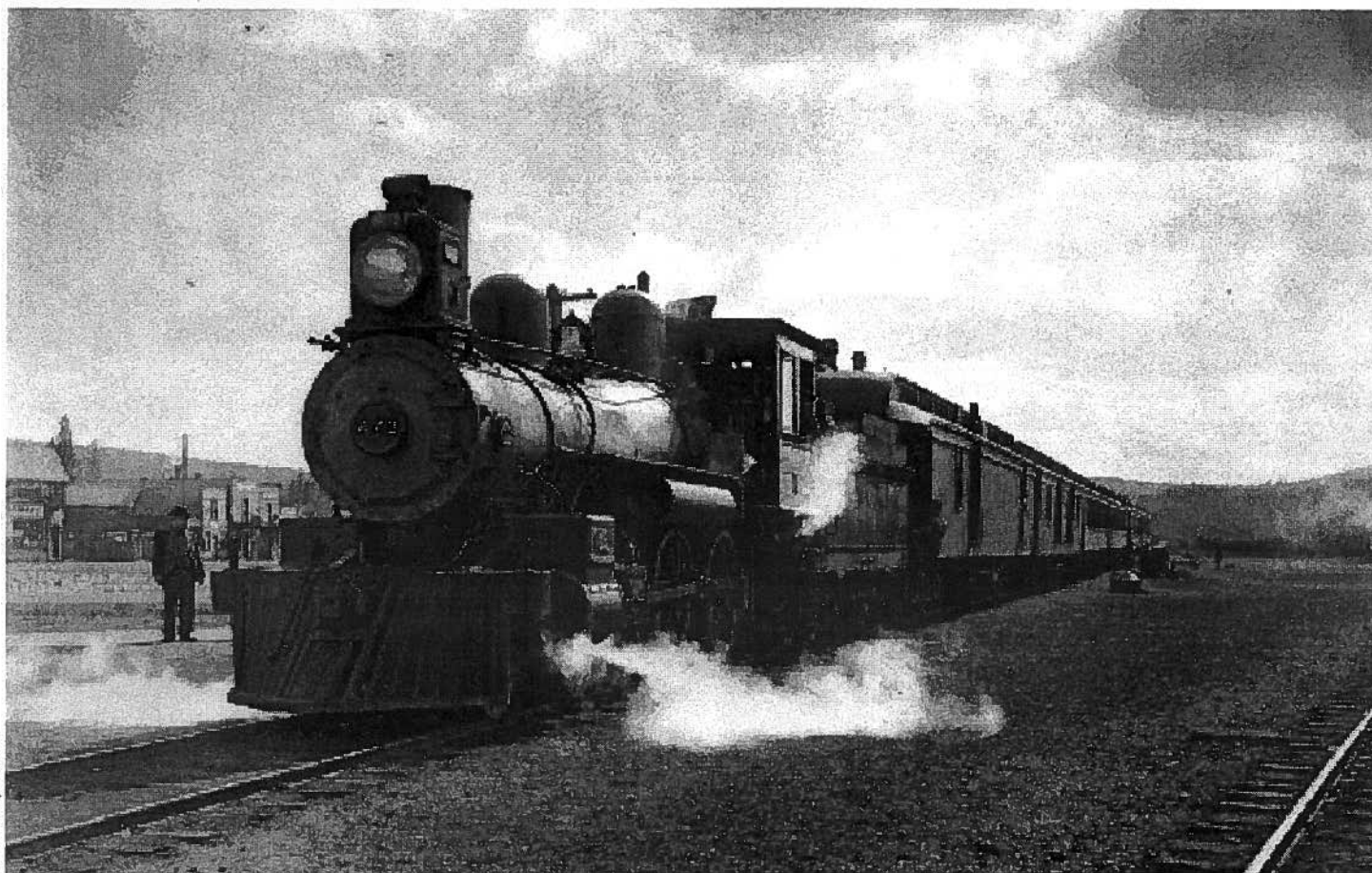


# BRITISH COLUMBIA HISTORICAL NEWS

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BC Archives, C-08273

The Canadian Pacific's Crowsnest Route train at Cranbrook about 1900. Remember the smell of coal and steam?

Robert Turner, curator emeritus at the Royal British Columbia Museum in Victoria, is an authority on the history of railroads and steamships in British Columbia and he has written and published a dozen books on BC's transportation history.

In this issue he writes about the Crowsnest Route.

