

In Defense of Big Bear: The Role of Henry Ross Halpin

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ABSTRACT. Henry Ross Halpin, a Hudson's Bay Company clerk, was taken prisoner during the 1885 Riel Rebellion by rebellious Crees who belonged to Big Bear's camp. Halpin was protected by his friend Big Bear, who had lost control of his band. During the attack on Fort Pitt, Halpin served as the secretary for Big Bear, who wanted to avoid further bloodshed. At Big Bear's treason trial Halpin testified that Big Bear was innocent of all charges against him. This article, based on Halpin's memoirs and the trial transcripts, sheds new light on the characters in this chapter of the Riel Rebellion and the social upheaval that went with it.

SOMMAIRE. Au cours de la Rébellion de 1885 Henry Ross Halpin, un employé de la Compagnie de la Baie d'Hudson, fut fait prisonnier par les Cris du camp de Big Bear. Là il fut protégé par son ami Big Bear, qui ne contrôlait plus sa bande. Pendant l'attaque sur Fort Pitt, Halpin servit de secrétaire à Big Bear, qui voulait éviter de nouvelles tueries. Quand Big Bear fut jugé pour trahison, Halpin témoigna que celui-ci était innocent de toutes les charges. Le présent article, basé sur les mémoires de Halpin et sur les transcriptions du procès, jette un regard nouveau sur les personnages et les bouleversements sociaux de ce chapitre de la Rébellion.

During the Northwest Rebellion of 1885, Henry Ross Halpin, a Hudson's Bay Company clerk at Cold Lake, was taken prisoner by rebel Crees and held captive for 62 days in the camp of Big Bear. During the ordeal, Halpin was taken back and forth between Frog Lake and Fort Pitt, and finally to Frenchman's Butte, where he and some of the other prisoners were able to escape. During Big Bear's trial for treason-felony, Halpin ironically defended Big Bear. At the trial another HBC employee, Stanley Simpson, who also had been held captive, expressed surprise that Halpin would testify on behalf of his captors.¹ Was Halpin a victim of "Stockholm syndrome" by which kidnap victims are said to identify with their captors, or were there reasons for his support of the man who supposedly had held him captive?²

While many of the primary sources on the Northwest Rebellion make brief mention of Halpin's presence during those events,³ hardly any of the secondary sources have utilized his own hitherto unpublished memoir of the events.⁴ That memoir, coupled with the testimony he gave during the Rebellion trials, sheds light on his harrowing experience and provides the reason for his defense of Big Bear.⁵

Henry Ross Halpin was born in Ireland in 1856 and moved to Canada in 1864 when his father, the Rev. William Henry Halpin, had come to be the professor of Classics and Mathematics at Huron College, the original college of the University of Western Ontario.⁶ Young Henry Halpin had a great fascination with Canada's

Native peoples, and in 1872 joined the Hudson's Bay Company as an apprentice postmaster at Fort Garry. His employment and advancement seems to have been facilitated by being related through his mother (Elizabeth Gaston Rogan) to the Ross family, which produced several notable HBC officials. Henry Halpin's middle name, Ross, testified to that family connection. He served the HBC at Norway House, Nelson River Post, Oxford House, across the prairies, and in the Peace River District before managing the operation at Cold Lake, which was a branch post of Fort Pitt.⁷

Although he had only completed high school, Halpin had an inquiring mind and a keen writing style. His grandfather, uncle, and brother were prominent journalists in Ireland, the United States, and western Canada. Henry Halpin quickly became fluent in Cree and had an innate sense as an ethnologist, recording the culture and customs of the Native peoples he visited.

Halpin had known Chief Big Bear by reputation for six or seven years. He was regarded as a "good Indian" and friend of the white man.⁸ Halpin first met him in November 1884 and Big Bear's reputation was confirmed; a friendship developed between the two men. On occasion Halpin spent the night in Big Bear's tent on his trips between Cold Lake and Frog Lake.⁹

On 19 March 1885, Halpin stopped at Big Bear's camp while on his way home. During their conversation Halpin mentioned that he had heard "that there was trouble at Batoche and that [Louis] Riel had stopped the mails there." He told Big Bear that he "thought that there was likely to be trouble" and reported that Big Bear was surprised at the news and said, "I think it very strange."¹⁰ Halpin was invited to stay for supper, which he did. When leaving, he invited Big Bear to visit him at Cold Lake. Big Bear came to Halpin's home on 22 March, stayed the night, and left on the afternoon of 23 March in order to go moose hunting. That was the last time Halpin saw him before Big Bear came to see him after he had been brought to Big Bear's camp at Frog Lake.

The events which followed have been narrated in Halpin's memoir of the captivity. The manuscript is incomplete and is here supplemented with additional material enclosed in square brackets.

All through the fall and winter of 1884 and 1885 there had been rumors of trouble to come between the Indians and Half-breeds and the Government of the North West Territories, but no faith was placed in these rumors, nor do I think any trouble was taken by anyone to find out if there was any mischief brewing or what the grievances of the Indians and Half-breeds were. I, for my part, heard the Indians and Half-breeds declare over and over again that there was going to be "a quarter of an hour"¹¹ in the spring, but having lived so long with Indians and knowing that they were well off and looked after, I put no faith in the stories. Nor do I in this sketch intend to cover the ground that is said to have led up to the little trouble which occurred in the spring of 1885. I only wish to give a plain unvarnished story of my own life during the two months I was a prisoner with Chief Big Bear and his gang of cut-throats.

I took charge of the Hudson's Bay Company post at Cold Lake in the early winter of 1884 and 1885 for the purpose of trading with the Indians of that district. The winter was a hard one and very little fur was taken. The Indians of Cold Lake are mostly Chippewyans and are a thrifty lot of

people—good hunters and have or had at that time, a good herd of cattle about them.

On the evening of the 3rd of April 1885 I had just come home after an afternoon of unsuccessful hunting and tired out tramping through the slush and water along the lakes where I had been looking for an early duck or anything else that turned up. I was sitting outside my house waiting for the Indian boy I had as a servant to get supper ready and wishing for anything, no matter what, to change the loneliness of my present position.

