Chapter 1

Childhood at Penetanguishene Harbour

Like most of his contemporaries who played a leading role in early British Columbia, Walter Moberly had the advantage of having been born into an upper middle-class family with excellent connections. His antecedents were impeccable and his family background cultured and refined. His mother was the daughter of a general; his father, Captain John Moberly, was a career officer in the Royal Navy. They expected their sons to enter suitable professions and their daughters to marry well. It was a stable, comfortable, predictable environment within the framework of life in the services. They could have had little hint that three of their sons would abandon these conventional expectations for the primitive life of the Canadian wilderness—nor of the fact that in Walter they harbored a maverick within the family.

True, Captain Moberly's early life had been filled with action, but all the exciting highlights of his career had taken place before his children were born, so that Walter and his siblings only knew the more placid routine of their father's life on shore. Even so, their imagination must have been stirred by glorified tales of far-off lands and foreign seas and battles long ago. As a young man, John Moberly had had his share of danger and adventure on the high seas. He was only twelve when he joined the navy, and almost immediately he found himself sent out to the Mediterranean to train as a midshipman. By the age of eighteen he was a lieutenant and in line for active service, of which he saw a great deal in the next few years. His ship, the frigate *Metampus*, pursued and captured pirate vessels, helped in the capture of a French war brigantine and even played some part in the conflict at Guadeloupe. His most dramatic experience came in 1811 in a furious battle with the American frigate *President*, which ended with his own ship, *Little Belt*, reduced to a virtual wreck. Masts were smashed, sails torn apart, rigging shredded and the hull itself pierced. Thirty-two of the crew were either

killed or wounded. While the ship was still reeling under this disaster, a gale got up. In this desperate situation, with decks awash and heavy waves pounding away at the battered hull, John Moberly personally worked with the men to stop the leaks and repair the masts, displaying the typical Moberly qualities of courage and resourcefulness. His coolness and inspiring leadership during these tense moments won him a mention in despatches, and he was given command of his own ship, the sloop *Moselle*, a few years later.[1]

It would seem that all the excitement and drama of John Moberly's career were crowded into those early years at sea, for family history fails to record any subsequent adventures of equal note that might have added some luster to the later years of his command. He became a commander in 1813, and a post captain in 1815. Eventually, after thirty-one years of active naval service, he received a shore posting. But it was not in Britain that he was to spend the last years of his life. Instead, he was sent to Canada, to a remote and undeveloped harbor town on Georgian Bay in Ontario, to take charge of the little naval garrison there. Its name was Penetanguishene.

By this time he had a wife and family, though he had not had such domesticity for very long. He had not married until his late thirties—either in 1825 or 1828, according to which version one accepts, but probably 1828.[2] The girl who charmed him into marriage at last was half his own age. Maria Foch was the orphaned daughter of a Russian general who had been in command of Russian artillery at the great battle of Borodino. Her background was a glamorous one, for after the death of her father and uncle, she and her cousin Sophie had both become wards of the Czar Nicholas I.[3] She must have been accustomed to a sophisticated society and a life of privilege and refinement, in considerable contrast to the very basic conditions that awaited her in Penetanguishene.

As it happened, although John's roots and outlook were thoroughly English, he too had been born and brought up in Russia. It was an unusual background for an Englishman, but his father had transplanted himself to the great seaport of St. Petersburg for reasons of commercial opportunity and carried on some form of business there. John's childhood was spent in this city of spacious and classical beauty on the banks of the Neva River. After he went to sea, John was in the habit of returning to his home in St. Petersburg

to spend his leaves, and it was on one of these leaves that he met Maria Foch.

Maria's origins have been variously described as Russian, Polish, Dutch and German. There is some truth in all these suppositions. One quite detailed family history states that the Fochs were actually Dutch by origin and had fled Holland because of the religious persecutions of the sixteenth century. It seems as if the French-German border was the area where they took refuge at this point. Her son, Henry, was under the impression that the family had lived in German-held territory at one time, saying in his book *When Fur was King*, that his mother was "Marie Foch, a Polish lady whose ancestral home was in Alsace-Lorraine." (Some of Alsace still belonged to the Hapsburgs in the early sixteenth century.) The 1871 census too recorded that her ethnic origin was German—information which must have been supplied either by Mary or her son Clarence, who was in the household at the time. But eventually the family had drifted to Poland, where they lived for so long before moving eastward again to Russia that they were generally regarded as a Polish family. In Canada, Maria was always looked upon as a little bit exotic and foreign. In spite of changing her name to Mary and making friends in the local community, she figured in contemporary accounts as "a Russian lady," or Captain Moberly's "Russian wife."

