

## “KOOTENAI” BROWN

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Many honourable men have shared the name John Brown. One in particular is distinguished by his nickname, Kootenai, bestowed on him because of his mastery of the language spoken by the Kootenai Indians of British Columbia. He is the subject of at least three books, countless articles, and even a movie. Today he is almost a legend in the Southern part of Alberta, especially the region which he helped preserve for posterity.

In the life stories of several pioneers of the American West, it is difficult to sort out fiction from fact; and this is certainly true where Kootenai Brown is concerned. None the less, the truth about him is just as interesting as the fabrications. In America Kootenai Brown would be as famous as Buffalo Bill — whom incidentally he knew. His was such a colourful personality that he was bound to be the subject of many a tall tale, some apocryphal, others only slightly exaggerated. It is tempting to record some of the more fantastic stories about him, but the following sketch of his life keeps to the known facts as far as possible. One is that in his later years he was a Theosophist.

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John George Brown was born in Ennistymon, County Clare, Ireland on October 10, 1839.<sup>1</sup> Orphaned at a very early age, he was brought up by a grandmother, who subsisted on an army widow's meagre pension. He was a clever lad, and as well as being taught at home, more than likely received a grammar school education, an opportunity granted to few in those times. On the strength of his father's military service, the family importuned the British government to grant young John an army commission. Finally, at sixteen he was permitted to write the necessary examinations, which he passed with honours; however he had to wait two more years before being commissioned as an Ensign. It was a rare achievement in those times for anyone who could not afford to buy a commission, and his grandmother certainly did not have that kind of money.

In September 1858 he was posted to India. Because the Suez Canal was but a dream of the future, getting there entailed a four-month voyage, around the Cape of Good Hope. By the time he arrived, the aftershock of the Mutiny was subsiding, and Brown experienced little military activity in the relatively short time he spent on the sub-continent. His regiment was recalled in 1860, which meant another lengthy voyage home.

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<sup>1</sup>Basic biographical material is drawn largely from William Rodney's excellent biography, *Kootenai Brown: Canada's Unknown Frontiersman*; and W. McD. Tait's "*I Remember*": *Recollections of Kootenai Brown*.

The following year, he sold his commission because, not possessing a private income, his career prospects in the British army were practically nil. The proceeds were spent on a passage to Panama. From there, he proceeded to San Francisco, where he arrived broke. These were the gold rush years, and travel was expensive; even so, thousands of adventurers, among them John George Brown, were willing to make sacrifices to reach the gold fields in the Caribou region of northern British Columbia.<sup>2</sup> In those years there were no roads, and the main means of transportation was a dangerous journey up the Fraser River. There was no force to maintain law and order: this was long before the establishment of the North West Mounted Police. Like most of the eager prospectors, Brown failed to strike it rich. As he said:

I had no money when I went into the Cariboo in 1862, and I had none when I came out in 1863, but I had a little fortune in between. Like thousands of others I made and lost a fortune in less than two years.<sup>3</sup>

After leaving the Caribou region Brown moved to the Kootenai region of southern British Columbia, and stayed at Wild Horse Creek (later renamed Fort Steele).<sup>4</sup> Again, gold was the attraction, and again it was an unsuccessful quest; but while there he added to his experiences by taking on the unenviable position of constable in that relatively lawless settlement.

In 1865, hearing of a gold find on the Saskatchewan River near Edmonton, he and four companions set out to try their luck yet once more. They never reached their destination but for John Brown it was a significant journey. Travelling east through what is now the Crowsnest Pass, they came to Waterton Lakes where the grandeur of the area struck him as a place of rare beauty, a place of his dreams, where he wanted to settle. He later recalled that when he first moved into the Waterton area of what is now southern Alberta, he could not believe the huge number of buffalo he saw on the prairie. There were millions of these huge animals, yet within twenty years or so they had been shot almost to extinction.