**Archival Adventures**

**The Flood of 1894**

**Yellowhead**

**Cedar Cottage**

**"Single Tax" Taylor**

**Patricia Theatre**

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BRITISH COLUMBIA HISTORICAL NEWS

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# “...That Old Rogue, the Iroquois Tête Jaune”

by Yvonne Mearns Klan

Yvonne Klan, author of several articles on early days in BC, is thrilled by narratives of high drama and adventure unreeling from HBCo microfilms.

- 1 Hudson's Bay Co. Archives (HBCA) F.4/32, index; B.39/d/4, fo.5; B.239/d/245 fo.99d
- 2 Charles M. Gates, ed., *Five fur traders of the Northwest*. University of Minnesota Press. 1933. pp. 258, 266
- 3 A. S. Morton, ed. *Journal of Duncan McGillivray of the North West Company at Fort George on the Saskatchewan 1794-5*. Macmillan Company of Canada. Toronto. 1929. pp. li, 49.
- 4 W.K. Lamb, ed. *The journals and letters of Sir Alexander Mackenzie*. Hakluyt Society at the University Press. Cambridge. 1970. p. 411
- 5 Victor Hopwood, ed., *Travels in Western North America, 1784-1812*. Macmillan of Canada. Toronto. 1972. p. 223
- 6 Lamb, 1970 p. 85
- 7 E.E. Rich, ed., *Colin Robertson's Correspondence Book, September 1817 to September 1822*. Champlain Society for Hudson's Bay Record Society. Toronto. 1939. p. 56 (CRCEB)
- 8 HBCA B.60/a/7, Feb. 4, 1808
- 9 F. Wentzel to R. McKenzie, Feb. 28, 1814 in Masson, L.R. *Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest...* Impr. general A. Cote et Cie. Quebec. 1889.1890. vol. 1, p. 109

THE haunting image of Tête Jaune, a blond Iroquois who roamed the Rocky Mountains in the early 1800s, has fired men's imagination for over a century. It inspired Howard O'Hagan to write the novel *Tay John*, a Canadian classic set in the 1880s. It gave rise to numerous theories to account for Tête Jaune's presence in the west, and equally numerous speculations about his identity. Yellowhead Mountain, Yellowhead Lake, Yellowhead Pass, and the village of Tête Jaune Cache, commemorate him. His profile guides travellers along Yellowhead Highway 16, which stretches from the Queen Charlotte Islands to Portage la Prairie, and BC's Highway 5 from Kamloops to Tête Jaune Cache. Yet little is known about him.

Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John* was conceived of an Irish evangelist and a Shuswap native woman. The historical Tête Jaune's lineage is less precise; even his name has caused much confusion. The muddle started in 1819 when Colin Robertson, a Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) officer at St. Mary's on the Peace River, wrote that a group of Baymen embarking for New Caledonia was accompanied by "Pierre Hatsinaton, Guide." When the letter was copied in the fort's journal it read "with the Tête Jaune, Guide." However, account books of both the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company (NWC) refer to "Pierre Bostonais (*dit* Tête Jaune)." <sup>1</sup> Pierre may well have been christened Hatsinaton but called "Bostonais" to denote his origin or residence in the United States. This would lend credence to speculation that he was the Tête Jaune referred to in an 1804-1805 journal kept by a trader in present-day Minnesota:

Nov. 9, 1804: ...this afternoon the Tete Jaune and Son come from hunting Beaver, made an indifferent hunt. paid their debts. gave them 6 Gall Rum. they drank peacably and gave me no manner of trouble.

Jan. 27, 1805: ...this afternoon the Tete Jaune's Son expired after a long and painful Malady of upwards of three Months. his Death costs me a Keg of Rum to content his relatives. he was a most excellent Indian, desired his father to pay his Debt and to be attentive to the White people. <sup>2</sup>

Eight weeks later Tête Jaune again visited the post, repaired his canoe, and paddled out of fur trade records until 1816, when "Bostonnais dit Tete Jaune Pierre" appeared in a NWC ledger.

