

Mary Sarah (McDermott) Mactavish. (1829-1875)

Sally McDermott Mactavish was one of the Metis “First Ladies” of Upper Fort Garry and the Red River Settlement.

Mary Sarah ‘Sally’ McDermott was born c. 1829 at Norway House, the daughter of Andrew McDermott and Sarah Mary McNabb, who raised her in the Roman Catholic faith. Sarah’s father was born in Ireland, joined the Hudson’s Bay Company and arrived at York Factory in 1812. Around 1814 he married, à la façon du pays, Sarah McNab, the daughter of Thomas McNab and a Saulteaux woman. Sarah’s sister Annie McDermott was married to Andrew Bannatyne, a Hudson’s Bay Company employee who went on to become a very wealthy merchant.

In 1858, Sally married William Mactavish, the 21st Chief of Clan Mactavish, and a Hudson’s Bay Company officer from 1833 and the Governor of Assiniboia from 1858 to 1869.

As the ‘First Lady’ of Red River at the time of the Red River Resistance, Mary Sarah ‘Sally’ McDermott Mactavish lived with her husband, William, their young sons, Andrew Dugald (about 3 yrs old), and James William (about 8 yrs old), and their twin daughters Mary Letitia and Florence Anne (about 7 years old), in the Governor’s House at Upper Fort Garry during the formation and operation of the Provisional Government of Assiniboia. Sarah’s eleven-year term as hostess at Upper Fort Garry was longer than that of any previous governor’s wife. Her husband was well-liked throughout the settlement.

A note on William MacTavish (1815-1870)

Shortly after coming to Red River, Mactavish ended a life of determined bachelorhood by marrying Mary Sarah McDermott, the Metis (Catholic) daughter of businessman Andrew McDermott. Although Mactavish’s will provided for three “illegitimate daughters” in Stromness, Scotland, the four “country-born” children that are known are by his wife Mary Sarah. Appointed governor of Assiniboia in 1858, he believed the governance of the fur trade and the settlement should be separated. Nevertheless, in 1869-70 he was governor of both Rupert’s Land and Assiniboia.

Mactavish had taken an appointment at York Factory in 1850, and from 1851 to the autumn of 1856 had charge of it; he received his commission as chief factor in 1852. Mactavish spent another furlough in England before assuming the new post of officer in charge of Upper Fort Garry.

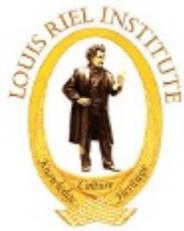
It was as governor of Rupert’s Land and governor of Assiniboia that Mactavish served throughout the Red River Resistance of 1869–70. He believed that the majority of Red River inhabitants, both English and French speaking, supported at least passively the existing Council of Assiniboia. The opposition which flared up sporadically he considered to be the work of a few “designing demagogue[s].” His sympathies lay with

the older inhabitants of Red River, the Métis, the HBC people, and the descendants of the colonists brought by Lord Selkirk], all of whom, he argued, should have had a voice in the transfer of Rupert's Land. In fact Sarah McDermott's great aunt — Thomas McNab's sister — Sarah McNab (born c. 1778), had married Thomas, and was the mother of Dr. John Bunn a Councillor of Assiniboia, and grandmother of Thomas, a Councillor in the Legislative Assembly of Assiniboia and member of Louis Riel's executive.

From 16 November 1869 to February 1870 her and his family continued to live in Upper in Fort Garry while Louis Riel—who was Sarah's nephew-in-law—held sway in the Fort. At that time he was mostly bedridden with advanced tuberculosis. When he took action it was through the agency of his private secretary, J.J. Hragrave (his nephew) and A.G.B, Bannatyne, his brother-in-law. He resigned on 15 January 1870. He and his family left for Scotland on 17 May, and he died upon disembarkation at Liverpool in July.

Reference;

Norma Jean Hall: <http://hallnjean2.wordpress.com/the-red-river-resistence/women-and-the-resistance/mary-sarah-mcdermot-mactavish/>



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