As for the others, with no maps, no roads and no guides, there was disagreement as to how to reach Edmonton, and his companions split off to follow their own sense of direction. Now alone except for his pack horse, Kootenai decided instead to set out for Fort Garry (now Winnipeg). For the time being, Waterton

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<sup>2</sup>More than thirty years later, in 1896, a branch of the Theosophical Society was formed in Barkerville, centre of the gold boom. Fittingly, it was called the Caribou TS.

<sup>3</sup> W. D. McTait, *"I Remember": Recollections of Kootenai Brown*, 8.

<sup>4</sup>More than twenty years later Brown served as guide for Col. Sam Steele, a Superintendent in the North West Mounted Police, who was sent to Wild Horse to settle trouble between white settlers and Kootenai Indians.

Lakes would remain the place of his dreams. Whether he knew it or not, he was facing a journey of almost 3,000 kilometres, and his attempt was probably the first by a non-native to travel overland across the Canadian prairies from west to east. (Before the railway, crossing the prairies was a very difficult journey and mostly done using river transport.)

For the next thirty years this incredible man lived in what were then known as Territories and which now comprise, in the USA, the States of the Dakotas, Montana, Idaho, and Washington; and in Canada, the provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. Together with British Columbia this amounts to an enormous section of North American geography. Kootenai seemingly could turn his hand to anything: he was variously prospector, guide, fur trader, packer, wagon train driver, pony express rider, outfitter, trader — even a surveyor of what was then little more than a line on the map, the Canadian-American border. And of course he was a crack marksman and a skilled hunter. From these experiences he got to know the immense territory like few others. Until he eventually settled down, seldom was he without broken bones, or knife and arrow wounds. On one occasion he came close to starvation; on another, near freezing to death.

Along the way, Kootenai encountered numerous native tribes throughout the vast region: some were friendly, others not. But never one to waste an opportunity, he picked up several native languages and dialects, a most valuable asset. He also spoke fluent French, so he was at home in the Métis communities. His communication skills even extended to sending and reading smoke signals, which he knew how to make. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he was without racial bias, and generally got along well with the native population. In 1869 he married a vivacious Métis woman, Olive (Olivia), and with her raised two daughters and a son. Some years after her death in 188- (?) he married a Cree woman, whose name in English translation was Blue Flash of Lightning, but he called her Neech-e-Moose, “My Loved One”. These relationships appear to have been harmonious, both wives perfectly adapting themselves to his unusual way of life and he to their traditional customs.

Tales of his adventures over the next twenty years could fill a book but here only a few will be cited. In 1869 while acting as a despatch carrier for the U.S. government, he and a companion were captured by the famed Sitting Bull (1831?-1890), Chief of the Sioux, and stripped of all their clothing. Facing torture and death, they managed to escape without a stitch of clothing, although mosquitos inflicted torture of a different sort on their naked bodies. Several years later Kootenai worked briefly with General George Armstrong Custer (1839-1876) with whom he was very friendly. It was only because he had to honour an earlier commitment that he missed being present and, like 265 others, killed by the Sioux at Custer’s famous Last Stand in 1876.

Existence on the frontier was never without life threatening incidents, whether

prompted by nature or humanity. In 1877, Kootenai faced death from a dreaded source — the hangman’s noose. It was when he was in Montana for the purpose of selling fur. There he became involved in a dispute with a trader, which resulted in the latter being shot dead. Brown was caught and tried for murder, but pleaded he had acted in self defence. He spent several weeks in fearful anticipation of the outcome because in Montana in the 1870s vigilante justice often took over from the courts. There was an added problem: a new sheriff had arrested him, and was ambitious to win this, his first case. In the event, a Grand Jury accepted his plea and did not return an indictment.

This incident probably made him realize it was time for him to put down roots. Kootenai’s dream was at last materializing, and it was in May, 1877 that he “squatted” on his first homestead at Waterton Lakes, close to the Waterton River, and his house there also served as a trading post. Eventually, however, it was washed away by floods. Some years later, he built on a registered homestead, taking advantage of government grants. The earlier squat was on ground that is now within the present boundaries of the National Park; the second just outside it. There he built a log cabin, which has been preserved and exists to this day at a museum site in Pincher Creek, Alberta. Fortunately, there is an eye-witness account of the cabin by a visitor in October, 1894.