The Moberlys' family origins seem to have been in Cheshire as far back as they can be traced. The name of Patrick Moberleia (a possible ancestor) occurs in the early Cheshire charters of the thirteenth century, and there are strong Moberly connections with the village of Mobberley in that county. A stained glass window in the parish church at Mobberley features several coats-of-arms of the Mobberley family, with dates ranging between 1206 and 1322. Four centuries later, some of the Moberly family were still making their home in Cheshire—Captain John Moberly's grandfather Richard came from Knutsford, just a few miles from the village of Mobberley. In John's great-grandparents' time the family called itself "de Mobberley," according to one record, but by the next generation the name had been simplified to "Moberly." John himself, having been brought up in Russia, had no personal connection with Cheshire, so had no particular reason to live there after his marriage.

During the few years in which he and Maria resided in England, they made their home in other parts of the country.

Only the three eldest children were born in England—Mary in 1829, George in 1830 and Walter in 1832. Mary and George were born in the northern part of the country in Sowerby, Yorkshire, but by the time Walter arrived the family was living in southern England in the Oxfordshire village of Steeple Aston. Steeple Aston, even today, might well qualify for that overworked term "picturesque," so freely applied to the English village. A winding street, honey gray stone cottages, low stone walls with cascading greenery and a square-towered, mediaeval church—all the features that make up the calendar-perfect English village were present in Steeple Aston where Walter spent the first two years of his life.

He was baptized in the village's ancient stone church on September 4, 1832, having been born three weeks earlier, on August 15. The baptism was performed according to the rites of the Church of England by the Reverend Mr. Carter (he was not the local rector, and nothing is known about him), but shortly after this came a second religious observance. It was often the custom at that time to have an infant "received into the church," as well as baptized. In Walter's case this ceremony was performed by a future bishop—Walter could hardly have arranged things better himself. His father had a younger brother George, a brilliant scholar who had been ordained into the Church of England and was already well launched on an impressive career (though not created a bishop until much later, as his High Church leanings were regarded with misgiving in certain quarters). George Moberly agreed to officiate, receiving Walter into the church on October 28, 1832.[4]

By happy chance, Walter's career was launched in the way in which it was to continue—in association with the distinguished and influential. All his life he would instinctively seek out important connections and figures of authority. Partly this was due to his urge to make things happen and to enlist the influence of anyone who could help his cause, but it was more than that. Walter Moberly felt that he belonged among this elite. And such was his charisma and his intensity of manner that most of those he approached did believe in him and respond to the compelling force of his convictions.

It is not clear what prompted John and Mary to make their home in Steeple Aston, but since the parish register shows that a William Moberly had married a girl from this village just a few months earlier, it is quite possible that they had close relations living there who had encouraged them to take a house nearby. But their stay in Steeple Aston was short, for John's career now took him to a very different part of the world.

Never having lived in Britain for any length of time, but having been raised in Russia and having then spent thirty years of his life sailing from port to port, John Moberly probably experienced no great emotional wrench in uprooting and taking up a post in Canada. He was still a comparatively young man, aged only forty-four at the time of emigration, and it is more than likely that he was full of enthusiasm for the opportunity of seeing for himself the New World and its marvels.

Penetanguishene, when John arrived there in 1833, was a very tiny village sloping down to the shore of Georgian Bay. Even thirteen years later, it still had only four stores and about 120 inhabitants listed in Smith's *Gazetteer*. A few Metis settlers—ex-voyageurs—occupied the countryside around the town. Its importance lay entirely in its topography. Penetanguishene was on an inlet that happened to have all the right conditions to form a fine natural harbor and a valuable naval base.

