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SIR WILLIAM BUTLER ON THE CANADIAN PRAIRIES

By Eddie Dalton

At the Royal Dublin Society's 1988 Spring Show the main attraction was the musical ride performed by the equestrian section of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, better known as the "Mounties". In the brief historical introduction to the event Capt. William Butler of Tipperary was referred to. Few in the crowd would have known that 1988 was the 150th anniversary of the birth of this famous Tipperary man, who became General Sir William Butler.

Henry Boylan's *Dictionary of Irish Biography* gives Suirville as Butler's place of birth. However, this is incorrect. He lived at Suirville on the west bank of the Suir, but was born at Ballyslatteen, Golden on 31 October 1838 — as his autobiography states.

His father, Richard Butler, was one of the Ballycarron Butlers, and had taken a tenancy of 90 acres from Frank Massey in Ballyslatteen. William got his early education from the Jesuits at Tullabeg in Carlow, and later at Dr. Quinn's school in Dublin.

His travels through Canada from 1867 to 1873 supplied him with the material for *The Great Lone Land*, his notable account of his experience of Indians and fur-trappers along the Saskatchewan and on the prairies. This book went into four editions, and brought him fame throughout the English-speaking world. Butler also wrote fifteen other works, based on his experience of over 50 years in the British Army, as well as an autobiography, published after his death.

All his life Butler loved a challenge. In 1870 the Lieutenant-Governor of Manitoba, Adams G. Archibold, asked him (then a Captain in the 69th Regiment) to examine the disturbed state of affairs in the Great Plains. Archibold wanted the situation to be investigated from an independent view-point and Captain Butler was also to indicate what action should be taken to restore peace. This undertaking by Butler resulted in one of the earliest anthropological studies of "the noble red man", as Butler called him.

In the autumn of 1870 as he prepared to set out there were several different tribes of Indians to be reckoned with, principally two main groups — the Prairie Indians and the Thickwood Indians. They roamed the prairies from the Red River on the 49th parallel to the Rocky Mountains. There were also 2000 half-breeds, who rarely settled in one place. The country had been troubled by recent incursions of armed bands of Fenians from the now once more United States.

Butler was an outstanding descriptive writer. Here is part of his description of the St. Lawrence River:

"The approach by the mighty estuary of the St. Lawrence River, the gradual drawing in of these great shores, the immense width of the streams when it is still 600 miles from the open sea, the varied scenery of lake and rapid along the upwards course to Ontario etc. — all combined to strike the mind of the newcomer with the sense of size and majesty which is the dominant note of the American Continent.

We then approached the top of one ridge and looked over. Before or since I never saw the equal of that sight; and what is more, no man can ever see it again. The sight that struck us was not the vastness of the prairie, but the immensity of the



animal life that covered it. From a spot three or four hundred yards from where we stood, far off to a remote horizon, where sky and prairie came together on a line that was visible to us only by the small black specks of life that were on it, a vast herd of grazing buffaloes stretched away to the south, huge animals in the foreground, gradually lessening in size as the middle distance was reached and then dwindling down into the faint specks I have spoken of. A rifle bullet might have reached the nearest of the herd; two hours' hard riding would not have carried you to the farthest animal where the earth limit was a line of buffalo backs”.



General Sir William Butler

There is frequently a spiritual dimension in Butler's writings. One of his oldest friends was Henry Connors, a private in the 69th. As a recruit Connors had been confided specially to Butler's care by his aged parents who had come to Fermoy to see their son enlisted. From then on Connors was Butler's faithful servant. However, Connors had always had lung trouble, and in the regimental hospital in Quebec died while Butler was out West. When he returned Butler put a small stone over Connor's grave in the military grave-yard outside the walls of the historic Plains of Abraham.

At the commencement of his journey by horse in 1870 Butler recalls one night in camp. "It was a dark cold night, and the wind howled dismally through some bare thickets close by, when the fire flickered low and the wind wailed . . . Amongst the dry white grass it was impossible to resist a feeling of utter loveliness.

A long journey lay before me, nearly 3000 miles . . . to be travelled . . . the terrific cold of a winter of which I had only heard, a cold so intense that travel ceases, a cold which freezes mercury and of which the spirit registers 89° of frost”.

Between this camp and the Rockies there stood but six houses in a distance of 1,200 miles. The devastation of the small-pox plague on the Indians had to be seen to be believed. The Crees near Fort Pitt suffered greatly as a result of contacting it. When Butler arrived, the fort had gone through a terrible ordeal; more than 100 Crees had perished around its stockades. The dead lay unburied for days on the roadside; the wolves fought over the decaying bodies.

From the south the Indians had come to the fort in midsummer, leaving behind a long line of dead. “Give us help” they cried; “our medicine men can do nothing against the plague; from the white man we got it, and only he can take it away”. But no help could be given, and day by day the wretched band grew less.

If, recalled Butler elsewhere, on the long line of the American frontier from the Gulf of Mexico to the British border a single life was taken by an Indian, if even a horse or an ox was stolen from a settler, the fact was chronicled by scores of journals throughout the United States. The reverse side of the story, however, is not known. “What a terrible tale could I tell of these dark deeds done by the white savage against the far nobler red man”.

Of the Sioux Indians, Butler wrote, there was not a thing that grew nor a thing that flew that the Sioux did not know how to make the best use of. After he had spent some months amongst the Sioux he wrote a book entitled *Red Cloud*. This was an account of his association with the last chief of the Sioux nation, before they were placed in reservations.

Butler’s second recommendation as a solution to the keeping of peace along the Saskatchewan was the organisation of a well-equipped force from 100 to 150 men. One third should be mounted, specially recruited and engaged for service in the Saskatchewan, enlisting for two or three years’ service. At the expiration of that period they should become military settlers, receiving grants of land, but still remaining as a reserve force should their services be required. The implementation of this recommendation resulted in the founding of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

