

Roderick Finlayson:

The Man Behind the *Fort Victoria Journal 1846-1850*

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The keeper of the *Fort Victoria Journal 1846-1850*, Roderick Finlayson, was a hard-working and determined man who saw the growth of Victoria all the way from its construction as a fort for the Hudson's Bay Company to its transformation into a bustling city. He saw the decline of the fur trade and the boom of the gold rush. He lived and breathed the Hudson's Bay Company, being hired into its service almost immediately after his landing at New York, establishing one of its main headquarters, marrying one of its men's daughters, and giving it 35 years of service. This biography only highlights some of the events that made Finlayson's life an indelible stamp on the history of British Columbia, while attempting to colour in the blank character behind the elegant cursive that provided a glimpse into the first years of Fort Victoria.

Born the year 1818 in Scotland (though he calls it "North Britain") to a simple farming family, Finlayson left from Glasgow and crossed the Atlantic to New York City in July 1837, a journey which took a "tedious" 40 days.¹ His cards were soon laid out when he bumped into a family member, most likely his uncle Nichol Finlayson,² who brought him to Albany after getting him a job with the Hudson's Bay Company. From there he traveled extensively, including by the

¹ Roderick Finlayson, "Biography of Roderick Finlayson 1818-1892," *Hudson's Bay Company at Fort Victoria: Fort Life*, 2000, BC Heritage, <<http://bcheritage.ca/fortvictoria/fortlife/rod.html>> (14 April 2010).

² "Ojibway Family History," *Turtle Island Productions* <http://www.turtle-island.com/native/family-roots.html#New_Finlayson> (16 April 2010)

first Canadian railway, to Lachine where he was employed as an apprentice clerk before being reassigned to Fort Colougne, and then again to manage the store at Fort William.³

His assignment at Fort William provided the first of many difficult and violent encounters Finlayson would face in his service to the Hudson's Bay Company, encounters that would also prove his value. Finlayson tried to prevent a man breaking into the store, and for this was attacked: "I got badly hurt in the encounter but managed to keep him and others who joined him at bay until my men came to the rescue."⁴ On July 20, 1847 Finlayson would again demonstrate his and the Company's intolerant attitude towards theft when an Aboriginal man was flogged 18 times for attempting to break into the store at Fort Victoria.⁵

In the spring of 1839 Finlayson was ordered to the Columbia district to be sent up to the northern posts of the coast and assert the Hudson's Bay Company's new ownership of land leased from by the Russian American Company. Finlayson was rather saddened for the transfer, but made many friends on his six-month journey west. Dr. John McLoughlin met him at York Factory; they traveled together and reached Fort Vancouver by mid-November.⁶

McLoughlin was a great source of inspiration to the young Finlayson. In the piece he wrote during the last year of his life, *The History of Vancouver Island and the Northwest Coast*, Finlayson describes the doctor as "a clear headed man of business, short [in] temper who in his

³ Finlayson, "Biography of Roderick Finlayson 1818-1892,"
<<http://bcheritage.ca/fortvictoria/fortlife/rod.html>>

⁴ Finlayson, "Biography of Roderick Finlayson 1818-1892,"
<<http://bcheritage.ca/fortvictoria/fortlife/rod.html>>

⁵ *Fort Victoria Journal 1846-50*, 20 July 1847.

⁶ Finlayson, "Biography of Roderick Finlayson 1818-1892,"
<<http://bcheritage.ca/fortvictoria/fortlife/rod.html>>

habits a strict disciplinarian...He would not allow any man to deviate from the strict rules laid down by him for the management of all the Forts in his Department.” Finlayson’s admiration of his senior officer was not unfounded. When he was in McLoughlin’s service at Fort Vancouver in the year after his arrival, he was put in charge of the saw and grist mill, located some five miles away from the fort. Every week he would have to go to the fort to give an account to McLoughlin; once he was late and, after a stern lecture was delivered from the man, McLoughlin gave Finlayson a horse to help solve the matter. Finlayson outfitted himself in the fashion of the day and returned home a happy man. On his next trip to the fort, however, Finlayson was rudely informed by the stern McLoughlin that his choice of fashion was not suitable to the Company, he was deprived of his horse, and sent home as an example: “It was in vain that I transformed my ignorance of them [the rules]...And now with the light of Mature years, and considering the Conditions under which he was placed, I cannot but express my utmost admiration of his character.”⁷