I had been expecting for some days past a gang of men from Frog Lake who were coming out to me to saw lumber for flat boats which were to be used in the freighting of a quantity of flour (then at Cold Lake in my charge) down the Beaver River to Ile-à-la-Crosse for the HBC and was beginning to wonder at the delay as the river was opening in many places and should in a short time be navigable.

All at once I heard voices and looking up saw five or six mounted Indians coming towards the house. I turned to my boy who was busy with the supper and told him he would have to get more as the men we were expecting had arrived. He acted rather strange I thought, so I asked him what he thought they were after and he used an Indian word which means "they are on the war path."

When they came a little closer I began to think that something was wrong for I saw that at least three of them were mounted on North West Mounted Police horses from Frog Lake. They stopped a short distance from where I was sitting and I got up and went forward to them when they all dismounted and shook hands with me and seemed in a good humor, laughing and joking with each other and us.

I said I was glad to see them and asked them if they had come to build the flat boats. Lone Man, a son-in-law of Big Bear, who seemed to be in charge of the lot, acted as speaker and told me that they had only come to visit me and not to work. One of the Indians, who had worked with Mr. Simpson of the HBC at Frog Lake, then took my boy aside and had some talk with him. They came back to me in a few minutes and I could see by my boy's face that he had heard something to startle him, for he was as pale as possible for an Indian to get, trembling with excitement.

He then went out and I followed him, asking him what was the matter. He said I would soon find out and took my gun from where it was hanging and started to put on his coat and prepare himself as if he were going out. I told him to hurry and get supper as the men must be hungry after their ride. He did not answer but started out the door saying he was going after the horses. I told him I did not want the horses but he went off down the road and paid no attention to me. By this time I was getting angry and started after him with [my] mind made up to give him a pounding. I caught up with him, took him by the collar of his coat, and took the gun from him. He told me to take care or I might get into trouble.

Just then Lone Man came up and told me to let the boy go for the horses and that he had something to tell me in the house. When I began to think a little I decided it was best to do what he wanted, so I went back with him. Back in the house I found the other Indians drinking tea seasoned with

painkiller which they had taken out of the store. I told them they had no business to touch anything in the house without asking me, as I was in charge of it. Then they all got up and shook hands with me, one after another. This I knew from experience was the beginning of a long talk of some kind. After the handshaking they all sat down, [except] Lone Man, who began to speak. He said to me, "You have always been a good friend of mine, and also of the other of our friends since you came here last fall. We all like you but we want you to tell us what you would do in case there was any trouble with the white people and the Police. Which side would you take? We would like to know now, before we return to Frog Lake?"

At this moment one of the other Indians got up and asked me what I thought of Louis Riel and would I help him if he were fighting with the Police. Happening just then to look round, I saw two of the Indians changing their own blanket coats for coats out of the store (which was in [my] house). I got up and told them to take [them] off. But they said no, that everything in the country now belonged to them, at the same time handing me a note written on a small scrap of paper out of a pocket book.

The note was from W.B. Cameron of Frog Lake and ran, as nearly as I can remember now, as follows: "Dear Halpin, the Crees are going out to see you. They have killed all the white people here.¹² Don't offer any opposition to them. They say they will not hurt you."

You may be sure I was, as the saying is, "knocked all of a heap" and felt that I would have to be very careful what I said to them. They could see that I felt very much the news contained in the note, but they all again shook hands and told me I was quite safe so long as I did what they told me, and promised not to try and get away from them. If I did try and get away they said they would shoot me. Besides there was no place I could go as all the whites in the country had been killed by this time. They then told me about the fight at Duck Lake with the police and volunteers from Prince Albert, and of course, made it appear the victory was in their favor. After this I made up my mind to take things easy and make believe to concur in all they said and did, but the horror of that night will never be forgotten by me should I live a thousand years.

My man got back with the horses by this time and after he had put them in the stable he came into the house. I then told him to make some bread for the Indians who had up to this time had nothing to eat. He turned round to me and said, "I have been working long enough, so you must do the cooking now." He looked very ugly. How I wish I had him somewhere I could give him a couple of good Irish blows to the face and bring him to his senses. For even then, with everything in his favor, I could see the little brute tremble at his own audacity. Anyway, I set to work and got their supper and made up my mind that if any chance came, I would run off that night, trusting to luck to find my way, and strike out down Beaver River for Ile-à-la-Crosse, warning the priest at the mission about seven miles from where I then was. I would tell him of what had occurred and give him a chance to join me.

After the supper was over they all sat down and smoked, chatting as if nothing but the most friendly feeling existed between us. It was now quite dark and I had in the meantime, when I thought the Indians were not

watching, got several boxes of matches and a small ball of twine and some snaring wire secreted about my person, for I had fully made up my mind to run for it. I found it was not so easy to get away, for whenever I went to the door or tried to go outside for anything, my servant boy would follow me with the gun and wait till I sat down again. Oh, how I hated that little brute that night, and do so still. I don't think I could ever think him anything but a most contemptible hound, for I had been most kind to him in every way and made much of him. So, burning with indignation at him, and my heart almost bursting with grief at the calamity that had occurred at Frog Lake, I lay down on my bed and pretended to sleep, but sleep was far from me that night and for many a night after.

The Indians had lain down on the floor, one of them keeping awake all the time, so I got no chance to get out of the house. A little after midnight they all got up and took all the goods belonging to the store and divided them equally between the six of them. After they put the stuff in bales or bundles handy to carry on horseback, they told me to put on my clothes as we were going down to the mission to kill the priest there and to go through the store of the trader that lived near the mission.

I got myself ready as soon as possible, having an idea that I could get away from my captors on the road. Again I found that I was mistaken and that they meant to take "good care" of me. They took an old cart which stood near the house and attached a horse to it, telling me to get in. They then tied me so that all chance of escape was cut off. The night was very cold and the roads very bad. In my cramped position, with my arms tied to each side of the cart, I was soon half frozen and splashed all over with mud and water off the cart wheels.

