



## **ISABELLA MAINVILLE ROSS**

### **First Female Métis Pioneer of Victoria**

**By George and Terry Goulet**

There have been many memorable Métis women in the history of British Columbia. A little known but remarkable one is Isabella Mainville Ross. Her memory is enshrined in the cemetery in Victoria named after her – the Ross Bay Cemetery, as well as in Ross Bay, both overlooking the beautiful Pacific Ocean.

Isabella was born on January 10, 1808. She was the daughter of Joseph Mainville (a French engagé boatman) who worked for the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) and Josette, an Ojibwa woman.

In 1822 the teen-age Isabella and Charles Ross, a fur-trading clerk with the HBC, were married at Lac La Pluie House (an HBC Fort subsequently renamed Fort Frances in what is now Ontario). Ross was a Scotsman born in Kincaig, Inverness Shire Scotland in 1794. Their marriage was a country marriage (that is without benefit of clergy) since there were no priests or ministers in the fur-trading country in those early days.

During his career with the HBC Ross was transferred to a number of locations in what is now Western Canada. Isabella and their children accompanied him. Two years after their marriage, Isabella and Charles moved to HBC’s Fort Kilmaurs in the New Caledonia District in what today is British Columbia.

Isabella and Charles had nine children (some sources say 10) five boys and four girls. According to HBC Archives, the children were only baptized in 1837 and 1838. The marriage of Isabella and Charles was solemnized in an Anglican Church ceremony at Fort Vancouver in the Oregon Country in 1838.

In the late 1830s they were living in Fort McLoughlin on Campbell Island in the New Caledonia District (what is now British Columbia). In his Narratives Governor George Simpson of the HBC wrote the following of Isabella:

“... the wife of Mr. Ross of this fort [McLoughlin], a Saulteau half-breed of Lac La Pluie, lately displayed great courage. Some Indians, while trading in her husband’s absence, with her son in the shop of the establishment, drew their knives upon the boy. On hearing this, the lady, pike in hand, chased the cowardly rascals from post to pillar till she drove them out of the fort. ‘If such are white women’ said the discomfited savages, ‘what must the white men be?’”

In 1843 after the HBC shut down Fort McLoughlin Isabella, Charles and their children as well as other HBC staff and the Fort’s stores were transferred to what was soon to become Fort Victoria on Vancouver Island. The site for this new fur-trading Fort had been selected by one of the high muck-a-mucks in the HBC, Chief Factor James Douglas. He was married to Amelia Connolly Douglas, another memorable Métis woman. James Douglas, who is today considered the Father of British Columbia, had personally chosen the location because of its abundance of water and timber, its safe and accessible harbor, and its fertile land for crops and animals.

With his move Charles Ross had been promoted to Chief Trader and was designated by Douglas to supervise the construction of Fort Victoria. He, together with Roderick Finlayson and several dozen HBC men, commenced

construction of the Fort with the assistance of members of the nearby Songhees Tribe. It has been written that the HBC men were mainly French Canadians, but undoubtedly many of them were actually Métis.

Roderick Finlayson was second in command to Ross and later the son-in-law of Josette Legacé (also an outstanding Métis matriarch and pioneer in Victoria). During construction of the Fort, two ships (the Beaver and the Cadboro) guarded the area until Fort Victoria was completed in 1844.

Isabella and her children became the first Métis family in Victoria as a result of the posting of Charles to Fort Victoria. In 1844 one of their children William, was the first Métis child born at the Fort. On June 27 of that same year Charles died from an appendicitis attack. Consequently he never lived to see the fruits of his labor.

In 1840 the HBC had formed the Puget's Sound Agricultural Company (PSAC) as a subsidiary joint-stock company for commercial farming. The majority of the stock in this Company was held by the directors and fur trading officers of the HBC.

The headquarters for PSAC were located in the disputed Oregon Country at the main shipping location of HBC on Puget Sound at Fort Nisqually in what is now the State of Washington. South of Fort Nisqually on the Columbia River and on the main route between Fort Vancouver and Fort Langley, PSAC established the primary location for their agricultural enterprise at Cowlitz Farm.

The labor force brought in for the agricultural enterprise of PSAC was also intended to provide British subjects to colonize the area for the purpose of preventing further intrusion of American immigrants moving into the Pacific Northwest. In order to accomplish this objective the HBC sent the Red River Expedition of 1841 (led by the remarkable Métis James Sinclair) to form settlements in the Pacific Northwest.