Finlayson stayed at Fort Vancouver one year before being ultimately sent up to Sitka to establish a post on the Taku River. On passing Vancouver Island, Finlayson remarked in hindsight that he had hardly thought that it would one day be his home.⁸

After Chief Factor James Douglas left their newly established Fort Durham, leaving Finlayson in charge, he had his first major quarrel with the Aboriginal inhabitants of the British Columbia coast. Viewing them as a “wild turbulent race,” only a couple of native traders were

⁷ British Columbia Archives (hereafter BCA), Roderick Finlayson, *The History of Vancouver Island and the North West Coast*, 9A/B/30/.F49A, 1878, page 30.

⁸ Finlayson, “Biography of Roderick Finlayson 1818-1892,” <http://bcheritage.ca/fortvictoria/fortlife/rod.html>

allowed into the fort at a time. Apparently associating the Hudson's Bay men with an American group who had previously killed some of their own, the native men rushed the gate of the fort. Finlayson recounts two slightly different versions of the event. In his *History*, he is dragged by his hair down to the water where his clothes are torn off before hitting his assailant with the butt end of his pistol.⁹ In his autobiography, he is struck over the head and forced away from the fort, but succeeded in taking control of the situation: "I managed to get my back to a tree, drew my pistols from my belt and threatened to kill the first man that attempted to lay hold of me, my face was covered with blood and otherwise badly hurt." Though Finlayson might have dealt with his attackers violently, he shows a sense of understanding with regards to the Aboriginal men; he halts trade for a short time until reparations were made and peace declared.¹⁰

In 1841 Finlayson was thankfully instructed to return to Fort Stikine and work in the trade shop, and found the same employment at Fort Simpson one year later. That year it was decided that the steamship *Beaver* would take over trade along the coast and the forts would be dismantled. Finlayson was now on his way to establishing a new fort on the southern tip of Vancouver Island, a place he would call home for the next fifty years.¹¹

Finlayson was appointed second-in-command to Mr. Charles Ross, but by the spring of 1844 he was in charge of the fort as Ross had died, being apparently quite ill already upon his

⁹ BCA, Roderick Finlayson, *The History of Vancouver Island and the North West Coast*, 9A/B/30/.F49A, 1878, page 15.

¹⁰ Finlayson, "Biography of Roderick Finlayson 1818-1892," <<http://bcheritage.ca/fortvictoria/fortlife/rod.html>>

¹¹ Finlayson, "Biography of Roderick Finlayson 1818-1892," <<http://bcheritage.ca/fortvictoria/fortlife/rod.html>>

arrival. The first violent clash Finlayson faced against the native residents of the area famously began with the unlawful killing of the Hudson's Bay Company's oxen. The accused Songhees men did not take kindly to the demand for repayment, as the oxen had been grazing on their land, and so they fired bullets on the fort as a demonstration of their resistance. Finlayson responded by sending an interpreter to have their largest house evacuated (assuming it was the residence of the chief) and, once he was satisfied to that effect, fired a nine-pounder canon loaded with grape shot, which caused the lodge to fly, in his words, "into the air in splinters like a bombshell." Finlayson was quite relieved that no one was killed though he was disturbed by their noisy reaction to the power he had demonstrated. This show was enough to convince the Songhees to pay Finlayson for damages in furs. Finlayson's policy regarding the Aboriginal people was, like his trade, one of fair exchange: "I was fully prepared to carry on the battle, but did not like to kill any of them without explaining to them that they were wrong and giving them another chance of making restitution."¹²

Though at times Finlayson seemed to be an oppressive usurper of aboriginal lands, forcing the Songhees to move to the other side of the harbour for allowing fire to threaten the fort, he was determined to establish amicable relations with his trading partners. On one occasion, a party of aboriginal traders from Bellingham Bay were attacked and robbed by the Songhees shortly after leaving the fort with their newly acquired goods. Once informed, Finlayson invited the victims to stay at the fort until the property stolen was restored to them as demanded by the young authority figure. To Finlayson's contentment, the affair was settled