Towards the end of the 1700s Canadian and American fur traders were sending Iroquois, "who trapped with an application unknown to the Indians," <sup>3</sup> to the Missouri, Mississippi, and Saskatchewan rivers. For some Iroquois this was an idyllic life. Explorer Alexander Mackenzie noted that a small colony had emigrated to the Saskatchewan River in 1799, "to escape improvements of civilization in the east and to follow the mode of life of their forefathers." <sup>4</sup>

In 1800 David Thompson, wishing to bring Iroquois trappers to Piegan country in the Rocky Mountain foothills, diplomatically consulted the Piegan chiefs. He told them that the Iroquois' homeland was so depleted in furs that they could no longer make a living there and had asked to be brought to the Rockies. He assured the chiefs that the immigrants "would behave quietly, would reside in the woody hills at the foot of the mountains, and serve as a barrier between the Piegans and their enemies." <sup>5</sup> The latter point was particularly pleasing to the frequently embattled Piegans and they gave their consent.

By the summer of 1801 more than 300 Iroquois and Mohawks had been brought west. They migrated to the meadowlands around today's Jasper and to the grazing fields in the valleys of the Peace and Smoky rivers. They frequented the sources of rivers yet unknown to white men, and traversed the rugged passes twisting through the Rockies into New Caledonia. When their contracts expired many were unwilling to leave their native wives and families and re-engaged. Others remained as "freemen"—unfettered wanderers who traded furs on the same basis as the local natives and contracted as temporary interpreters, guides, canoemen, and provision hunters.

The majority came from mission settlements along the St. Lawrence River. Alexander Mackenzie stated that many had been taught "reading and writing in their own language, and are

Notes continue on page 20

better instructed than the Canadian [i.e. today's Quebecois] inhabitants of the country of the lower ranks."<sup>6</sup> The more pious taught their families and native hosts elements of Catholic prayer and ritual, and it was said that Iroquois voyageurs paddled more often to hymns than to Canadian paddle songs.

They were skillful canoemen. Colin Robertson held that Canadian voyageurs "may be more hardy or undergo more fatigue, but in either a rapid or traverse, give me [the Iroquois], from their calmness and presence of mind which never forsakes them in the greatest danger."<sup>7</sup>

They trapped relentlessly. In 1802 traders in the Saskatchewan District complained that the area had been trapped out by Iroquois who "leave nothing wherever they come." In 1808 Edmonton officers noted that "in a few years a beaver will be nearly as great a curiosity here as in London, 'tis the free Canadians and Iroquois with their steel traps that has so totally destroyed them."<sup>8</sup> In 1814 NorWesters in Athabasca reported that local Indians "complain of the want of beaver (the Iroquois having ruined the Country)."<sup>9</sup> And Daniel Harmon, an NWC clerk in New Caledonia, commented in October 1818,

As they are mere rovers, they do not feel the same interest, as those who permanently reside here, in keeping the stock of animals good, and therefore they make great havock among the game, destroying alike the animals which are young and old. A number of Iroquois have passed several summers on this side of the mountain, which circumstance they knew to be displeasing to the Indians here, who have often threatened to kill them, if they persisted in destroying the animals on their lands. These menaces were disregarded. A month since, an Iroquois, with his wife and two children, were all killed, while asleep, by two Carriers of this village, which melancholy event, I hope, will prevent any of the Iroquois from coming into this region again.<sup>10</sup>

Ironically, while Harmon was writing this comment a contingent of Iroquois engaged by the HBC was preparing to enter New Caledonia.

For many years the HBC had been trying to penetrate the NorWesters' fur-rich strongholds in Athabasca, Peace River, and New Caledonia. Every attempt had been ruthlessly crushed. The NorWesters drove game away from the Baymen's path and so intimidated the natives that they refused to trade furs or provisions with the newcomers. Consequently in the winter of 1815 at least sixteen HBC voyageurs died of starvation along the Peace. Nonetheless the HBC persisted, and in the fall of 1818 an HBC brigade led by John Clarke had reached the forks of the Peace and Smoky Rivers (today's Grande Prairie, Alta.) and were building Fort St. Mary's. Clarke's relative ease in establishing this post was largely due to the early onset of winter, for while his men were erecting St. Mary's, the NWC's Peace River brigade, bringing reinforcements and trading goods from Montreal, became ice-bound far downriver leaving the NorWesters with insufficient men to drive Clarke away and not enough trade items to effectively compete with him.

Clarke's brigade was composed largely of Iroquois, many of

whom had previously served the NWC in this area, had forged across the Rockies, and were familiar with the country. Now under contract with the HBC, they were to return to New Caledonia and secure the natives' goodwill towards the Baymen who wanted to trade in their land. As winter tightened its icy grip, the Iroquois, led by Jose Gaubin, set off on their mission. (Other voyageurs were sent to live with local natives—a tactic which eased the strain on St. Mary's meager food resources and ensured that furs and game hunted by the natives went to Clarke rather than the NorWesters.)

