Alexander Ross (1782-1856)

Born in the Scottish Highlands, schoolteacher Alexander Ross immigrated to Canada's St. Lawrence River Valley in 1804. Befriended by fellow Scot Alexander McKay, a veteran Montreal-based fur trader, both men found work in American John Jacob Astor's boldly conceived Pacific Fur Company enterprise in 1810.

The two voyaged around the Horn on the *Tonquin*, arriving at the mouth of the Columbia in March 1811. Ross, engaged as a clerk, remained to help build Fort Astoria, while McKay sailed on the doomed ship to commence trade with the Natives of Vancouver Island, a trip that ended with the death of all aboard. As a result, Astor's plans for a transcontinental, trans-Pacific fur-trade empire were crippled.

Ross was sent more than 400 miles up the Columbia to establish a trading post at the mouth of the Okanogan River. There he married a local Indian woman named Sarah, or Sally. They had a large family and remained devoted partners for the rest of Ross's life.

In addition to writing copious official correspondence, Ross kept personal journals (now lost). His journals later became the basis for his very popular memoirs, *Adventures of the First Settlers on the Oregon or Columbia River* (1849) and *The Fur Hunters of the Far West* (1855).

Staying on after the forced sale of Fort Astoria to the British-owned North West Company during the War of 1812, Ross served as that firm's second-in-command at Fort George (Astoria). Later promoted to chief trader at Fort Kamloops on the Thompson River (in present-day British Columbia), in 1818 Ross was placed in command of the North West Company's new Fort Nez Perce, strategically situated on the east bank of the Columbia about one-half mile above the mouth of the Walla Walla River.

Following the amalgamation of the company with the Hudson's Bay Company in 1821, HBC Governor George Simpson persuaded Ross to remain on the scene for a few more years. Ross led the 1824 Snake Country Brigade out of Flathead Post to explore and trap the streams of western Montana. Anxious about his health and concerned for the education of his sons, he left the Pacific Northwest for the HBC's Red River settlement (present-day Winnipeg). There he helped found the colony's Presbyterian church and began philanthropies to aid the growing number of displaced Indian and Métis inhabitants.

Although criticized by some colleagues for writing official reports "full of marvelous nonsense," Alexander Ross has earned lasting recognition as a close observer of Native cultures and the fur-trade society. His memoirs remain indispensable sources on the history of the early Oregon Country.

Written by Jeff LaLande

Further Reading:

Ronda, James. *Astoria and Empire*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990.

Stewart, Edgar. "Alexander Ross." In *Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West: Biographical sketches of the*

participants by scholars of the subject and with introductions by the editor. Vol. 6. Edited by Leroy R. Hafen. Norman, Okla.: Arthur H. Clark, 1965-1972.

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