This Expedition consisted mostly of former HBC employees and their families many of whom were Métis. In 1846, two years after the death of her husband, the widowed Isabella Ross and her children moved from Fort Victoria to settle in Fort Nisqually. At that time the HBC and PSAC commander at the Fort was Dr. William Fraser Tolmie whose son Simon Fraser Tolmie would one day become Premier of the Province of British Columbia.

Over the years, the ongoing territorial conflict between Great Britain and the United States had escalated and a provisional government had been formed by settlers (many of whom were Métis) in the Willamette Valley (in what is now the State of Oregon) that requested annexation to the United States. Although the British appear to have had a better international legal claim to the disputed Oregon Country, they accepted the terms of the 1846 Treaty of Oregon that settled the boundary for the Pacific Northwest at the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel.

As a result the HBC moved its Columbia District headquarters from Fort Vancouver (in what is now Washington State) on the Columbia River to Fort Victoria on Vancouver Island.

A further effect of the Oregon Treaty was that in 1854 PSAC moved its headquarters from Fort Nisqually to Fort Victoria and established its farming operations at Craigflower Farm on Admirals Road. In that same year Isabella Ross with her Métis children left Fort Nisqually to reside permanently in Fort Victoria.

On her return to Victoria, Isabella bought 99 acres of waterfront farmland overlooking Ross Bay which (as noted) was named after her. This land purchase made her the first female registered landowner in British Columbia. Isabella and some of her children farmed the land for a number of years

She gave the name Fowl Bay Farm to her property due to the plentiful waterfowl in this area. The name Fowl Bay was later changed to Foul Bay. A copy of the "Victoria District Official Map 1858" shows lands then owned by a number of prominent citizens of Victoria, including Isabella.

HBC officials who married Aboriginal country wives, as they invariably did, were generally very fond of them. In a letter to his sister Charles Ross wrote:

"She [Isabella] is not indeed exactly fitted to shine at the head of a nobleman's table, but she suits the sphere she has to move in better than any such toy – in short she is a native of the country and as to beauty is quite as comely as her husband."

Many years after the death of her husband Charles Ross, Isabella remarried on June 29, 1863 to Lucius Simon O'Brien from Canada. This was a bad mistake as he turned out to be a racist and fortune hunter who overlooked her

mixed blood ancestry because of his eye on her financial assets. They split in less than a year at which time he placed a scurrilous notice in the *Victoria Daily Chronicle* of April 30, 1864 attacking Isabella and her children.

Isabella died in Victoria on April 23, 1885 at the age of 77 years while being cared for by the Sisters of St. Ann's Academy. The Academy is now a National Historic Site. Isabella is buried, not far from where she lived, in Ross Bay Cemetery. Her home and farm had been part of the land that is now this Cemetery.

The Cemetery named after her was opened in 1873. It is now part of a public park and on its south side it overlooks the Pacific Ocean at Ross Bay.

On touring the Cemetery, the authors of this article found its headstones and memorials to be a treasure trove of information on many prominent historical British Columbians that are buried there. In addition to Isabella, these include at least ten Premiers; Lieutenant Governors; Governor James Douglas and his Métis wife Lady Amelia Connolly Douglas; HBC Chief Factor John Work and his Métis wife Josette Legacé Work (grandparents of Premier Simon Fraser Tolmie); former HBC Chief Factor of Fort Nisqually Dr. William Fraser Tolmie; Premier and Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia Edward G. Prior and HBC Chief Factor Roderick Finlayson (sons-in-law of Métis matriarch Josette Legacé Work); renowned artist Emily Carr; Chief Justice Matthew Baillie Begbie; Billy Barker of Cariboo gold rush fame; and many others.

Isabella's tombstone in Ross Bay Cemetery reads:

“Here lies Isabella Mainville Ross  
Born January 10, 1808, Died in Victoria April 23, 1885.  
She came here in 1843 with her husband  
Chief Trader Charles Ross who was in charge  
of building Fort Victoria. After his death she  
bought the land upon which you are standing for a farm.  
By so doing she became the first woman  
to own land in what is now British Columbia.”

Isabella Mainville Ross was a courageous Métis woman pioneer whose life spanned several eras – from fur trade society to frontier outpost through colonial times to provincial status – from Fort Victoria through Victoria being named the capital of British Columbia and its development into a vibrant community. She was truly a memorable Métis pioneer in the history of British Columbia.

## **LONG LIVE THE MÉTIS**

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