

HOW TO INTERPRET BELLE VUE SHEEP FARM POST JOURNALS

Background

The Belle Vue Sheep Farm Post Journals written by Charles Griffin are available in two series of microfilm: April 1 through December 31, 1854 (Microfilm 1M16 HBC call # B.15/a/1 Post Journal for 1854-1855 written in pencil) and January 1, 1858 through January 5, 1862 (Microfilm 1M16 HBC call # B.15/a/2 Post Journal for 1858-1862 written in ink). These have been transcribed by Boyd C. Pratt. In addition to the difficulty of transcribing some individual words, several passages are unfortunately totally illegible, due in part to the 1854 original being written in pencil. The methodology of transcription is as follows: the abbreviations, punctuation (including slashes [/]), and spelling are Griffin's; questionable words are followed by a bracketed question mark ([?]); illegible words are represented by two hyphens followed by a question mark (--?); and notes are italicized and bracketed (*[notes]*).

Besides the daily entries, there are several miscellaneous documents included with the journals such as a sheep count; a list of items, employees, and dates; and a letter to Chief Factor Douglas dated 2 April 1855 regarding the presence of U.S. officers, protesting their seizure and sale of HBC sheep, and asking protection as a British subject.

Form, Style, and Context

The form that the journal entries take was standard: Griffin entered the day of the week and date, and then a brief (unless extraordinary, less than a full line) description of the weather. There followed brief descriptions of various tasks on which the "Men & Ind^s" were employed. Extraordinary events, such as the death of livestock and personnel accidents, were noted. (Griffin marked the left-hand margin of the page with an "X" upon the death of any sheep; presumably he used these indications to help tally the full counts that are also mentioned in the text.) Griffin also noted canoes, boats, and ships sighted and/or visiting, with comments on crews, passengers, and, in the case of post supplies, contents. In particular, he made careful note of Americans, especially in the case of "official" visits, such as that of the sheriff and tax collector of Whatcom County.

Griffin's writing reveals a well-educated man, and could be quite formal at times. Although the journal format allows for both grammatical and nominal abbreviation, some passages are quite complete to the point of embellishment. Against the staid and businesslike background of Griffin's day-to-day prose, emotional passages stand out, such as his reaction to the news of the drowning of his men ("alas!") or disapproval of lying and drinking ("my eye!" and "d---n"). This is particularly the case when discharging someone: the descriptions are quite charged in the cases of both John Williams ("a growling, grumbling, disemboweled beef-eating trash as ever lived or I had anything to do with" 6/21/54) and Murdoch McLeod Jr. ("a useless lump[?] of humanity – an "imposter" & double-faced hypocrite[?]" 10/7/54).

The Company or social rank of the people Griffin mentions dictated the manner to which they were referred: James Douglas (“Chief Factor” of “C.F.” for short) and other ranking members of the HBC and their families, as well as American civil and military officials, were “Mr.” or “Dr.”; the employees of the company under Griffin’s supervision were called by either their first or last names (e.g., Antoine & Baptiste or Scudder & Holland), sometimes abbreviated (Nap. for Napoleon; Bap^t for Baptiste); and Indians, both employed and visiting, were called by given names (“Johny”, “Harry”, or “Bill”), ‘tribal’ names (“5 Millbanks”, “2 Hyders”), or a combination of the two (“Cowitchin Joe”), possibly to distinguish others with the same given name.

Finally, the Company’s cultural origins were often reflected in the choice of terms that Griffin used. French words, some of which are descriptive place names (“Grande Bois”) while others appear to be corporate terms associated with the HBC’s French Canadian history (*Conge’* and *Bourgeois*), liberally employed.