We filed into his cosy sitting room—a beautiful room in its arrangements. Its walls were profusely decorated with fancy buckskins hung gracefully by skilled hands; a few mounted game heads and nice feathers; portraits of beautiful women; pictures of ancient Greeks and Romans. In one corner stood black mahogany cases filled with books, including some costly editions. Extending clear across a ten foot shelf nearby were magazines galore set up edgewise.<sup>5</sup>

Years later another observer mentioned some of Kootenai’s books, including works by Shakespeare, Tennyson, Byron and Poe; the King James version of the Bible; and “books on Theosophy and Hypnotism.”<sup>6</sup>

“Kootenai” so loved the wilderness area around Waterton Lakes, that he was one of those who pressured the federal government to protect it for future generations. Governments typically move slowly on important matters, but eventually a forest reserve was established and he was appointed its ranger. He continued to lobby until what is now the Waterton Lakes National Park was created, and he was appointed its first warden, and later, its first Superintendent. A better choice could hardly have been made. Kootenai would be pleased that

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<sup>5</sup>Joseph C. Cosley’s reminiscences in typescript. Copied by the writer at Parks Canada Interpretive Centre, Waterton, in the summer of 1991.

<sup>6</sup> McTait, *op. cit.*, 14.

the Park, which borders the U.S. Glacier Park, attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors every year. He would likewise be happy that ranchers whose land is adjacent to the park, are cooperating with the National Conservancy of Canada to limit commercial development in the area.

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Kootenai Brown joined the Theosophical Society in 1898. Considering how remote was the region where he lived, and how few contacts he had with the outside world, it would be interesting to know how this rugged outdoorsman became aware of Theosophy and its organization. As a voracious reader he would have come across the term, and eventually acquired some Theosophical literature. More interesting would be to know how Theosophy fitted into his personal philosophy of life.

“I have never been a very religious man any time in my life,” he admitted<sup>7</sup>, and it would not be unreasonable to assume that by the time he reached middle age, he had abandoned formal religion altogether. Born into the Anglican faith, in later life he appeared not to be interested in orthodox Christianity, although he got along well with both Anglican and Roman Catholic missionaries. (His second marriage was conducted by the well known Father LaCombe.) On the other hand, and this was a measure of the man, he was respectful of the spiritual traditions of the various native groups with whom he had come into contact over the years, an attitude which set him apart from most white settlers in the region.

Kootenai’s personal philosophy was undoubtedly influenced by his lifetime experiences. Even during his brief sojourn in India, exposure to Hindu religion may have awakened his inquiring mind to the concepts of reincarnation and karma. At any rate in later life it is known that he accepted reincarnation as a fact. Later he became aware of the esoteric side of some First Nations’ religions, which were then less infiltrated by Christianity than today. Having witnessed seemingly inexplicable phenomena performed by certain Medicine Men in the west, including the “shaking tent”, at least he should have been open minded regarding latent powers in humanity. (Incidentally, in 1890 he was one of few white men of his time to have been allowed to witness an authentic Sun Dance ceremony.<sup>8</sup>) But most importantly, living as close to nature as he did would have awakened in him the realization of the Oneness of existence.

So when, as Kootenai himself said, he “embraced Theosophy,” it would have been the natural thing for him to do. Kootenai’s biographer William Rodney

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<sup>7</sup>W. D. McTait, “I Remember”: *Recollections of Kootenai Brown*, 46.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 187. The date is approximate. The three-day ceremony was on the Blood Reserve. According to Kootenai, the Bloods gave up the observance around 1900.

probably made a correct assessment when he wrote:

. . . Brown's life, marked by its closed dependence upon nature's cycles of plant and animal life, made it conceivable that Kootenai would be attracted to an esoteric philosophy that was the very antithesis of the materialism which characterized the advance of civilization across the North American west.<sup>9</sup>

As for the formality of his joining the Theosophical Society, it is known that “. . . the arrival of new neighbours precipitated his application to join the Theosophical Society.”<sup>10</sup> The new neighbours were ranchers who came north in the mid-1890s, fleeing from cattle rustling and lawlessness in Montana. Among them were the brothers A.O. and A.E. (Ted) Endersby who with their families settled only a short distance from Kootenai's home near the Waterton Lakes. Along with P.M. Pedersen and Edward Pill, Ted Endersby endorsed his letter of application dated June 30, 1898, which they sent to the headquarters of the Theosophical Society in America in Point Loma, San Diego. It can be imagined how Kootenai welcomed the opportunity of discussing philosophy with like minded individuals.