Gaubin's party returned in the spring and reported that the New Caledonia natives were eager to have the HBC on their lands. During his journey Gaubin had encountered other Iroquois and brought them into the HBC's fold. One of the new recruits was Tête Jaune, who made his first appearance in HBC records as "Pierre, the Guide" in October 1819. In that same year the NWC wrote off the large debt he owed with the notation "deserted."

Colin Robertson took charge of St. Mary's over the 1819–1820 season. Determined to gain a footing in New Caledonia in 1820, he had earlier arranged for a brigade of trading goods to be sent from Norway House in time to cross the mountains well before freeze-up. At St. Mary's he sought the Iroquois' opinions of the mountain passes and the country beyond and Tête Jaune, who knew the territory well, drew a map for him, which unfortunately has not come to light.

In December, 1819, Robertson ordered Clerk Ignace Giasson, "with Tête Jaune, Guide," to take a party of Iroquois up the Smoky, hunt and cache provisions for St. Mary's until April 1820, then cross the mountains at the Smoky's source. In New Caledonia he was to advise the natives that an HBC brigade crammed with trading goods would arrive in the fall and urge them to withhold their furs from the NWC, trading instead with the Baymen when they arrived. Finally, Robertson warned Giasson to expect fierce opposition from the NorWesters, who "will throw every obstacle in the way of your having any intercourse with the Indians."<sup>11</sup>

On 23 December Tête Jaune strapped on his snowshoes and guided the party (accompanied by wives who could serve as interpreters) up the Smoky. It was a hard and hungry journey. One man, near starvation, died after reaching a food cache and overeating. The group struggled on, hunting and caching provisions only to have one cache destroyed by bears and another spoiled by weather. At the end of March Giasson sent a report from Sheep Creek, some 300 kilometres up the Smoky, stating he would leave for New Caledonia 30 April. Their route through the Rockies is not known but most probably Tête Jaune led them through Robson Pass—from the Smoky's headwaters, along the base of Mt. Robson, past sprawling glaciers and alpine lakes, to the Robson River, which debouches at the Fraser River near today's Tête Jaune Cache. Almost certainly the route was not today's "Yellowhead."

- 10 W. K. Lamb, ed., *Sixteen years in the Indian Country. The Journal of Daniel Williams Harmon*. The Macmillan Company of Canada. Toronto. 1957
- 11 HBCA B.190/a/2, 18 Dec. 1819.
- 12 HBCA B.188/a/1.
- 13 E. E. Rich, ed. *Journal of occurrences in the Athabasca Department by George Simpson, 1820 and 1821, and report*. Champlain Society for Hudsons' Bay Record Society. 1938. p. 10 (SAJ).
- 14 SAJ p. 132.
- 15 HBCA B.190/a/3, 29 Oct. 1820.
- 16 HBCA B.190/a/3, 2 Nov. 1820.
- 17 SAJ p. 338.
- 18 HBCA B.190/a/3, 17 May 17 1821.
- 19 SAJ, p. 277.
- 20 SAJ p. 286.
- 21 HBCA B.39/b/2, 4 May, 1823.
- 22 HBCA B.39/b/2, 18 May, 1824.
- 23 HBCA B.5/a/1, 21 July 1824.
- 24 HBCA B.188/b/4, #11, 24 Oct. 1825.
- 25 HBCA B.188/a/8, 24 Sept. 1826.
- 26 HBCA B.188/a/10, 21 Apr. 1827.
- 27 HBCA B.188/a/10, 5 Sept. 1827.
- 28 HBCA B.188/a/10, 27 Apr. 1828.

News of the HBC's presence in New Caledonia raced through native lodges and reached the ears of incredulous NorWesters. At Ft. St. James a clerk wrote,

June 10: Indians report of there being at the Forks of Fraser's River one of the HBC clerks and three men with the Iroquois distributing out goods and tobacco Gratis with the promises of their coming in force early in the summer, but I can hardly credit them as certainly our Gentlemen in Peace River would have sent us notice of it, if such is the case they certainly will play the deuce with the Natives and get all their furs without my having it in my power to prevent them ... however it is false.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless he ordered his men to spread through the country and secure whatever furs and provisions the natives had before they could "fall into the clutches" of the HBC.

