ANGUS McDONALD
The last Chief Trader at HBC Fort Colvile

By Alix Christie

The Scotsman and the American officer were drinking nothing stronger than tea at Harney's Depot one evening in April 1861 when the news arrived. Shots had been fired: it was war between the States. Angus McDonald, the last remaining Chief Trader for the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) on American soil, retired to his own fort fifteen miles to the west on the bank of the Columbia. From Harney's Depot, later dubbed Colville Depot and finally Fort Colville, three companies under Brevet Major Pinkney Lugenbeel marched off to fight the Civil War.

Angus McDonald had arrived at this bend in the river more than two decades before, in 1839. In another ten years he too would be gone, and nearly all trace of the HBC wiped away. Thus would end nearly sixty years of vigorous British trade below the 49th parallel. It also ended the fur-trading career of my great-great-great uncle Angus, a tall, dashing man with bushy beard and Glengarry cap, reputed to be the best rifle shot on the continent—and a key figure in the history of the Pacific Northwest.

By 1861 the new international boundary had been surveyed and cut. Fort Colvile (with one L, after HBC governor Andrew Colvile) was but a shadow of its former self. For forty years it had been the largest European settlement between the Cascades and the Rocky Mountains, a vast, rich farm and the hub of trade between Native trappers and mainly Scottish traders who exchanged pelts for manufactured goods. By the time the Civil War started, American westward expansion and the discovery of gold deposits across the Columbia plateau had changed all that.

The Native tribes of the HBC's former Columbia District — among them the Yakama, Palouse, Walla Walla and Spokane—had been crushed resisting treaties imposed by the governor of the new Washington Territory, Isaac Stevens, who himself would perish in the Civil War. Under the terms of the 1846 treaty between Britain and the United States, the HBC in 1860 closed its headquarters at Fort Vancouver and relocated to British Columbia. Only Angus McDonald and his mixed-race family remained in post below the boundary known to Native people as the "medicine line" — asserting possession until the U.S. compensated the HBC for its property.

In the long winter evenings Angus wrote stories and poems and reminiscences, some of which have survived in archives in Montana. They reveal the life of a remarkable man whose actions helped shape the northwest. The following is but a brief précis of that life, alongside his Nez Perce wife, Catherine Baptiste, and their thirteen children. Ten of those children survived and founded families that are deeply rooted four generations later across the mountain West. On the

Scottish side, his brother Duncan's descendants (your correspondent included) have remembered their fur-trading relatives for equally long.

Angus made a name for himself even before he arrived in the summer of 1839 at the farm at Colvile established in 1825 by his great-uncle Archibald McDonald. The Columbia boat bearing his party foundered in the "Death Rapids" further north on the river, and only Angus's quick bailing helped to right the boat. Chief Factor John McLoughlin, head of the Columbia District, saw the episode from shore and, according to Angus, cried "Oh Angus, Angus, you have saved them, come and take some wine." (Wine, and cognac, were major elements of social life at Fort Colvile through the years.) McLoughlin's support helped propel Angus's swift ascent up the Company ranks. He spent his first year learning the trade from Archibald, along with the Salishan and Sahaptin languages, before postings to forts Hall (in present-day Idaho) and Connah (in present-day Montana). In 1851 he was posted back to Colvile as Clerk in charge, and promoted in 1852 to Chief Trader, making him a shareholder in the firm. Then in 1853 the world changed.

That October Angus hosted Governor Stevens and Captain George McClellan at Fort Colvile on their journey westward to survey for a railroad to the Pacific. The Chief Trader "uncorked 50 imperial gallons of wine and brandy" for the expedition leaders and their crew; in his journals Stevens praised the Scot as "an upright, intelligent, manly and energetic man." The HBC's hospitality, however, did not prevent Stevens from developing an antipathy to the British firm, especially when a Company employee discovered gold just upriver in the autumn of 1854. Angus initially tried to to keep the discovery quiet, but word of the strike at the confluence of the Columbia and Pend d'Oreille rivers became public the following summer in the *Puget Sound Courier* and the *Oregonian*.

Finding their homelands invaded by miners and settlers, Native groups began to retaliate. In the wake of a violent attack by the Shoshone on a wagon train along the Snake river, and the deaths of two HBC traders, Angus was ordered to close the interior forts and pull back to Colvile. Stevens, meanwhile, was convening treaty negotiations with the tribes, which in the summer of 1855 stripped them of vast tracts of land and created Indian reservations. War seemed imminent. Stevens asked Angus to mediate, as a longtime friend and trading partner to the chiefs. But a meeting in mid-winter at Plante's Crossing on the Spokane River failed to ease hostilities. Over the three years of battle that followed, known as the Yakima war,, the Chief Trader attempted to stay neutral. Though he famously loathed Americans, he did not arm the Native combatants, and repeatedly urged his indigenous friends and family not to fight, arguing that they would be destroyed. By his own account, Chief Kamiakin asked him to trade 70 pounds of gunpowder for 100 horses, but Angus refused. This difficult balance was one he would strive to maintain for the rest of his life.

The fur trade dwindled but business was brisk through the 1860s at Fort Colvile even so. The HBC gladly equipped the hordes heading to the Fraser and Pend d'Oreille mines. Angus, meanwhile, was delighted by the presence of the British Boundary Commission headquartered two miles north of the fort. His winter balls, with dancing and music, were legendary; he loved nothing more than "playing the Scottish laird", according to daughter Christina. Lieutenant Charles Wilson of the Royal Engineers recalled watching the whole family depart on a hunting excursion, presenting "a fine scene of excitement and confusion," with Catherine, Christina and Angus singled out as particularly colorful.

Gladly would the McDonalds have stayed on at what the Americans called "Mac's old pile of logs" when the HBC pulled out. But it was not to be. Native title to the land had not been extinguished, the authorities said; the buildings could be used for the planned Colville reservation. Angus gave testimony at Astoria in 1865 to the commission winding up the Company's affairs, and reportedly was offered a post in British Columbia. But loyalty to his wife and family, and the Native world he so deeply loved, led him back to Montana and Fort Connah, the trading post he had built back in 1846. Both he and his wife Catherine are buried in the family cemetery there, near the little stream that is still called Post Creek. Seventy years later, Fort Colvile too "went to the worm," as Angus would have said, drowned beneath the waters backed up by the Grand Coulee dam.

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Alix Christie is the author of the new historical novel "The Shining Mountains," which tells the story of Angus and Catherine McDonald across two generations in the American Northwest. She will present a talk and book signing on Friday, June 9th at 5 pm at Crossroads in Colville, sponsored by the Heritage Network.

Photos:
Boundary Commission photos: Angus, Christina,
Portrait of Catherine; Fort Colvile photos, picture of me & Joe