Penetanguishene's long narrow inlet stretched a full three miles in length. On either side rose long high banks that fended off the winds of Georgian Bay and provided sheltered anchorage for ships at harbor during winter storms. The channel had a good depth of water, and besides this it afforded a strategic military position, as the entrance at the sand spit was very narrow, which made it easy to defend by cannon—"only half a gunshot across," it was said. As soon as Lieutenant-Governor Simcoe had first looked at the possibilities of Georgian Bay in 1793, he had been promoting Penetanguishene as the perfect naval base for this part of the lake. He wrote enthusiastically, if optimistically, to the Privy Council: "Penetanguishene bids fair to become the most considerable town in Upper Canada, as the passage to the Northwest will be established here."[5]

Although this prediction had fallen far short of reality (even today Penetanguishene is still a small and quiet place), the government had started to construct a naval base there late in 1813. The catalyst for this was the fact that war had broken out (though

briefly) between the United States and Canada, and there was considered to be a very real immediate threat from the Americans. Even after hostilities died down in 1814, it still seemed a reasonable measure to patrol and protect the trade route from Georgian Bay to Lake Superior, since this was an important route to western Canada. In fact, as an extra defensive measure, in 1828 a large military force also moved into Penetanguishene to join the navy. The upshot was that the naval and military establishments became the major industry in the town, and a huge array of buildings soon extended along the bay a little way out of the village. (A splendid reconstruction of some of these buildings now entices tourists to a heritage site, which is a center for historic tall ships.)

The Moberly residence stood on the hillside above the red-painted naval store and in a spot which commanded a fine view of the harbor. "The house is remembered," wrote Judge Ardagh, "from its peculiar roof which extended back to the slope of the hill."[6] Though he described it as "commodious," it was actually not luxurious in its basic components, being merely a simple log structure like the other buildings at the establishment at that date.

But although the house and surroundings were rustic—primitive, even—John and Mary had quickly made their home comfortable and charming. "There are several pretty houses on the beautiful declivity, rising on the...side of the bay, and the families settled here have contrived to assemble around them many of the comforts and elegancies of life," wrote one visitor.[7] In coping with a climate that could be bitterly cold in winter, the Moberlys found too that their experience in "Russian comforts," as another friend put it, was quite an advantage in creating a pleasant home in these crude surroundings. Their ideas on gardening excited some admiration, not to say surprise, for they requested that the large hemlock stumps be left in place so that they could plant little flower gardens upon them. Although the notion was considered definitely quaint by their Canadian neighbors, it was admitted that it did have a kind of original charm.[8]

The property on which they lavished their first artistic efforts in the garden was not their own, but belonged to a family called O'Brien. Edward and Mary O'Brien wanted to find a family to lease half of their house and were delighted when such eligible tenants as the Moberlys appeared on the scene.[9] The arrangement apparently

worked well, as the families developed a permanent friendship that, many years later, resulted in the Moberlys' son George marrying the O'Briens' daughter Fanny. The house-sharing lasted for just over a year, until Captain Moberly acquired the nine acres on which he built his own log house. (This house burned down several years after the Moberlys left. It stood just east of Magazine Island.[10])

Inevitably, by reason of John's rank, the Moberlys moved in a small select circle. Their social life revolved chiefly around a few of the officers and their families, and the Penetanguishene doctor, with the occasional stimulus of cultivated visitors from the same sphere.[11] Mary Moberly was evidently a kind and thoughtful hostess and a social asset to her husband. One visitor wrote: "I have reason to remember with pleasure a Russian lady, the wife of an English officer, who made my short sojourn there very agreeable."[12]

John made an immediate impression as a man of action when he arrived in Penetanguishene in mid-October of 1833. His first reaction (just as Walter's was to be, on arriving anywhere new) was to explore the district as far as he could, and he instantly organized an expedition into "the remotest surveyed region."[13] Only after this did he arrange for his wife and children to join him. "He is a man to go at once into the middle of everything," was how Mary O'Brien summed him up in her journal.

It was due to John's energy and organizing abilities that Penetanguishene had its first Anglican church built. The village had had a Roman Catholic church since 1831, a simple log building, but there was no place of worship for the considerable number of Anglicans in the garrison community or the village. John evidently felt that it was his obligation to make good this deficiency as soon as possible. Within eighteen months of his arrival, he had hustled to raise the money and induce the military authorities to find a site for the church on what was known as "the Lines." This was a road built in 1832 as the line of communication between the village and the naval and military base (it goes under the name of Church Street on today's map).

