James Anderson (1812-1867)

Photo courtesy of Mrs. Goodfellow, a descendant.
Canada’s northern frontier, far from being a “wild west”, was a region where Indians and the Hudson’s Bay Company dealt with each other to their mutual advantage. James Anderson, better known as an arctic explorer, was one of the men who made the orderly system work.

A career on the frontier of the British empire came naturally to a young man with his family connections. General Outram was a famous warrior in India. Another cousin stood his battalion at attention on the sinking Birkenhead so that women and children could be saved. In 1831, James left Britain as an apprentice with the Hudson’s Bay Company. For 20 years he served with energy, judgement, and business acumen in the James Bay, Lake Superior, and Athabasca areas. Then-Governor George Simpson entrusted him with the remote and expensive probing of the arctic islands, but Dr. Rae of the Company to use the same route to check out Rae’s report. Instead, he packed up the raft in the canoes, which had been repaired and regummed, and gave the order to return.

Not until 1962 was the whole Back River canoed and kyaked again. Many regard it as an ultimate challenge due to its remoteness and exposed terrain. At a mid-August date when modern canoeists are anxiously scanning the skies for their pick-up plane, Anderson’s men had to paddle, line, and portage their way up the Back, across the height of land, and through windy lakes, over 1500 kilometres to Fort Resolution. In the weakened canoes, they risked death in the icy waters.

Anderson’s official report was brief and restrained. He had found no papers or bodies and could merely confirm Rae’s statement that the disaster had occurred somewhere northwest of the Back. Nonetheless, Simpson warmly thanked him, his fellow officers gave him a silver cup, and the British government awarded him the Polar medal and £400. Dr. King, however, was upset that Anderson had not specifically checked his 1834 cache on Montreal Island. Lady Franklin financed another sea-and-sledging expedition under M’Clintock, which found the message at Victory Point. But this was far beyond the range of canoes in 1855.

Anderson’s health had been undermined by the trip. After three more years as chief factor in the Mackenzie District, he asked to be transferred. At Mingan on the St. Lawrence, he straightened out the account books and entertained the governor-general with salmon fishing. He finally retired, as a country squire, to Ontario, where his children were entering the professions.

James Anderson’s service to the Company was exemplary, and he narrowly missed fame at Starvation Cove. Altogether, he was a fine frontiersman – Canadian style.

FURTHER READINGS
