letter would usually end up on a wild goose chase following the false instructions. About the same time, he became known as Jemmy Jock. He also met the now famous artist Paul Kane. The subject of Kane’s paintings was the Blackfoot people, and Jemmy Jock was very helpful in teaching him about their customs.

Although many people did not trust Jimmy Jock, Kane found him to be very kind and generous. At the time Bird was living in the vicinity of Fort Benton working for the American Fur Company. In return for his favours, Kane helped Jemmy Jock get a position as an interpreter for the American Blackfeet treaty negotiations (1855). The Canadian government similarly, employed Bird for the Treaty Seven Blackfoot Crossing negotiations in 1877. Long before this Jemmy Jock had adopted the Blackfeet as his people, and in fact he was widely known as “the half-English Chief of the Piegiens.”³

In the spring of 1856 Bird left the USA for Red River and settled on his old HBC grant that he had received forty years earlier. They lived on Lot 63 about 12 miles below the Forks on the east side of the Red River. In 1857 Sarah was baptized at St. Paul’s Anglican church and in 1859 their sons Thomas and Philip were baptized at the same church. It was at Red River where Humphrey Lloyd Hime of Henry Youle Hime’s expedition took a picture of their daughter Letitia in 1858.



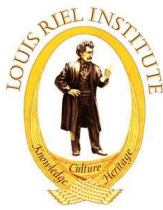
² J.J. Gunn, *Echoes of the Red*, Toronto: Macmillan Co., 1930: 164-165.

³ “Two of the Honourable. Company’s late clerks, James Bird and Hugh Munro... became so much attached to the roving life of Plains Indians that these last few years they have withdrawn themselves from the Establishments, assumed the Indian costume, accompanying them in all their wars and hunting excursions and by their bravery and activity have obtained great influence with the Piegan Tribes...” (H.B.C.A D.4/90 fos. 48-48d, Governor’s Correspondence, York Factory, Simpson to Governor and Committee.)

At about the same time Bird sold his land to Schultz and relocated to Lots 280 and 287 in St. Andrews Parish. In 1874 the Birds along with son Philip and daughter-in-law Mary Kipling left Red River and headed for the Assiniboine Agency in the USA then to Bow River and the Metis community of Blackfoot Crossing. By 1876 they were living near Battle River at Buffalo Lake. On May 21, 1885 they came to Calgary and made their claims before the Scrip Commission, they said that for two years they had been living with the Piikani near Gleichen. Roger Goulet was the Commissioner who approved their applications. They then moved to the Medicine Lodge Blackfoot Agency. He died at Two Medicine, Montana in 1892.

References

Fuchs, Denise M. "Native Sons of Rupert's Land 1760 to 1860s," Winnipeg: Ph.D. thesis, University of Manitoba, 2000: 89-91.
Jackson, John C. *Jemmy Jock Bird: Marginal Man on the Blackfoot Frontier*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2003.
Sealey, Bruce (General Editor). *Famous Manitoba Metis*, Winnipeg: Manitoba Metis Federation Press, 1974: 2-4.



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Please see HBC employment record on following page.

NAME: BIRD, James JR. PARISH: Hudson Bay ENTERED SERVICE: 1809, Aug. 9 (A.16/35, fo.75d-76) DATES: b. ca.1800 ("2nd" or Jimmy Jock) d.11 Dec. 1892

Appointments & Service		HBCA Reference	
Outfit Year*	Position	District	
*As Outfit year ran from 1 June to 31 May			
1809 - 1814	Apprentice Clerk	[Edmonton]	Saskatchewan A.16/14, fo.9d-10; A.16/15, fo.11d-12; A.30/11, fo.28d-29; A.30/12, fo.42d-43; A.30/13, fo.42d-44
1814 - 1815	Assistant Trader		Saskatchewan A.30/14, fo.5d-6
1815 - 1816	Clerk	Qu'Appelle	Saskatchewan A.30/15, fo.24d-25
1818 - 1821	Interpreter	Edmonton	Saskatchewan A.30/16, fo.2d-3; A.16/37, fo.19d-20; A.16/40, fo.29d-30
1833 - 1839	Clerk & Interpreter		Saskatchewan A.32/21, fo.395; B.239/g/13-18
1839 - 1840	Retired Clerk		B.239/g/19
1840 - 1851	Freeman		B.239/g/20-30.

In a letter dated 27 July 1841, Sir George Simpson wrote to Rev. J. Evans that Rev. Robert Rundle employed Jimmy Jock as an interpreter (D.4/113, fo.324).

In a letter to the Chief Commissioner dated 19 January 1882, W. V. Mackie, Prince Albert, wrote mentioned "James Bird, an aged man residing here" (D.14/28).

On 26 July 1884, James Bird made his will, leaving three-quarters to Thomas Bird and one quarter to Philip Bird, his sons. (Search File, James Bird JR., letter from Crawford and Long, 24 October 1938.)

James Bird JR. was referred to as 5'7", stout [sturdy] (A.30/14, fo.5d-6).

Search File: "Bird, James Jr."

Family:*

Parents: James Bird, Sr. (James Curtis) and Elisabeth [Swampy Indian] or [Montour]

Wife: Sarah [Piegan], b. [ca.1809], married [ca.1825]; second wife [Elizabeth, b. ca.1808]

Children: James, John, William, Elisabeth, Edward, Mary, Letitia, Maria, Charles, Joseph, Thomas, Alfred, Phillip



Search File: "Bird, James Sr."
Métis Families: A Genealogical Compendium

*There is some discrepancy regarding names, children, etc. in the genealogical information found in several sources in the Search Files and in Gail Morin, *Métis Families: A Genealogical Compendium*.

Filename: Bird James Jr. (ca. 1800-1892) (fl. 1809-1851) (KE: 02/98, from unattributable biog.) : May/99/mhd; Reformatted PC May/01; Revised AM Nov/05