We went some distance towards the mission, when they stopped at the house of one of the Chippewyans and told them what had happened at Frog Lake. The Chippewyans did not appear to like the business very much, especially the killing of the two priests, and from what little of their language I could understand, I soon made up my mind that if any idea of killing Father Le Goff was still in the minds of Big Bear's Indians, they had better be very careful, as I was quite sure the Chippewyans would kill the whole lot of them before they let them touch their priest.

I was very much pleased to see this as I was afraid till then that the poor priest was going to be butchered like the people at Frog Lake—in cold blood. After waiting about an hour we started once more towards the mission, some Chippewyans having joined us. (There must have been about ten or twelve mounted Indians altogether.)

I again got cold and asked Lone Man to let me get out of the cart and run to keep warm. He was quite willing, but my boy was against it, but Lone Man let me out, telling me not to try any tricks as I was sure to come to grief if I did. Of course by this time I saw that there was very little use in trying to get away from them that night, so I went quietly along.

When we got to the mission we went into the priest's house and found him still in bed. I told him what had happened and I think he thought his hour was come. He was very much affected, poor fellow, but not on his own account, [but] more so for the murder of his fellow missionaries at Frog Lake. The Chippewyans took him out of harm's way at once for they

were afraid to leave him with the Crees. The river ran close to the mission and while the priest and I were walking up and down outside the church, I asked him to risk it and try and get away. But he said no. His place was with his people when they were in trouble, and besides he would go to Frog Lake and bury the priests who had been murdered there. When I saw that he had made up his mind to stay with his people and not risk getting off, I thought it best to wait for some better chance myself, trying to keep in with the Indians as best I could.

After Big Bear's Indians had gone through the priest's house and church, they started for the trader's house about a mile away. He was up and it seemed to me at the time that he did not appear very much surprised at what the Indians told him. The women of the house set to work and soon got a good breakfast ready for the party after which the Indians told the trader to go to his store and take anything he wanted for his family and himself in the way of clothing and provisions, for they would take the balance for themselves. He helped himself to what he wanted and told me to help myself. I took a pocket knife and some tobacco, more to make it appear that I was in with them, than that I wanted anything come by in such a way.

Again the Indians divided the goods amongst themselves and got ready to return to Frog Lake, first making the Chippewyans promise to get ready and come after them in a day or so. The Crees were very anxious to have the Chippewyans with them at Frog Lake as they, the Chips, had a very fine band of cattle which would be a good thing when other kinds of provisions got low, and I thought at the time that starvation would soon come. The Indians, if wanting an empty sack for any purpose, would take a bag of flour and empty it outside the door. Hundreds of bags of flour were destroyed in this way, both at Cold Lake and other places where there was any stored.

The party in charge now started on the return journey to Frog Lake, putting me on an old horse that could hardly walk and making me go ahead of them on the road. They were all very lively, talking, and making jokes about the way the people had been butchered at Frog Lake. Of course this interested me very much and I kept thinking how I would look carried around on hay forks by a band of howling Indians, this last mentioned performance they told the Chips, had been enacted at Frog Lake a day or so before. They seemed to think it very good fun.

We kept on all that day going slowly for the horses were well-loaded with the goods they had stolen, besides carrying the Indians. We camped about twenty miles from Frog Lake (Frog Lake is about thirty-five miles from Cold Lake). I forgot to say that on the way the Big Bear Indians stole a two-year-old steer from the Chips. They seemed to think it very strange that I did not "eat, drink and be merry" like they did.

I lay down and tried to sleep and, if possible, forget what had happened, but with an Indian on each side, it was not possible. I had an idea that if I fell asleep someone would kill me, for I could not trust any of them, especially my late servant. I believe that only for him I could have got away, but he kept close watch on me all the time, always looking at me as much as to say, "It would give me great pleasure to put daylight through you," but I had a good friend in Lone Man and I think had it not been

for his influence, I would not have been spared. (I learned from Mr. Cameron, after I got to Frog Lake, that Lone Man had started his companions on the way to Cold Lake and that the rest of the gang had made up their minds to kill me on sight, but Lone Man would not hear of it and told them that they would have to kill him before they hurt me.)

The sun was high next morning before we started on our journey and as we neared Frog Lake we met some Indians. They were surprised to see me I think and one old fellow was greatly hurt that I lived. I got off my horse when I met him and offered to shake hands, but he told me that he only shook hands with his friends. He said to Lone Man that it was his fault that I lived then, but that after I got to Frog Lake things would be changed. This was, of course, very interesting to me and I began to try and make preparations for the "Sweet Bye-and-Bye," which, by the look of things, could not be far distant from me.

We at last got near the camp on Frog Lake and I could hear the war songs and big war drums going. Everyone in camp seemed perfectly mad with excitement, but they were having a good time in their opinion. A great many cattle had been killed and the Government Store and Hudson's Bay Company store had been robbed, with the result that they had lots of beef, bacon and flour.

Lone Man took me to his tent and told me to stay there and not go about the camp, at least for a while. He told me he would go out and get Big Bear to come over and see me.¹³ He was not gone long when poor old Big Bear came in looking so miserable and tired out that I thought the poor old fellow would not live long to enjoy the good times they were having. He shook my hand and told me I was quite safe, that they were all my friends, but that he could not trust some of his young men. Therefore I had better not go outside camp or mix too much with the Indians for he said it took very little to start trouble when the Indians were in their present temper.

He made me promise not to try and get away as it would be sure death for me and the other people in camp. I think all the Indians were afraid that any of their prisoners would get away and let the troops know what their strength was, where they were, and the best way to get at them.

During this conversation Big Bear insisted that he had nothing to do with the massacre that had occurred several days before. Big Bear told Halpin that if he wanted to, he could stay in his tent or any tent that he liked.¹⁴

I had something to eat for the first time since noon on the day I was made prisoner and I must say I felt a little better. Shortly after I had eaten Mr. W.B. Cameron and Mr. James Simpson of the HBC came into the tent. How glad I was to see them and they me. Mr. Simpson told me that so far as he knew, I was quite safe as long as I minded my own business and no one knows Indian character and temper better than he. I asked his advice and he told me to go on and [pretend] to side in with them and not to contradict any stories of their victories that I might hear. Mr. Cameron seemed in his usual good health and spirits and had evidently made up his mind to live if possible.

