

SAMUEL MUNRO

1853 – 1929

**By Hugh Munro Carter
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PREFACE

I never knew my grandfather, except as an infant. This story is pieced together from stories I heard from my mother and father, from talks with my cousins, Sam Munro, Dorothy (Munro) Phipps, Munro Clark, Betty (Munro) and her husband Kirk Macdonald, and from documents I have gathered in my genealogical research.

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Samuel Munro left his birthplace, Inverness in Scotland, looking for a better life. One of the many children of Christopher and Isabella (Macdonald) Munro, he became one of the thousands of emigrants from his native land. Emigration was a familiar option to the Scots at that time, sending large numbers of emigrés to many countries, and Canada was a favourite. Christopher was a shoemaker, and with ten children to look after, he could not offer a bright future to them. It's no wonder that emigration was a solution for more than one of them, and it's not surprising that even the parents were agreeable to leaving Scotland once they had the opportunity.

Samuel was born November 8th 1853. Inverness was not entirely without promise. With about 15,000 people, it was the commercial hub of the Highlands. A new castle had recently been built to replace the old one destroyed by the Jacobite army

Thanks to the family bible for his birth date. Only two of his eight siblings have turned up in the official records. Compulsory registration started in 1855, but full compliance was slow to get underway. Even registration in the parochial record was lackadaisical

in 1746, a new cathedral was about to be started, and several small industries were headquartered there, including shipbuilding, rope making, sail making, tanning and wool. In 1817 a sheep market was organized. Despite the comparative vigour of Inverness, Scotland was very poor, and it was daunting for young people to find jobs, let alone to plan a career.

Scottish education must have been one of the few bright lights for the children of a shoemaker in Scotland. The country was, and still is, admired for the quality of its education, reinforced undoubtedly by the students' austere backgrounds and disciplined upbringing, which would implant and nourish the desire to learn. We can imagine a frugal and even hard life at

Samuel's home, but not an unhappy one. As we shall see the family was close knit and love must have flowed from the parents, judging from later events.

At twenty-three (1876), Samuel headed for London, England, where expansion was dynamic, the centre of a mighty and growing empire. It seems that he may have worked in the British Civil Service in Inverness, and then managed a transfer to London. We have no record of what type of job it was or in which government department. During that time he met his future wife, Ellen Sophia Sickle who lived in what was then Surrey, now Lambeth. She was the daughter of James Thomas Sickel, a tailor, and Ann (Dunkin) Sickel.

The family name was Sickel, probably a German name originally. Ellen Sophia, for some unknown reason, changed it to Sickle.

Late in 1878, at the age of twenty-six, with Sophia Ellen pregnant, Samuel set out for Canada and started to carve out a new life in London, Ontario,

London, Ontario had prospered during the American Civil War, as the centre of a wheat growing area, shipping wheat to the Northern armies. In the 1870's lines of new mansions rose, reflecting the new found wealth.

where he was to spend the rest of his life. Ellen joined him at the end of April 1879, and they were married on May 12th.

Just in time! Their first child Rowland arrived one month later. We'll never know the full story. When she became pregnant could he have

skipped out and away from England trying to escape, but she tracked him down? Or, did he tell her he would get a job in Canada and send for her? Did her parents throw her out? In those days it was a serious disgrace for an unmarried woman to find herself with child. In any event, they settled down to a long married life, raising four children. It was fortunate in a way that he was so new to the Canadian scene that he had developed few friends and was virtually unknown. The secret of the pregnant marriage faded away and didn't become public knowledge.

Sam prospered. His first job was a bookkeeper with Marshall, Lind and McFee. His outgoing personality and his Scottish practicality were important assets, and he rose steadily in the firm. He became a star salesman, and there was no more interesting figure in the Ontario Commercial Travellers' Association. He was a tower of strength in its earlier

years serving as treasurer then vice president. He was president in 1888 and 1889 and continued an active role until 1904.

His drive and enthusiasm led eventually to a partnership in the company and then to co-owner, together with Walter Simson and Harry Buttrey of the enterprise by then known as John Marshall and Company. It was nominally a hat and cap concern, but its main and lucrative products were furs. He made frequent trips to Europe finding a profitable market there, and always returned with luxurious gifts for the family and friends, often silks and silver items unobtainable in frontier Canada.

His home on Ridout Street was said to be quite palatial with the largest ballroom in town. He was one of the early members of the London Hunt Club. He took the family for a month every summer to the fashionable Muskoka area. My mother told me they arrived with many trunks and a couple of servants. He also had a summer house in Port Stanley on Lake Erie. Life was undoubtedly very good to the young man from Scotland and his bride from Lambeth.