¹² BCA, Roderick Finlayson, *The History of Vancouver Island and the North West Coast*, 9A/B/30/.F49A, 1878, page 20.

peacefully and the Hudson's Bay Company "secured the trade and good will of the Indians from the opposite side of the straits – who knowing they would be protected, came here regularly afterwards for trade." The smooth operation of business was the main priority of Finlayson, as was the application of British law, and he did not want affairs between the native tribes interfering with either.¹³

Finlayson was also a conscientious trader with white men as well. Shortly after the Oregon Treaty settled the question of British and American ownership on the coast in 1846, Fort Victoria received a vessel of men wearing red flannel shirts. Finlayson was suspicious of these men's appearance, taking them to be pirates, but agreed to let one man into the fort. He brought with him gold nuggets from California which Finlayson carefully scrutinised by having it hammered flat on the anvil and checked against his book of minerals. Though satisfied, Finlayson apprehensively agreed to take the traders' gold at the price of \$11 an ounce; his suspicion was again ignited by American traders' lack of hesitation and he had it sent to Fort Vancouver for a final check and for his personal contentment.¹⁴

This event also demonstrated Finlayson's devotion and loyalty to the Company and something of his character. One of the men invited Finlayson to return to California with them to take up the management of the store in San Francisco, as clerks were apparently hard to come by. His enticement was a salary of \$1000 per month, which he declined though he was only being paid £100 (about \$500) per year: "I was, however, under an engagement with the

¹³ BCA, Roderick Finlayson, *The History of Vancouver Island and the North West Coast*, 9A/B/30/.F49A, 1878, pages 24-5.

¹⁴ BCA, Roderick Finlayson, *The History of Vancouver Island and the North West Coast*, 9A/B/30/.F49A, 1878, page 21.

Company to give twelve months' notice before quitting the service so I remained at my post." Finlayson could have easily and profitably deserted the Company as so many did during the California gold rush, but his commitment went unscathed.¹⁵

From the accounts Finlayson left behind, his service to the Hudson's Bay Company seemed to overshadow all the events in his life. The entry for December 14, 1849 in the *Fort Victoria Journal 1846-1850* concisely records one of the major personal events in his young life: "About 11 A.M. Mr R. Finlayson was married to Miss Sarah Work by the [Reverend] Mr Staines." Though Finlayson himself does not provide any insight into his personal life, even the professional, a visitor to the fort in 1852 shared a glimpse of the relatively new Mrs. Finlayson: "In her inherent goodness of heart [she] was always ready to win the hearts of the boys by ministering to their appetites with such luxuries as were not to be had at the school."¹⁶ In those early years they shared a house in the Northwest corner of the fort, next to the sale shop.¹⁷ They would go on to produce eleven children.¹⁸

Previous to Finlayson's marriage in 1849, James Douglas arrived in Fort Victoria to manage the fort as Chief Factor after it became the new headquarters for the Hudson's Bay Company in the area. Finlayson was placed in the office as head accountant, a job he performed for the next thirteen years. Finlayson admired Douglas' "modern way to produce

¹⁵ BCA, Roderick Finlayson, *The Biography of Roderick Finlayson, A/B/30/.F49A*, 1891, page 22.

¹⁶ Jennifer Iredale, "Roderick Finlayson," *Hudson's Bay Company at Fort Victoria: People*, 2000, BC Heritage <<http://bcheritage.ca/fortvictoria/people/finlayso.html>> (15 April 2010).

¹⁷ "Section F: Records of Related and Subsidiary Companies," *Hudson's Bay Company Archives*, N.d., Province of Manitoba, <http://www.bcarehives.gov.bc.ca/exhibits/schoolnt/001/cartogr/img_html/dir_1/00363385.htm> (15 April 2010).

¹⁸ "Ojibway Family History"

the greatest possible results from the least possible means” and practiced this attitude himself.¹⁹ In turn, Douglas praised Finlayson for his “degree of energy, perseverance, method and sound judgment in all his arrangements...He is a young man of great probity and high moral worth.”²⁰ The two men worked closely together for the next decade.