The Indians all over the camp were enjoying themselves in their own wild

way to their hearts' content, dancing, eating, gambling, and making plans for the future. In one place there was a council going on and here I found Wandering Spirit (the Indian who shot Agent Quinn) using all his eloquence to influence the minds of his hearers to awaken them to their old time ardour. They [were] at last worked up to a sort of desperation by the visions of good times held out to them.

In going about camp I had to be very careful what I said or did as I found all the Indians very easy to take offence, in fact "spoiling for a row" with anyone that wanted to have one. The first evening I was in camp I came very near getting into trouble while trying to prevent two Indian boys, who were both armed with guns, from killing each other. I don't know what the trouble was about, but there was a lot of loud talk and suddenly one of them put his gun to the other's breast and pulled the trigger. The gun was one of the old fashioned flint-locks and luckily did not go off or the youngster would have been killed. I tried to stop them, but it was no use, and I started for the tent of Wandering Spirit who was the War Chief and boss of the camp. I told him that if he did not want the boys to kill each other he had better have them parted. He came and spoke to them and they parted, but Wandering Spirit told me at the time that I had to mind my own affairs. I concluded to do this and not to say a word to prevent any little festivities in which they might wish to engage in future.

Lone Man that night gave me a part of his tent for my own and told me to make myself at home and that I was all right now, as Big Bear wanted to treat the HBC's people well. I must [say] I did not feel much at home with one of Lone Man's children at each side of me, put there, he said, to keep me from harm, but I know he meant to keep me from trying to run away during the night.

I do not think I closed my eyes that first night. There was a constant hubbub all over the camp. Scouts would arrive and then the camp was all excitement to hear the latest news. When anyone passed close to the tent where I lay I felt quite sure he was going to fire through the tent and kill me. The only wish I had was that he would make his shot a sure one and finish me at once. I did not want to be wounded and suffer for a long time before I died. But I got over the night at last. I don't think I was ever so glad in my life before to see dawn, but during the whole time I was in camp with the Indians I never felt quite safe.

Next morning, the 6th of April, I think, I took a walk around the camp to see my fellow prisoners, Mrs. Delaney and Mrs. Gowanlock, who were [under the care] of John Pritchard, the [Métis] government interpreter at Frog Lake. How I pitied these two poor women! Mrs. Delaney seemed to bear up better as far as one could judge by outward signs, but one could see by her face what she was suffering. Mrs. Gowanlock was only a shadow of the handsome girl I had seen at Battleford a few months before, and I would not have known her. She was completely prostrated with grief and when she tried to speak would burst into tears. At that time I thought it would have been better for both those women if they had died with their husbands and I recalled the horrible stories I had read of the Indians' treatment of their female prisoners, but let me say that here once and for all, that I do not think that once during their stay in camp either of those women was molested in any way by the Indians. Of course

they had many influential half-breeds on their side which tended to keep the young Indians in their place.

These two women had to work for the Indians sewing, making bread and things of that kind and, most of the time, had to work from morning to night, which I think was good for both of them. [If] they had been left on their own sad thoughts they [might] have died. All the half-breed prisoners did their best to appear at home, but, on the whole, I think the Indians distrusted them more than they did the white prisoners.

The camp was pitched on a high hill overlooking Frog Lake and was in a very good position in case of surprise [attack]. Of course, if any considerable number of men had caught them in that place they would have been driven into the lake. The camp looked very well; nearly all the tents had a flag of some kind or another and their medicine bags were all decked with ribbons and hanging on poles near the tents. Both Indians and squaws were dressed in all the finery they could get and there were very funny costumes.

After I had been for a few days in camp I was free to go anywhere within bounds, so I had a very good opportunity of seeing all that was going on. There was one thing that struck me very soon, and that was the changed bearing of the squaws towards their husbands. I asked Lone Man's wife the reason [for] it. She told me that as there was no law now, the Indians could murder or beat his wife to his heart's content without fear of the Police. At other times, such was not the case, [for] when an Indian did anything of that sort the law would [arrest] him.

Squaws as a general thing rule their husbands, and so long as they don't go too far, the men seem to take it in good part. But at times the women get [a] "big head" and their husbands can stand them no longer and beat them. If things get too bad the squaws call in help [from] the Police or Indian Department officials. But when in camp with Big Bear I don't think I ever saw such a submissive lot of women in my life.

Lone Man's wife had a tongue in her head before the trouble began that no one could stand better than her husband. She ruled him with a rod of iron, but now she had not a word to say and Lone Man "made hay while the sun shone." He used to come home from some council or dog feast and try and pick a quarrel with his wife, whether she wanted to or not. I have seen him take a stick of firewood and hit her over the back for no reason, other than to show her that he was boss of the shanty. There was no use saying anything, and after the shindy was over, they were or appeared to be good friends.

The little Indian boys also got very big-spoken and saucy to their mothers, for taking the pattern of their fathers, they looked down on the women. Their mothers and the squaws dared not so much as lift a hand to them. Even in times of peace a squaw seldom if ever hits one of her sons, though she has full swing at her daughters, so long as they live at home, whether grown up or not.

The Indians, although they used me very well, as far as giving me plenty to eat and drink went, managed to make me feel at all times that the white people in the camp were only there on probation, and that any show of

temper or any attempt to get away would be met with death, and they told us as much, for they were afraid we would give information as to their whereabouts and fighting strength. But on these first days of our imprisonment it was more than impossible to escape for all were closely watched on all sides, even when we did not think we were.