By the time he was in his mid-thirties, in the late 1880's, he was able to bring his father, mother and two sisters from Scotland to live permanently in Canada. His father, Christopher, at the age of 70 set up in business as a shoemaker and continued to work for many years. He died at 85, a ripe age for that era. His wife, Isabella, didn't do badly either. She made it to 82 - very advanced considering she bore nine children. The old couple, Christopher and Isabella, passed on sound attitudes to their offspring who were on the whole successful. George became a bank manager in India, and another, Christopher William, was a successful businessman in Pennsylvania.

We owe this classic and much prized Munro family photograph taken in London, Ontario in 1890 in part to a visit by brother George and family



George towers at the back, behind his parents, with little George between them. Sam is at the far right with Ellen behind him and sister Annie to his right. My mother, age 4, is at Sam's left arm. Rowland is immediately in front of his grandfather Christopher.
[See **Family Photos** on **Family Page** for more detail.]

from India. It was common for the British working in the colonies to be granted a furlough every two or three years, and George chose to travel to Canada since his parents had left Scotland. What a proud moment it must have been for both the parents and their progeny!

The New World's opportunities for hard-working arrivals from the Old World were perhaps at their peak. London, Ontario was no exception as an expanding city and economy. Towards the end of the century people were accumulating money, building more substantial homes, and the infrastructure was filling in. Although London goes back to the early 1830's, and the railway and the Bank of Upper Canada had arrived in 1835 making London a regional centre, and the city was incorporated in 1855 with about 12,000 people, it wasn't until the 60's and 70's that growth became exponential. So Sam arrived at a propitious time. With a Scottish education, and with Scottish characteristics of hard work and prudence, he quickly accumulated funds for a life which materially he couldn't dream of back in Scotland



By the turn of the new century Sam had much to be pleased about. He was prospering, he had brought his mother and father plus sisters to Canada, he was admired and respected in the community, and he had a fine young family of two boys and two girls. Rowland was 20, Florence 19, George 16, and Evelyn 14.

Some might say he displayed a few attributes of the nouveau riche. But this was frontier land.

Admiration rather than criticism came from the community for those who did well. No obloquy was attracted by evidence of, or demonstration of prosperity. Everyone aspired to success. Perhaps a touch of envy by some, but admiration rather than censure. Sam was proud that he belonged to London's best clubs.

His grandson, (also Samuel), felt that Sam was unhappy about his first born, son Rowland (and young Sam's father). Young Sam noticed a brusque, bullying and dominating attitude by his grandfather towards his oldest born, at the same time favouring his second

son, George. Rowland was a timid, unsure person and never managed to succeed. In the 1980's when documents revealed the secret of Sam and Ellen's marriage, young Sam said, "To me, that explains many things! First, I've wondered why my father's name (Rowland) was chosen outside

Coincidence? Sir Rowland Hill, originator of the penny postage system and responsible for development of modern postal service, died in August 1879 and was buried in Westminster Abbey amid great publicity. Although Rowland Munro was born in June 1879, his birth was not registered until 17th October 1880.

family tradition. Also my father was never invited into Sam's business, whereas his younger brother George was. I was often embarrassed by the way my grandfather spoke to my father, and I felt my father was humiliated but unable to stand up for himself." Young Sam believed his grandfather resented Rowland, because he had not been a welcome child, but an embarrassment as one "thrust upon him."

I know little of Samuel Munro from the turn of the century until his death in 1929. He must have continued to do well. My mother, Evelyn, told me of

Sam's trips to Britain to sell furs, and of his returning with all sorts of expensive gifts. He also gave my mother a baby grand piano for her 21st birthday in 1907. I believe World War I added to his prosperity owing to his firm's ability to supply clothing, principally caps and hats, to the army

Ellen died on December 8th 1924 at 75 after being ill for several weeks. My cousin, Dorothy Phipps, (Rowland's daughter) was very fond of her grandmother and often saw her for a visit. She described Ellen as pensive and perhaps sad, not outgoing and rather shy. Presumably my mother, Evelyn, received the news of Ellen's death in Calgary by wire or perhaps even by telephone. I was six at the time and have no memory of the situation.

In that same year Sam's business folded and my father told me the details years later. After the end of the war Sam found that Eatons was his best customer. With stores all across Canada their demand for furs grew steadily. He made a mistake that few businessmen would make today. To meet the growing demand from Eatons he neglected most of his other customers until finally Eatons was taking virtually all he could supply. Like most aggressive purchasers, they squeezed him for price reductions each year. When they eventually discovered that he was completely dependent on them, they stepped up the pressure. He foolishly yielded to the extent he jeopardized his cash flow, and bankruptcy followed.

Soon after Sam suffered from progressive dementia. He was a broken man for the rest of his life. He had no money apart from small remittances from family members. He salvaged very little from the value of his house having mortgaged it heavily in trying to save his company. In the last few years he stayed with various relatives until his death on 21 Dec 1929. He was buried in the Woodland Cemetery in London, Ontario.

Alzheimer's disease - Mental deterioration in middle or old age, owing to progressive generalized degeneration of the brain; senile dementia.