

ELIZA MCDUGALL HARDISTY: PRAIRIE PIONEER

By Gayle Simonson © 2005

Fifth Place: Wondrous Western Women Story Contest to Celebrate Alberta's Centennial
Famous 5 Foundation (www.famous5.org) and Light Hearted Concepts (www.lightheartedconcepts.com)

For forty years before Alberta became a province and more than 50 years before the Famous Five had women in Canada declared “Persons,” one woman had watched the west develop from a fur-trade society to an area of economic growth and diversity. Her family engaged in many of the areas which allowed that growth – missions, fur trade and business.

Like many women of her time, her story is not well known but we have indications that she was a highly intelligent hard-working woman, well-liked by all who knew her. She hosted many of the most important people of the era and raised not only her own three children but relatives as well. She attended negotiations between the Canadian government and the aboriginal people of western Canada. Her name appears on two treaties, perhaps indicating the high esteem in which she was held by officials. She was the daughter of missionaries and, with her support, her husband moved through the fur trade to become Chief Factor of Fort Edmonton and eventually the first senator from western Canada.

Eliza McDougall was sixteen in 1865 when she left school to join her parents, George and Elizabeth, at Victoria Mission. The following year, she married fur-trader Richard Hardisty and immediately left for Rocky Mountain House. Guide Peter Erasmus wrote: “Her honeymoon trip by cart trail to Edmonton and saddle horse to Rocky Mountain House from Victoria was an event of historical fortitude that any present day bride might envy!” How times have changed! Richard was eventually transferred to Fort Edmonton where he became Chief Factor.

Her parents also moved to Edmonton and built the first home and a small church outside the fort. Richard arranged for a “Big House” just outside the fort on the present-day site of the Alberta Legislature. This home became the centre of social life as the settlement grew. Many well-educated visitors were part of that circle. Acquaintances included surveyor-scientist Sandford Fleming who was instrumental in the establishment of a standard time system and Richard's brother-in-law Donald Smith, Lord Strathcona, who drove the final spike of the CPR.

Eliza was present at the meetings for Treaty 6 at Fort Carlton and Treaty 7 at Blackfoot Crossing. Her signature appears on both. On Treaty 6, the name of Mary McKay also appears. On Treaty 7 in 1877, five other women also signed. These included her sister-in-law Annie McDougall (a signature sometimes mistakenly

attributed to another sister-in-law Elizabeth who was, instead, minding the mission at Morley), missionary teacher Elizabeth Barrett, and the wives of three North-West Mounted Police officers – Mary Macleod, Julia Winder and Julia Shurtliffe. In the midst of the encampment, these six participated in a tea party hosted by Mary Macleod. It would seem that, despite rough conditions, the women of the west tried to maintain what they saw as the niceties of civilization!

When, in 1883, Richard was transferred to Calgary, the parting gift of the people of the little Methodist church reflected their regard, not only for Eliza's hospitality but also her intellect. With thanks for her help with the Sunday School and also the choir for which she shared duties as accompanist, the Calgary *Herald* reported that "Mrs. Hardisty was presented with a tea service and twelve handsomely bound volumes of the British poets..."

In Calgary, three teenagers joined them, the children of Richard's brother. The daughter Isabella married the first lawyer to settle in Calgary – James Lougheed, a name well-known in Alberta history. Like many women of her time, she lived much of her life as a widow. Richard died in 1888 while she lived until 1929. Though widowed, when her daughter-in-law died, she took in the children of her soldier son Richard.

The changes she saw and experienced in her lifetime were extreme. From Red River cart to the start of the aviation age, she had travelled large distances in many different conveyances. When she arrived in the west, consumer goods were non-existent and food was scarce. White flour cost \$30 a bag and had to be transported by cart from Red River. By 1905, the HBC wooden fur trade post where she first lived in Edmonton was no longer in operation and a three-storey brick building on Jasper Avenue provided a wide variety of goods. How did she feel in 1915 as the last of the fort buildings were demolished for the completion of the new Alberta Legislature? In Calgary, which had not existed in 1865, a new six-storey Calgary store opened in 1913 and its restaurant offered such delicacies as broiled lobster!

Early life in the west was one of hardship and deprivation. Like the other women named above, Eliza's story is not well-known. Eliza represents all the women who helped to develop this western territory so that it could become a province.