Lone Man, my host for the time, often used to ask me what I thought the future would bring for the Indians after the way in which they had acted. After I had expressed my thought of what the ultimate end of the trouble would be, he would laugh and say "perhaps [you are] right," but that Riel was a very clever man, almost a God in fact, and could make no mistake as to the outcome of the rebellion, and that Riel had told Big Bear the previous fall that all the Indians and Half-breeds were going to be rich beyond even their expectations, after they had driven the whites out of the country. He said also that the buffalo would come back to the plains again and there would be unlimited food once more without much work. Food without work is an Indian's idea of happiness.

I visited Mrs. Gowanlock and Mrs. Delaney every day and saw how they were getting along. They at all times seemed to be employed at some work for their captors. I don't think they had many idle moments in those days. They were either cooking, making clothes, or mending for the half-breeds in whose camp they were living. But it was well for those women that the half-breeds bought them from their Indian captors, or I am quite sure the debt of vengeance owed by the whites to the Indians for those days of trouble would be much heavier. The half-breeds in the camp acted splendidly and nothing but praise can be given to Pritchard, Blondin, Beaudreau and others, who at much personal risk, saved those poor women from a life that could have been a hundred times worse than death.¹⁵

After we had been in camp a week or so I think the Indians did not watch us so closely and we had greater freedom in going about the camp. We seemed to be welcome into whatever tent we entered and the best of food that was in the tent was placed before us. We were treated as if things were as before the trouble began. Still the Indians and half-breeds showed plainly that they knew they were masters of the situation. Indians are like Irish people, naturally hospitable and always give the best the house can afford to the guests. There were many times I went back to my tent uncomfortably feasted, for it did not do to refuse to eat.

Some of the dishes set before one in the camp I do not think would be very tempting to some Regina people. I have seen beef, bacon, gophers, fish, dried apples, raisins, potatoes with the skin on, and many other articles boiled in the same pot at the same time. So I leave it to your imagination what the taste of the mess would be. To me it seemed that the fish came out on top.

Some of the costumes were also funny in the extreme, for whenever there was a feast or council going on, every man, woman and child in camp, who attended, tried to have some sort of finery in the way of painted faces or loud colored clothing to show off. I remember an Indian named Dressy Man going about dressed in the following outfit. To begin with his feet, he had one police boot and one moccasin. On his legs were a pair of

police riding pants. His coat was an evening swallow tail, which he wore back to front and on which he had sewn many rows of brass buttons and little strings of colored beads. To crown all, a police helmet painted red on one side and green on the other, and from the spike of which hung a pair of ladies' velvet slippers, one on each side of his head. All of this finery, combined with a painted face, made Dressy Man the most envied man in camp.

Indian women are very fond of loud and glaring combinations of colors in their clothing. Green, red, and yellow are the prime favorites and when all these colors are combined in one dress, they are happy for the time being. But like their white sisters, they get unhappy when they see another who has, to their mind, a nicer dress than they have, and, as their white sisters [...] do, they make remarks that are not always complimentary. I have seen an Indian woman come to visit another simply to show off a new dress with all the colors of the rainbow in it. And though the dress was admired and the different points in its make-up praised to the face of the owner, and though the women would kiss one another when parting, after their visitor had departed, express their opinion that the dress was a failure and their friend was a fright. Indian women never wear hats or bonnets; at least they did not in that camp or there might have been more trouble.

After we had been in camp a week or more the Chippewyans arrived from Cold Lake to join Big Bear's Indians. This, I think, added about 150 or 200 souls to the camp, and as they brought a good many of their cattle with them, they were gladly received by the Crees. Had they come empty handed, the welcome would not have been so great. Big Bear's Indians had by this time killed nearly all the cattle on the reserve for beef. I have seen them kill four or five animals at one time just for the fun or pleasure of taking life and even the little boys would take their fathers' guns and go out and shoot a calf or cow so as to appear big before the other boys in the camp.

After the Chippewyans arrived with their priest Father Le Goff, efforts were made to bury the people who were killed by the Indians on the 3rd of April.¹⁶ So a party of us went down to where the massacre had taken place and most of the bodies were lying just as the Indians had shot them, and as the weather had been cold, no change had taken place in their appearance. They were all, however, more or less mutilated. The Indian agent Quinn and his interpreter Gouin had been thrown into a cellar after having been stripped. [Then] a plentiful amount of coal oil [had] been poured over them and the house [was] set on fire.

The Indian Agent, who was cordially hated by all the Indians, was mutilated to a degree. The Indians seemed not to be able to show enough hatred to him, even after he was dead. Whether or not he merited this hatred is not for me to say now, but after the Indians got through with him, I don't think his own mother would have known him. Even Quinn's wife, who was related to Big Bear and many of his people, never raised [a] hand or voice to save her husband. Had she done so even, I am not sure if she could have saved him on that dreadful day, the 3rd of April, Good Friday, I think it was.¹⁷

There were nine people killed by the Indians on the morning of the massacre, namely Indian Agent Quinn, Charles Gouin, carpenter and

interpreter, John Delaney, farming instructor, Gowanlock, Gilchrist, and Williscroft who were building a mill for the Indians at that time at Frog Lake. Also Dill, a trader, and two priests.

There is an interruption in the manuscript at this point. Apparently a message had arrived from Riel asking Big Bear's tribe to join his rebellion. The letter recounted the defeat of the Mounties at Duck Lake.

All this good news tended to raise the spirits of the Indians and make them more saucy and proud, and though I felt at the time that most of the stories were false, I could not say so without laying myself under the displeasure of the Indians who trusted their runners and their letters without question. From this time forward I don't think we were allowed so much freedom in the camp or were treated so well by the Indians. There were so many people in the camp who had lost friends and relations in the fight with the Police and Prince Albert Volunteers at the fight at Duck Lake in March and they now heard of it for the first time. This of course tended to make them cranky and morose, but no one showed any open hostility to any of the white people in the camp, but still they were not treated the same as before in many ways.

After the Chippewyans came to the camp and had rested their horses and themselves for a few days, preparations were made for a trip to Fort Pitt where the Mounted Police still held out in the Hudson's Bay Company fort. As the Hudson's Bay Company had a good stock of goods on hand, the Indians were anxious to take the place, without fighting, if they could do so, but to take it they would, at all risks.