Summer passed into autumn and the HBC Peace River posts heard no more from Giasson. George Simpson, superintendent of the HBC's Athabasca Department, worried over the expedition's fate. His plans for New Caledonia were going badly awry. At Norway House the brigade destined for New Caledonia was delayed "by the misconduct of the people who were in a continual state of intoxication."<sup>13</sup> Once underway the canoes were found to be poorly built, necessitating frequent stops for repairs. Obviously the brigade could not reach Peace River Portage before freeze-up and all hope of establishing New Caledonia in 1820 had to be abandoned. To cap matters, NorWesters from the Peace brought reports that Giasson's party had been killed by natives. Not surprisingly, the Iroquois destined for New Caledonia in 1821 had second thoughts and "positively declared that they will not renew their engagements unless Giasson returns safe, so if he does not make his appearance it will be quite impractical to establish the country next year."<sup>14</sup>

Simpson's worries were not entirely groundless. The NorWesters had indeed tried to persuade the natives to murder Giasson and his men but the New Caledonians had instead welcomed them, were keen to have them in their country, and dutifully hoarded their furs for the expected HBC brigade. When the canoes failed to arrive they were obliged to trade their furs—some five hundred pelts—with the NorWesters.

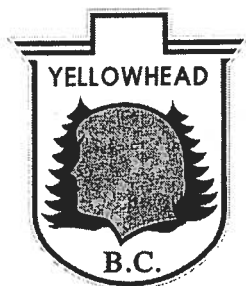
Giasson's party, resplendently clad, returned to St. Mary's ten months after their departure. "Beaver must be remarkably plentiful in that quarter," a clerk noted, "as they were all clothed in dressed

Coat Beaver."<sup>15</sup> The arrival of Tête Jaune and his brother Baptiste was duly celebrated when "The Iroquois all enjoyed themselves with a booze."<sup>16</sup> Giasson sent Simpson a report and a map (neither of which has survived) showing two sites he had selected for future establishments and, with the natives' approval, had marked "H.B.Coy." to signify possession.

Tête Jaune spent the remainder of the winter hunting up the Smoky. Unfortunately an unseasonably mild thaw settled over the area and was followed by a cold snap. The resultant snowcrust crackled under the hunters' feet, causing the startled prey to flee out of gunshot range. "Many of the Beaver Indians have been starved to death," Simpson noted, "one of our Iroquois and three belonging to the North West Coy. have shared the same fate."<sup>17</sup> Tête Jaune returned to St. Mary's in May, haggard, starving, and without pelts. Nonetheless the journal records, "Old Tête Jaune was engaged for the New Caledonia."<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile Simpson pushed ahead with plans to establish the new country in 1821. He urged officers along the Peace to engage Iroquois "without delay. I shall not limit you to terms, we absolutely need their services."<sup>19</sup> He assembled "a formidable force" of six canoes, sixteen men, and four officers<sup>20</sup> to fight through the resistance expected from the NorWesters and in the summer of 1821 Tête Jaune guided the first HBC brigade to enter New Caledonia up the Peace. Contrary to expectations, it was a peaceful voyage for in the spring the rival companies had united under the banner of the Hudson's Bay Company.

With the union, all hands could work at gathering furs and provisions instead of harassing and spying on the opposition. The HBC suddenly found itself overburdened with too many men and too many posts. The Iroquois could no longer demand (and get) high wages; many could not even renew their engagements. As freemen they were not wanted around the forts, being perceived now as mischief-makers and, with their families, a drain on the area's resources. Nor were they wanted by the Beaver Indians, who threatened their lives if they tried to go up the Smoky where beaver were now all but extirpated. A former NWC officer wrote Chief Factor Smith at Ft. Chipewyan complaining of "the faithless Iroquois who were an intolerable burthen and expence to me throughout the winter."<sup>21</sup> Smith, however, took a broader view and replied,



It is cruel to introduce foreign Indians to ruin [the host] country. The poor Beaver Indians with all their industry scrape only a miserable lively hood, their country exhausted of beaver and large animals, and by who? by the wild ambitious policy of the whites who study their interest first and then that of the natives...<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps it was this animosity towards Iroquois that caused Tête Jaune and Baptiste to move with their families to New Caledonia. They arrived at Fort George (today's Prince George) in the fall of 1823, heavily in debt to the Company and so ragged that they were obliged to trade their cherished dogs in exchange for clothing. Though deemed "not very handy workmen" and "no great acquisition" they were hired for the winter.