Little else is known of his Theosophical leanings after the ranchers left the area, but he must have sustained his interest because in his Will, written a few months before his death some 18 years later, he directed that the Theosophical Society in Point Loma be notified of his passing.

Now, why would he be worth remembering as a student of Theosophy, apart from the gratitude owed him by all who appreciate the Waterton Lakes National Park? He was hardly a typical Theosophist — then or now. His meals were largely fish and game — he was a dedicated hunter. At one time too, he had a reputation for being a hard drinker. He was tough as nails, but certainly not without fine, humanitarian qualities and from what is known of his life, he upheld the principle of brotherhood as outlined in the first object of the Theosophical Society.

Theosophy has attracted many strong personalities, yet few have had the reputation of being a truly extraordinary “character”. Kootenai was one of the few. In the history of the Theosophical Movement there cannot have been any Theosophist in any country with whom to compare this extraordinary individual.

Kootenai Brown died on July 18, 1916 three months before his 77<sup>th</sup> birthday. That spring he knew his days were numbered, and told his son Leo:

Since your last letter my health has been very bad and it seems

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<sup>9</sup> William Rodney, “*Kootenai Brown: The Unknown Frontiersman*” 2002 edition, 181.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 182.

only a short time until I will have to pass in my checks. Never mind about this, it is alright, a thing we have all got to pass through.<sup>11</sup>

As it happened, Leo predeceased him and is recorded to have died on May 20, 1916. That happens to be the same day when Kootenai wrote his Last Will and Testament. In that document he stated "I do not desire the attendance of any clergyman of any denomination at my funeral in an official capacity."<sup>12</sup> In the event, his wish was not honoured.

Kootenai lies buried outside the Waterton Park boundaries near Middle Waterton Lake at the foot of Chief Mountain. His two wives are also buried here, Neeche-Moose having lived until 1935.

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Karma unfolds in mysterious ways. Kootenai was an early influence in the life of a second generation Theosophist, Victor Endersby (1891-1988) who was a member of the previously mentioned family that had settled in the Waterton area. More than seventy years later he still fondly remembered the old frontiersman.

There was little opportunity for schooling in that remote country, but thanks to family tuition this bright seven year old was already a good reader. As a friend of the family, Kootenai knew about this, and offered to lend books to the boy. (At this time, Kootenai probably had the best personal library for at least a couple of hundred miles in any direction, and of course there were no public ones.) So, every two weeks or so, the boy would jump on his horse and ride five or six miles over to Kootenai's log cabin.<sup>13</sup> After sampling Mrs. Brown's cooking, he would pick up a sackful of Kootenai's books, and it was mainly from these that he received his early education. When several years later, after his family moved to California, Victor finally began regular formal schooling and did brilliantly, winding up as Chief Engineer on the eastern section of the San Francisco Bay Bridge. In manhood, he became an independent Theosophist who for over a quarter of a century privately published his own journal, *Theosophical Notes*, and wrote *The Hall of Magic Mirrors*, one of the few favourable biographies of Madame Blavatsky. Even when nearly ninety, Victor Endersby still gratefully remembered Kootenai Brown, the early Canadian Theosophist who befriended him as a boy.

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<sup>11</sup>Kootenai Brown, letter to his son Leo dated March 21, 1916. Waterton Museum.

<sup>12</sup>Last Will and Testament of John George Brown, dated May 20, 1916. Waterton Museum.

<sup>13</sup>These notes are based on Victor Endersby's reminiscences in a Letter to the Editors, *The Canadian Theosophist* 61:2 (May-June, 1980), 38-39.