In his testimony Halpin states Big Bear had lost all control over those in his band; the young bucks were following Wandering Spirit and Imasees, one of Big Bear's sons, who had usurped his father's position. They had planned the attack on Fort Pitt. While the other Indians rode horses or in carts, Big Bear walked on foot at the rear of the caravan. Halpin drove a cart for Lone Man. Big Bear had insisted that Halpin go along to write letters, calling for those in the Fort to surrender in order to prevent further bloodshed. Cameron and the women prisoners were left behind at Frog Lake.¹⁸

So after the Indians had given orders to the old men who were left behind (to keep up almost hourly communication [via smoke signals] with the fighting men who were on the way to Fort Pitt), about 150 or 200 mounted Indians started for Onion Lake en route to the Fort. I think it was on Monday the 13th of April we started.¹⁹ The day was fine and warm and the snow had almost all gone, only in places was a little left, though the ice [on] Frog Lake was still quite strong and firm. Some wagons and carts were taken along to carry back the spoils of the campaign, for the Indians were quite confident about the result of the trip and never for a moment thought the police would stand them off. Where they got this confidence I don't know, for whenever the police and the Indians had come to face each other in the past, the police always came off best, even when the Indians had ten to one in their favor, but this fear of the police was all over for the time being, not that I think the Indians would have stood up and fought with half [the] number of police on anything like fair ground, for the Indian is naturally cowardly in the daytime, or when the odds are not considerably in his favour.

When we got to Frog Lake²⁰ we found all the buildings deserted and one or two had been burned. The Indians started to destroy everything that had been left in the storehouses and dwelling houses. Flour and bacon were plentiful and the Indians ate all they wanted and tried to waste the remainder. Flour was emptied out on the dirty ground by the sackful and trampled under foot. Sides of good bacon were thrown out in the mud and fed to the dogs or in other ways destroyed....

We saw no one on the road from Frog Lake to Onion Lake, but some scouts belonging to the camp said that they had seen some Mounted Police later in the day some distance from the road. (This news afterwards proved correct and one poor fellow [Corporal David Cowan] belonging to the police never got back to the fort but was killed on top of the bank about a quarter of a mile from the fort on his way back.)²¹

We put in the night at Onion Lake, [the Indians] feasting and dancing. Early in the morning we started for the Fort, the Indians dancing and singing along the road, and now and then firing off a gun to keep everyone on the alert. When we arrived about five miles from the fort Big Bear came to me and asked me to write a letter to Captain Dickens [the son of the famous novelist], who was in charge of Fort Pitt, asking him to give up the fort and take the police with him. If he would go without fighting, he could do so, but that if he would not go out, he would have to fight and that Big Bear would kill everyone in the fort or burn them out like rats in a hole.²²

An old Hudson's Bay Company servant was sent with the letter and Dickens sent back word for the Indians to come on, that he was ready for them, and would not give up the fort so long as a man remained alive. This brought the situation before Big Bear and his party in a different light and they commenced to think that if they wanted to be proprietors of Fort Pitt they were going to have some work to do first. It made them angry to think that the police in Fort Pitt would not vacate the place as did the police at Frog Lake the night before the Indians butchered the whites there. There was much loud talk from a lot of the young bucks of what they would do, and in an hour or so while we were resting, they got themselves worked up into a very bad state of mind.

I felt that very much depended on the next day or so as to whether any of the whites would ever get out of it alive, for I heard some of the Indians say that for each Indian killed in the taking of Fort Pitt one of the white people would die. This was not pleasant news and I at once tried all in my power to get them in a better state of mind. I told them I would do all possible to see the Hudson's Bay people in the fort and get things settled quickly, the Indians at that time only wanted the goods that were in the fort, and also, that if possible, the police would go without fighting.

It was late in the afternoon before we made a start on the last stage of our journey to [Fort] Pitt and it was almost sunset before we arrived at the top of the hill overlooking the river, on the banks of which the fort was situated. When we came in sight of the fort we could see that the inmates were quite prepared for us. Everything that an Indian could use as ambush had been cleared away from about the place and the gates closed and everything [was] in ship shape. Above all floated the dear old Union Jack.

I don't ever remember looking upon that flag before with so much love as I did that day and would have given a good deal to be with its defenders inside the fort. But I could not get a chance to get down, though I asked [the] Indians to let me go and see Captain Dickens and Mr. McLean who was the Hudson's Bay agent in Fort Pitt and make some sort of bargain with them, but the Indians instead sent an old man by the name of Dufresne to speak to the people in the fort.

Nothing was done that night by the Indians for they were all tired after their trip from Frog Lake. So eating, drinking and big talk was the order of the day or rather night. Early in the morning the camp was all astir, scouts arriving from Frog Lake and other parts of the country.

At this point, 14 April, Big Bear dictated another letter to Halpin which was sent to Sgt. Martin, pleading with him to persuade Dickens to vacate the Fort before a massacre happened. "That is to let you off, if you would go, so try and get away before the afternoon, as the young men are all wild and hard to keep in hand. P.S. You asked me to keep the men in camp last night and I did so, so I want you to get off to-day."²³ Later that day Corporal Cowan was murdered and two other police were wounded when they inadvertently entered the camp of the rebels. Halpin saw Cowan fall from his horse after being shot.²⁴ Cowan was finished off with two more shots to the head. Dressy Man also clubbed Cowan who was scalped by the first Indian who shot him; his heart was cut out and nailed to a tree.

The Hudson's Bay Company employees in Fort Pitt and the whites, who had fled there for safety, vacated Fort Pitt on 15 April and surrendered themselves to Wandering Spirit. They joined the other prisoners. The Mounties destroyed what arms and ammunition in the Fort that they could not carry, and fled down the river in a leaky boat. The Crees honoured their promise to let them leave in safety. While Big Bear and Halpin watched from the bluff, the young bucks looted the Fort for its supplies. Encouraged by their defeat of the police, many of the warriors decided to join the larger Riel Rebellion.