With the spring break-up they paddled down the Fraser to Alexandria. Their presence infuriated the post's clerk, who noted that local natives were bringing in very few pelts,

...but the poor fellows are not so much to blame, the beaver lands having been destroyed ... by those two confounded Vagabonds, Tete Jaune and his brother Baptiste who have hunted there all spring. I wish they were anywhere except New Caledonia, even if it was in Hell for they do more mischief than they are worth. I am only sorry the Indians did not strip them naked provided they spared their lives, but I would not pity them.<sup>23</sup>

Faced with such hostility, the brothers retreated to Jasper, a favorite Iroquois resort.

Leather, the most preferred trade item in New Caledonia, brought Tête Jaune into HBC records once again. Hides and sinew were collected at the prairie posts and paddled west via the Peace River. Governor Simpson chafed at this long and costly mode of transport and ordered Chief Trader James McMillan to find a route suited to packtrains. McMillan arrived at Jasper in October 1825 and tried to hire a guide familiar with such a route. Of all the men McMillan approached only Tête Jaune would agree to guide him. The little party threaded its way through the winding corridor that would evermore be known as "Yellowhead Pass" and emerged at a point on the Fraser called then, as now, Tête Jaune Cache. McMillan found the route better than he expected. He believed a packtrain could easily bring cargoes of leather to Tête Jaune's cache, where it could be picked up by canoes from New Caledonia. McMillan wrote a report for Tête Jaune to deliver to New Caledonia's Chief Factor Connolly at Ft. St. James, and thoughtfully added,

The Iroquois says that salmon does not agree with him. If kept at the Fort I beg that some consideration may be shewn him. If he had not undertaken [this journey] none else would, not even for 150 Beaver.<sup>24</sup>

Connolly sent Tête Jaune to trap around Alexandria (now in charge of a more congenial clerk) with the understanding that he should return to Ft. St. James in the summer to guide a party to the cache to fetch Connolly's 1825-1826 leather requisition: 400 dressed moose and deer skins, 30 parchment skins,

2000 fathoms of pack cords, 30 lbs. sinews, and 70 lbs. babiche (used for making snowshoes). Unfortunately Tête Jaune became ill at Alexandria and failed to return to Ft. St. James. While Connolly fumed over "that old rogue the Iroquois Tête Jaune, who was depended upon to guide the people..."<sup>25</sup> his clerks scoured the area and eventually found another Iroquois who knew the cache's location.

Connolly saw no more of Tête Jaune until November 1826, when "that rogue Tete Jaune and his brother" appeared at Ft. St. James, driven there by a dread of Carrier Indians who had threatened to kill them. Though Connolly was a reluctant host he realized that "these people cannot in this part of the country live by hunting in the winter, and it being too late for them to cross the mountains they will be a charge upon us till Spring." He proposed that they winter at Fort Kilmaurs on Babine Lake, where salmon was less scarce than at other posts. In return they would have to do whatever work was required of them. This offer, however, "they decline accepting and they may now shift for themselves the best way they can." Three weeks later the hungry Iroquois accepted Connolly's proposal and, with their families, set off for Babine Lake.

Tête Jaune's rugged life and his advancing years were taking their toll. When the aging brothers returned to Ft. St. James the following spring it was apparent to Connolly that they had endured a miserable winter "for I never saw two more wretched beings in my life. Since the fall they have not killed one marten between them, nor had they even shift enough to hunt rabbits for their subsistence."<sup>26</sup> Only the charity of the Babine Indians had kept them alive and now they were at a loss what next to do or where next to turn. At Connolly's suggestion that they hunt around the headwaters of the Finlay River—a harsh mountainous country where game and beaver were said to be plentiful—they assembled their ragged families and trudged into the hinterlands of New Caledonia.

Connolly sometimes thought about them and inquired about their welfare but "all I can learn is that they crossed the mountain to Finlay's Branch and intended to proceed downwards to Peace River. I am glad that this district is rid of them,"<sup>27</sup> he wrote in September 1827.

In that same month Tête Jaune and Baptiste, their women and their children, were murdered by a party of Beaver Indians near the mouth of the Finlay.<sup>28</sup>

Tête Jaune and his family met their fate more than 175 years ago but the old pathfinder is not entirely forgotten. His legend still survives in the high Rocky Mountain passes and his presence, stylized on Yellowhead Highway signs, still guides travellers through the long-conquered wilderness that was once New Caledonia. ~