After being promoted to Chief Trader, Finlayson purchased 100 acres adjoining Rock Bay in 1851.²¹ He would continue to buy up land in the area which he “cleared, fenced, drained, and improved” and then leased it out to various parties. His real estate dealings would make Finlayson a rather wealthy man, but in his modest fashion he reported that he “received some returns from my outlay on it.”²² Finlayson also had a hand in forming the Vancouver Island Steam Saw Mill Company at Esquimalt in 1852; it ran for four years but ultimately proved unsuccessful.²³

As well as seeing the establishment of Fort Victoria, Finlayson saw the British crown take possession of Vancouver Island as a colony in 1849. In March 1850, Finlayson and the others at Fort Victoria received the new governor Richard Blanshard who read the proclamation on the eleventh day of that month.²⁴ Douglas soon took over the government of the new colony and Finlayson was promoted to the Council of Vancouver Island as treasurer, a duty he proudly

¹⁹ BCA, Roderick Finlayson, *The History of Vancouver Island and the North West Coast*, 9A/B/30/.F49A, 1878, page 27.

²⁰ Eleanor Stardom, “Finlayson, Roderick,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, N.d., Government of Canada, <http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=6099&interval=25&&PHPSESSID=i3dc56j8lr8p22difhraqe8mo3> (15 April 2010).

²¹ Stardom, “Finlayson, Roderick.”

²² Finlayson, “Biography of Roderick Finlayson 1818-1892,” <<http://bcheritage.ca/fortvictoria/fortlife/rod.html>>

²³ Stardom, “Finlayson, Roderick.”

²⁴ *Fort Victoria Journal 1846-1850*, 9-11 March 1850.

performed from 1852 to 1863. After a trip to Scotland in 1861 to visit his parents whom he had not seen in twenty-five years, he requested and was granted a promotion to superintendent of the Hudson's Bay Company's interior affairs.²⁵

By this time, Victoria was being transformed from a fort into a city. It also served as the judicial centre of the colony. Finlayson's character was such that he sat on the jury of a mysterious murder trial in 1868, where an aboriginal man was accused of killing three black settlers on Salt Spring Island. The man was found guilty and sentenced to death, though continued speculation suggests he may have been wrongfully convicted. If this is the case, and as his language often alludes, Finlayson was likely one of many whose opinion of the British Columbian native was coloured by a Eurocentric bigotry.²⁶

In 1872, Finlayson retired his services to the Hudson's Bay Company and took to farming and managing his business and real estate interests. He continued in his community's service, however, and was elected mayor in 1878 for a brief office of one year that saw the commencement of the construction of Victoria's present City Hall.²⁷

The events described above offer a mere glimpse into the life and personality of Roderick Finlayson. His careful and professional conduct maintained in both his written works and the *Fort Victoria Journal 1846-1850* does not hide the man behind these surviving accounts, but reveals a man of considerable strength in character, ambition, loyalty, equanimity, and even some naivety. His legacy survives in the nomenclature of the area, such

²⁵ Stardom, "Finlayson, Roderick."

²⁶ "The Murder," *Who Killed William Robinson?: Race, Justice and Settling the Land*, N.d., Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History, <<http://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/robinson/murder/indexen.html>> (15 April 2010).

²⁷ Stardom, "Finlayson, Roderick."

as Millstream, which was named after the mill he had built in the area, and Mt Finlayson near Finlayson Arm in the Saanich Inlet.²⁸ Also, the house built in 1914 by one of eleven children still stands near Willows Beach.²⁹ Though he is often eclipsed by James Douglas as the central figure in the history of Victoria and the province of British Columbia, Finlayson played a significant and invaluable role in the formation of the westernmost colony, both as the man and the officer of the Hudson's Bay Company. Finlayson remained in Victoria until his death in January 1892.³⁰

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²⁸ Andrew Scott, "Millstream" and "Finlayson Arm", Encyclopedia of British Columbia, 2000, <<http://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/robinson/murder/indexen.html>> and <<http://www.knowbc.com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/IEBC/book/f/finarm.asp>> (15 April 2010).

²⁹ "Roderick Finlayson Residence," *Maltwood Art Museum and Gallery*, 13 December 2005, University of Victoria, <<http://www.maltwood.uvic.ca/arts-crafts/maclure/finlayson.html>> (16 April 2010).

³⁰ Stardom, "Finlayson, Roderick."

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