Others from the camp starting off to Battleford, Saddle Lake and Duck Lake. Many half-breeds left for Battleford and Duck Lake and never came back again.

Signal smoke was to be seen in many directions during the day. The Indians know quite well what each particular smoke means. They have some way of holding blankets over the fire and shaking them in a particular fashion so as to make the smoke come up at different intervals and directions, each of which has a meaning. ([Later on 2 May] we in camp at Frog Lake, more than a hundred miles from Cut Knife, knew all about the fight that took place there on the same afternoon it occurred simply through the use of Indian signals.

At this point Halpin's memoir ends. The day after the capture of Fort Pitt, Stanley Simpson and W.J. McLean visited the remains of the fort to get some of their surviving possessions. Halpin accompanied them.²⁵ Later that day Wandering Spirit's men returned to Frog Lake, taking their additional prisoners with them. On or about 5 May they returned to Fort Pitt. After that they wandered the countryside seeking to avoid the police and army. They arrived at Frenchman's Butte on or about 27 May. Halpin and the other prisoners were made to dig rifle pits and fox holes in anticipation of the coming battle.²⁶

During the bombardment by Major-General T. Bland Strange's artillery fire on 28 May, Halpin and some of the prisoners escaped. There are hints in Halpin's testimony that Big Bear facilitated the escape.²⁷ For several days the former prisoners wandered through the bush trying to avoid re-capture by the Indians and being shot by Strange's troops or Sam Steele's Mounties. On 1 June W.B. Cameron and several others made contact with the Major Dale and were rescued. The following day, Halpin and more of the captives emerged from the bush.²⁸

Once he had his freedom, Halpin joined Major-General Strange's Alberta Field Force, working as a scout and guide, as the hunt was on to bring to justice those who had perpetrated the Frog Lake Massacre, the capture of Fort Pitt, the murder of Corporal Cowan, and the other crimes associated with those events. As the search progressed, Big Bear was portrayed by the government and the newspapers as the arch-villain, even though he had nothing to do with the crimes; but his letters to Dickens had implicated him in the murders. Halpin next saw Big Bear in the cells at Prince Albert after he turned himself in near Carleton House.²⁹

During the Rebellion trials Halpin testified against the rebels and for the defense of Big Bear, stating that his friend Big Bear was just as much a victim of the Frog Lake Massacre as he was. Prosecutor Scott tried to block Halpin's testimony, treating Halpin with suspicion.³⁰ All but one of the prisoners (Stanley Simpson) testified that Big Bear was innocent and powerless to stop the young bucks in his band from committing the murders, seizing Fort Pitt and engaging in battle with the troops at Frenchman's Butte. If anything, Big Bear's influence had averted further bloodshed. In spite of the clear testimony of Big Bear's innocence, the prejudicial comments of Judge Richardson influenced the jury to find him guilty and he was sentenced to three years in Stony Mountain Penitentiary.³¹

When Halpin applied for his wages as a guide for the Alberta Field Force he was turned down. The War Claims Commission ruled: "This man appears to have been one of the prisoners whom the troops were sent to release. He ought to be thankful instead of making such a claim."³² The following year Halpin re-applied for compensation for his services; he eventually received \$80.

Because of his vast knowledge of Native matters Halpin was hired by the Indian Affairs Department, working out of the Regina office. In January 1886 he married Annie M.D. Elliott, the daughter of Robert Wilson Elliott, the justice of the peace at nearby Balgonie.³³

For some years Halpin worked on the Indian reserve at Muscowpetung, near Fort Qu'Appelle, as a clerk and interpreter.³⁴ When the Rev. George Bryce, historian and founder of Manitoba College, visited the reserve, he commented that Halpin was one of the best speakers and translators of Cree he had encountered.³⁵

Halpin later worked at the Moose Mountain Reserve in Saskatchewan, at Neepewaw in Manitoba, and at Cannington Manor in Saskatchewan.³⁶ Following the death of his wife Annie, he re-entered the service of the Hudson's Bay Company, working at Fort Alexandria on the east side of Lake Winnipeg. He married a Métis woman, Floral Leask, in 1904, had a second family, and remained with the HBC until 1909. Settling at Libau, he taught school for several years³⁷ and was a justice of the peace.³⁸ In 1928 Henry Ross Halpin moved to Winnipeg where he died in 1930.

Halpin's reminiscence of the Rebellion provides interesting social commentary. Although he held some patronizing attitudes towards the Natives, he had a respect

for them, having worked in the fur trade for 13 years. Because he had been situated in the northern parts of the country most of that time, he seems to have misunderstood the impact that reservation life had upon the Plains Cree in the southern prairies where Big Bear had spent the previous years. Big Bear's tribe had faced starvation and government indifference: this had led to Big Bear's loss of respect among his tribe.³⁹ Halpin thus incorrectly discounted their grievances.

Halpin's comments on the social inversion which occurred during the Rebellion are revealing: his servant defied him, Lone Man's wife was now subservient since she did not have the Indian agent or the police to protect her, and young Indian boys were not obeying their mothers. Halpin's description of Dressy Man is entertaining and also reflects the social inversion that was taking place.

This memoir reveals the real terror under which Halpin and the other prisoners lived. Yet, through the experience, Halpin felt that Big Bear and Lone Man would try to protect him. Recent suggestions that Big Bear had ordered Lone Man to bring Halpin to Frog Lake for his own protection⁴⁰ may be supported by Halpin's manuscript; however, while he was a prisoner on his way to Frog Lake, Halpin did not have any feeling that he was being placed into protective custody. Cameron stated that when the war party was sent to apprehend Halpin, he pled for Halpin's life and sent along the warning note to which Halpin's memoir referred.⁴¹ Lone Man may have gone along to protect Halpin, but the initial capture of Halpin may not have been Big Bear's initiative.