Not only did Captain John take the initiative in getting the project started, but the Moberly family personally donated the bulk of the funds, with major contributions from John himself, his relatives at home and "other friends in dear old England," as recorded by the church's first vicar Rev. G. Hallen.[14] Promptly they had the site

cleared and the church framed and roofed in that same summer (1835), though with the short season and more money to be raised, it was not completed and in use until the following year. The Moberly family always retained a deep feeling of affection for the little church of St. James-on-the-Lines—it was almost like their own creation—and although John and Mary each died elsewhere, it was at Penetanguishene that their memorial stones were erected, in the cemetery behind the chancel of St. James-on-the-Lines. (This church is still to be seen, restored to its original condition, with clapboard siding, wooden shingles and handsome iron decoration.) Clearly John Moberly went far beyond the call of duty in his energetic efforts. As a senior officer, he felt it his obligation to provide a place of worship for those serving under him. Even so, that hardly necessitated a major donation on his part, nor yet a need to enlist such generous support from his family and friends in England—the largest donations came from England. His zeal must have been motivated by deeply held religious convictions. Walter was to remain in the Anglican church all his life, but his outlook on life was a distinctly secular one.

Walter had no interest in recalling any incidents from his childhood when he wrote his memoirs at the age of fifty-two. Nearly thirty years later, at the very end of his life, when he was collaborating with his biographer, Noel Robinson, he told Robinson that his earliest distinct memories dated from the age of eleven, when his parents moved to Barrie. The two men evidently considered these childhood memories too trivial to record in a biography. Nowhere in Walter's or Robinson's writings is there any account of Walter's early youth or any hint of his parents' personalities or other early influences.

His relations with his siblings are equally unknown, other than by surmise. Six more children were born to John and Mary after they came to Canada—Henry, Clarence, Arthur, Sophia (who died in infancy), Frank and Emma. Frank may have been particularly congenial to Walter, in spite of a thirteen-year age difference, for the two of them occasionally had periods of association in their work (they were both civil engineers), but the whole family seems to have been close-knit and affectionate. The few family letters that survive show that they kept in touch throughout their lives, in spite of being

separated by great distances—by an ocean in the case of his sisters, who both returned to England to live.

Although there is no record of Walter ever having visited England himself again after the family emigrated, he remained intensely patriotic to the British flag throughout his life, like many others of his era. He belonged to the St. George's Society during his years in Winnipeg and identified strongly with the British side in history, muttering hoarsely on his deathbed in 1915 that he just wished he were young enough to be fighting against the Kaiser. He retained an English, old-world style of courtesy and gracious manners, and even at the end of his life—no doubt due to his early upbringing and schooling—it was recorded that "curiously enough, his pure English accent would suggest that he had recently emigrated from the Old Country."[15]

Endnotes

1. Biographical notes in the Museum of Sainte Marie Among the Hurons, Ontario, taken from O'Byrne, *Dictionary of Naval Biography*.
2. The year of marriage was 1828 according the family tree of the Moberlys in England. According to *Pioneer Papers of Simcoe*, 1908 (1974 reprint), p. 106, it was 1825, but there are several minor errors in this account.
3. Biographical notes in the Museum of Sainte Marie Among the Hurons.
4. Bishop's Transcripts, Steeple Aston, MS, *Oxford Diocese Papers C-607*.
5. Lieutenant-Governor J. G. Simcoe to the Privy Council, December 20, 1794.
6. *Pioneer Papers of Simcoe*, 1908 (1974 reprint), pp. 109–10.
7. Anna Jameson, *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles*, 1965, p. 165.
8. Mary O'Brien, *The Journals of Mary O'Brien*, 1968, p. 221.
9. *Ibid*, p. 220.
10. W. R. Williams, *The Mohawk, Inland Seas*, Vol. 7, 1951.
11. F. Feilde to his mother, March 24, 1835, *Feilde Papers*, Museum of Sainte Marie Among the Hurons.
12. Anna Jameson, *op. cit.*, p. 165.
13. Mary O'Brien, *op. cit.*, p. 220.
14. Rev. G. Hallen to W. P Band, February 11, 1879, Museum of Sainte Marie Among the Hurons.
15. Noel Robinson, *Blazing the Trail through the Rockies*, 1914, p. 9.