

McLeod (Ballenden), Sarah. (1818- 1853)

Sarah McLeod Ballenden was one of the English-Metis “First Ladies” of Upper Fort Garry and the Red River Settlement. As the Metis and Indian wives of the older HBC employees died, many of these men remarried to white women. This greatly changed the social climate at Red River. Sarah McLeod was a target of the resulting racism, intolerance and bigotry.

Sarah’s story will be told in the play, *Sarah Ballenden* written by Maureen Hunter. It is scheduled to run at the Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre John Hirsch Mainstage from April 19th to May 13th, 2017.¹

Sarah was born in December 1818, in Rupert’s Land, the daughter of North West Company fur trader Alexander Roderick McLeod and a Metis woman. Sarah McLeod was one of eight children born to Alexander Roderick McLeod and his Metis wife whom McLeod considered his legitimate wife since their union had been contracted according to the “custom of the country.”

Sarah was raised at posts in the Mackenzie River and Columbia districts. She was sent to the Red River settlement for her education in the 1830s. Chief Factor John Stuart acted as her guardian and gave his consent to her marriage, at the age of 18, to the promising HBC clerk John Ballenden. Thus, Sarah McLeod, a daughter of Chief Factor Alexander Roderick McLeod, married John Ballenden, at Red River on December 10, 1836. Sarah received a dowry of £350 from her father, and the wedding, which was solemnized by the Reverend William Cockran, was one of the social highlights of 1836 at Red River. It also indicated that, despite the example of Governor George Simpson and other HBC officers who introduced British wives into fur-trade society, attractive and acculturated young Metis women could still aspire to social prominence through marriage to eligible young company officers. Ballenden was complimented on his choice by as severe a critic as Chief Trader James Hargrave, who declared that Sarah was “a delightful creature” and that her husband had “every reason to consider himself a happy man.” The couple had three sons and three daughters.

John Ballenden was born about 1810 and came from Stromness in the Orkneys. He entered the service of the Hudson's Bay Company as an apprentice clerk in 1829, being first employed at York Factory and in the Lower Red River district, and later in the counting house at York Factory.

In 1836 he went to Fort Garry as accountant, and in 1840 he was given the joint management of the Sault Ste. Marie and the Lake Huron districts. He was promoted to the rank of Chief Trader in 1844, and in 1848 he was made a Chief Factor.

In 1850-51 he was allowed leave of absence on account of ill-health. On his return from England he was appointed to Fort Vancouver, where he remained as a member of the Board of Management until 1853. He was on furlough during the season 1853-54, and in the succeeding outfit he was appointed in charge of Red River Settlement at Fort Garry.

¹ Their promotional blurb states: “Against the landscape of the developing Red River Settlement, Sarah Ballenden has developed a thick skin as the Métis wife of a high-ranking Hudson's Bay Company officer. But when a spark of gossip spreads through the Fort like wildfire, her reputation is tarnished, leaving Sarah with nothing to depend on but her own true grit to clear her name.”

"Ill-health prevented him carrying out all his duties during the season, and he was once again allowed furlough in 1855-56. He retired as from June 1, 1856, and died on December 7th of the same year.

The following information on Sarah Ballenden comes from Sylvia van Kirk's book, "Many Tender ties, Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870."

John and Sarah Ballenden returned to Red River district in 1848, when Ballenden took charge of the district.

The English women who had come into Red River took offense at Sarah Ballenden's high ranking in the local social heap.

Some were offended that they were forced to give precedence to a mixed blood woman, who they could not possibly consider to be their social equal -- because she carried Indian blood.

But, as wife of the district's chief Factor in charge, Sarah was determined to take part in the local society, and organized dinner parties and balls and presided at the officers' mess at Upper Fort Garry.

The highlight of the 1849 social season was the christening of her infant daughter -- called a "splendid entertainment with [an] abundance of champagne," by Letitia Hargrave, wife of York Factory's Chief Factor James Hargrave.

From her first days in Red River, Sarah became an object of gossip and speculation -- every act, word or deed was noted and commented on by a group of white women who set themselves up as watchdogs of Red River society.

Her popularity with the young single men was suspect: and one man became particularly suspect. This was Captain Christopher Foss, an officer who had come out with the Chelsea Pensioners in 1848 and who now dined at the mess table at the Upper Fort that Sarah Ballenden presided over. Some women cattily remarked that Sarah was the type of woman who must have a sweetheart as well as a husband. The bullying gossip was circulated and re-circulated, and magnified until, in summer 1849, it was rumoured that the Captain's attention to Sarah were such that John Ballenden should be able to demand a divorce!

Even the Governor of Assiniboia heard the rumours, though he hesitated to take action because of John Ballenden's popularity in the district. But when Ballenden left Red River to take his furlough, leaving his wife behind, the Governor forbade his family to associate with Sarah, and a concerted effort was made by Red River society to exclude Sarah Ballenden from local events. Even some of Sarah's mixed race friends were convinced that they should exclude Sarah from their society.

But Sarah fought back against the bullying English community. She was not without her supporters, and in her husband's absence, she took refuge with the family of her husband's friends. She obtained sworn statements from people who knew there had been no affair between Captain Foss and herself, and on John Ballenden's return to Red River, her friends convinced him there had been no truth in the rumours.

Foss himself brought a lawsuit against some of the gentlemen and English women who had so slandered Sarah, and the three-day trial began in July, 1850. Numerous witnesses were called but the evidence proved to be vague and circumstantial and most witnesses were forced to admit that they had only heard and repeated rumours concerning Foss and Mrs. Ballenden.

After several hours of deliberation, the jury declared that Mrs. Ballenden had been unjustly slandered, and the defendants were required to pay heavy damages. But Sarah Ballenden continued to be shunned by the Englishmen and women, and many of the other mixed blood women of the Red River community. When John Ballenden was posted to the Columbia district, where he worked with Alexander Caulfield Anderson, he left his wife behind again. She spent a lonely winter alone before moving to Norway House to stay with her husband's good friend, Chief Factor George Barnston.

When Ballenden's own poor health finally forced him to leave the Columbia district, husband and wife had a tender meeting -- in Scotland one resource says - - only a few months before poor Sarah Ballenden died of consumption. She died on December 23, 1853 in Edinburgh, Scotland.²

Sources:

Sylvia van Kirk. *Many Tender Ties, Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983: 189-201.

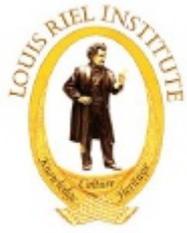
Sylvia van Kirk. *Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Sarah McLeod*.

http://biographi.ca/en/bio/mcleod_sarah_8E.html

Fur Trade Family history

<http://furtradefamilyhistory.blogspot.ca/2012/05/john-ballenden-chief-factor-in-columbia.html>

² Over the years, Ballenden had sent all of his children to Scotland for their education, and upon his death the five youngest were entrusted to the guardianship of their aunt Eliza Bannatyne. His eldest daughter had previously married HBC officer William McMurray.



Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell
Coordinator of Métis Heritage and History Research
Louis Riel Institute