The tone of Big Bear's first letter, which Halpin wrote to NWMP Inspector Francis Dickens, is completely uncharacteristic of the rest of Halpin's description of Big Bear's character. Big Bear had not led the attack on Fort Pitt; Wandering Spirit and Imasees were the de facto leaders, but the strident tone of the letter may have been an attempt by Big Bear to regain control of his band, to make him look the warrior of old. The letter to Dickens seems to have been more or less a bluff in order to cause the police to evacuate in order to prevent another massacre of the white occupants of the fort. Whatever his motives for writing the letter, Big Bear's letter to Dickens unjustly implicated him in the murders at Frog Lake, the murder of Corporal Cowan, the capture and destruction of Fort Pitt, and the later battle at Frenchman's Butte. From his prior friendship with Big Bear and his observations of him during the sixty-two days, Halpin believed that Big Bear was completely innocent of the charges brought against him and valiantly defended him during his trial.

Notes

1. H.R. Halpin's testimony, "The Queen vs. Big Bear," Canada, *Sessional Papers* (#52), Vol. 19:13 (1886), pp. 217–218.
2. The "Stockholm Syndrome" was part of the defense during Patty Hearst's 1976 trial.
3. Samuel Benfield Steele, *Forty Years in Canada; Reminiscences of the Great North West* (London: H. Jenkins Ltd., 1915), 223, and William Bleasdel Cameron, *The War Trail of Big Bear* (Boston: Small Maynard and Co., second edition, 1927), 74, 107–11, 119, 186, 199.
4. Blair Stonechild and W.A. Waiser, *Loyal till Death: Indians and the North-West Rebellion* (Calgary: Fifth House, 1997), appear to have been the first historians to have used Halpin's manuscript.
5. Halpin's 16-page typescript in the Hudson's Bay Company Archives (document E.262/3) seems to have been written soon after the events of 1885, with a Regina newspaper audience in mind. I have not been able to find it published in the Regina *Leader* in a search of the 1885–1886 issues. A copy of the Halpin typescript is also held by the Saskatchewan Archives Board; its provenance is currently unknown. Special thanks must be given to my cousin, retired Major John P. Elliott, who located the Halpin manuscript.
6. James John Talman, *Huron College: 1863–1963* (London, ON: Huron College, 1963).

7. Halpin's personnel file, HBC Archives.
8. Halpin testimony, p. 212.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 213. The dates of events are somewhat confused in the trial transcript because of the prosecutor's many interruptions.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 212–13.
11. The meaning of this expression is unclear. It may be a transliteration of a French expression, meaning 15 minutes, mixed with a Cree meaning.
12. Not all the whites had been killed. Besides Cameron, Theresa Delaney and Theresa Gowanlock had been spared.
13. Halpin states that he arrived at Frog Lake on 5 April. During Big Bear's trial he stated that he did not meet with Big Bear until 7 April. The confusion may again have been caused by the prosecutor's interruptions.
14. Halpin testimony, p. 215.
15. Halpin may have overstated Blondin's gallantry; other later evidence suggests that his motives in regard to Mrs. Gowerlock were less than honourable. See Cameron, *The War Trail of Big Bear*, 205 and Theresa Delaney and Theresa Gowanlock, edited by Sarah Carter, *Two Months in the Camp of Big Bear* (1885; Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1999), 18 and 39. Halpin's version suggests an early date for his memoir, before Mrs. Gowanlock revealed more details about her ill treatment by Blondin.
16. Actually 2 April.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Halpin testimony, p. 216.
19. The trip may have started on the twelfth of that month.
20. The manuscript says Frog Lake, but the context suggests Onion Lake. The settlement at Onion Lake had been burned earlier after its residents had fled to Fort Pitt.
21. The murder of Cowan happened on 14 April.
22. Dicken's report indicates that he received such a letter via Halpin on 13 April. Francis J. Dickens to Commissioner of NWMP, 8 June 1885, *Sessional Papers* (No. 8), Vol. 19:6, 1886, pp. 78–80.
23. Big Bear's letter to Sgt. Martin was published in Charles Pelham Mulvaney, *The North-West Rebellion of 1885* (Toronto: A.H. Hovey and Co., 1885), 125–26.
24. Halpin testimony, "The Queen vs. Big Bear's Band, Nan-e-sue et al.," *Sessional Papers* (#52), Vol. 19:13 (1886), p. 255.
25. Stanley Simpson testimony, "The Queen vs. Big Bear," p. 194.
26. Halpin testimony, "The Queen vs. Big Bear's Band," pp. 255–56.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 216–17.
28. Cameron, *The War Trail of Big Bear*, 198–99; Major-General T. Bland Strange to Major-General Middleton, 4 July 1885, *Sessional Papers* (No. 6), Vol. 19:6, 1886, p. 59.
29. Halpin testimony, p. 217.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 212.
31. Judge Richardson's trial notes, p. 90, Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Riel series, MG3 D1, #617.
32. "War Claims Commission, Report No. 35," 17 October 1885, *Sessional Papers*, Vol. 19:5, 1886, p. 126. See also H.R. Halpin to the minister of the Interior, 20 July 1886, National Archives of Canada, RG 15, D-II-1, Vol 462, file 122927.
33. *Regina Leader*, 7 January 1886, p. 4. Annie Elliott was this author's great aunt.
34. *Ibid.*, 16 December 1890, p. 8.
35. George Bryce, *Holiday Rambles Between Winnipeg and Victoria* (Winnipeg: 1888), 52.
36. *Lovell's Directory of Manitoba and Northwest Territories for 1900–1901*, p. 373.
37. *East of the Red: 1884–1984* (Rural Municipality of St. Clements, Manitoba, 1984), 205.
38. Halpin resigned as justice of the peace in 1926. See J.H. Meanwell, private secretary to the lieutenant governor, to H.R. Halpin, 2 Dec. 1926, T.A. Burrows Papers, MG 12 J1, Box 15, Provincial Archives of Manitoba.
39. See Hugh Dempsey, *Big Bear: The End of Freedom* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1984).
40. *Ibid.*, 165; and Blair Stonechild and W.A. Waiser, *Loyal till Death*, 119.
41. Cameron, *The War Trail of Big Bear*, 74–75.