Before Denman

By Graham Brazier

June 15 is not a date we celebrate on Denman Island or in western Canada for that matter. The reasons for this are not at all clear as it was on this day in 1846 when it was agreed that it would be the 49th parallel with a southern dip through Juan de Fuca Strait that would separate the United States from British North America - an agreement with both immediate and profound, long-term consequences. (Just ask Donald Trump).

There was, however, a prominent ship's captain who plied the waters of Georgia Strait in the interests of the fur trade on behalf the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) for whom the date was particularly consequential. William Henry McNeill, son of William Henry McNeill and eventually father of William Henry McNeill, Jr., was born in Boston. At the time of the border agreement, which became known as the Oregon Treaty, McNeill was 45 years old and had been in the employ of the HBC for 14 years.

His employer, London-based HBC, knew him to be a skillful trader and effective communicator with the indigenous populations he encountered as well as an experienced and highly skilled ship's captain. All was not smooth, however. In the 14 years preceding the Oregon Treaty the Company had chosen to overlook two difficult factors of McNeill's background in order to maintain his commitment as an employee. One; he had become known as 'a tough cookie', a tough captain to please and a harsh disciplinarian which caused widespread reluctance to work under him. Despite company policy, incidents of lashing and shackling of sailors were not uncommon aboard McNeill's ships and on a number of occasions the word 'mutiny' was used to describe events under his supervision. Management, it seems, had little difficulty overlooking these aspects of McNeill's behaviour.

It was his American citizenship that posed a more challenging problem for company management as, according to HBC policy, only British citizens were eligible for employment. However, it appears that McNeill's value to the Company was so well established that rather than pressuring him to take up British citizenship it created a set of exceedingly complex maneuvers for him to by-pass the requirement. In short, management embraced him and, as time went on, his postings allowed him to settle on land, and over time marry two indigenous women (Matilda & Martha), raise twelve children and retire.

And yet, McNeill's biography ("***Captain McNeill and his Wife the Nishga Chief***") written by Robin Percival Smith concludes, not with the death of McNeill which didn't occur until 1875, but with a reference to a letter he had signed to U.S. President Grant in 1867 in support of a plea to annex British Columbia.

Perhaps we have good cause to raise a glass on June 15?

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