

## ALEXANDER ROSS'S KORAN

A Rare and Unexpected Volume to Find in a Fur Trader Library

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"This is a horribly dull place. Here I have been, since you parted from us, perfectly solus. My men, half Canadians and half Sandwich Islanders. The library is wretched, and no chance of my own books till next year, when the Athabasca men cross the mountains. If you, or my friends at Spokane, do not send me a few volumes, I shall absolutely die of ennui." Thus, in his book, *The Columbia River* (London, 1832), Ross Cox quoted a letter from fur trader Joseph McGillivray at "Fort Oakinagan," February 14, 1814.

When one thinks of it, the romantic hustling frontier life of the fur-trader had its down time; hours of sitting in canoes or lake boats, endless winter evenings listening to the winds blow, dreary camp-bound days waiting for the wind to die down before setting off across yet another lake or nameless wide spot in a river. All this boredom was no doubt amplified by the endless buzzing of mosquitoes, black flies, and restless natives. Books must have been a boon—any book, perhaps, would do, as indicated by McGillivray's letter.

One tome that has been added to the Washington State Historical Society's Special Collections bears eloquent testimony to the reading of books, particularly by the Astorians. The Astorians were representatives of John Jacob Astor who, inspired by reports of the Lewis and Clark expedition, conceived a plan to dominate the entire fur trade of the Columbia River region. Astor, to this end—having failed to convince the North West Company to join with him in the venture—organized and financed the Pacific Fur Company in 1809. The plan was to establish a fort at the mouth of the Columbia manned by seasoned fur traders and to send a supply ship each year to restock with trade goods and carry the furs thus secured to the Orient—all at a presumed handsome profit.

In September 1810, Astor's ship, the *Tonquin*, set sail from New York and arrived at the mouth of the Columbia in March 1811. Among this first contingent of traders was Alexander Ross, a schoolteacher of Scottish origin from upper Canada with education and a drive for adventure that was a prerequisite in the fur trade. In October 1811 the second Astor ship, the *Beaver*, set sail, arriving at the Columbia in May of 1812. And here the story properly begins.

The book recently acquired by the Society is the Koran, the first American edition, published in Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1806. On its title page is the signature, "Benjamin Clapp 1810." Clapp had signed on with Astor in New York as a clerk in the Pacific Fur Company and is mentioned several times by Gabriel Franchère and Ross Cox in their fur trade narratives. Clapp married, according to the custom of the country, a Chinook woman, but he left the Columbia with Wilson Hunt in August 1813 and signed on with the United States Navy in the Marquesas later that year. Perhaps Clapp bought the book in the east to supply himself with reading

material while on his fur trade adventure—nothing is known of his life before 1811 and nothing is known after he resigned from service with the navy in 1815.

It appears, however, that Clapp gave this copy of the Koran to Ross Cox, whose signature appears on the front free endpaper. Cox accompanied Clapp on the *Tonquin* and had, as his narrative indicates, a great many adventures in the ensuing year, which established him as an up-and-coming fur trader. Cox, after a winter at Fort Spokane, returned to Astoria on June 11, 1813, just in time to learn the news of the war with Great Britain and the impending sale of Astoria to the North West Company. All the men were given the choice of remaining with the North West Company, returning to the States, or returning to Great Britain. Cox, who from his narrative clearly enjoyed the fur trade, chose to stay. Clapp, meanwhile, had decided to leave with Hunt, perhaps in patriotic zeal to remain with the Americans. It appears Clapp passed the Koran on to Cox, no doubt because all books were deemed essential survival gear at Fort George, the new name for Fort Astoria.

The volume contains wonderful internal evidence of provenance not often seen in books of any period. On another preliminary leaf of the Koran is the inscription, "Ross Cox to the Mufti Ben Haden A. Ross." There also appears on the title page the signature, "Alexander Ross 1814," and on the contents page the signature "Alexander Ross Ft. George 1814." Finally, in front of and adjoining Ross Cox's signature on the front free endpaper, Alexander Ross has written just his first name, thus reading, "Alexander Ross Cox"—a little fur trade humor.

Ross Cox spent a good deal of time in 1814 both at Fort George and Fort Okanogan, with visits to Fort Spokane as well. Alexander Ross was nominally in charge at Fort Okanogan during this period, although he also spent a fair amount of time at Spokane. During this period they likely discussed Clapp's Koran, and at some point the book became Ross's.

Over the next several years Alexander Ross spent most of his time at various forts east of the Cascades, helping to build Fort Nez Perces at the confluence of the Walla Walla and Columbia Rivers, and eventually took charge of the fort. Things must have been rather quiet there during the summer of 1821, for the next dated inscription in the Koran (this one on the front paste-down) reads, "A. Ross com<sup>ed</sup> reading the Alcoran Augt. 12th 1821." It must have been slow going for the strict Calvinist Ross, for he records at the end of the book, "Alexander Ross finished reading the Alcoran 10th January 1822. The previous owners recorded neither the commencing nor completion of their reading of the Koran, if they read it.

In 1821 the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company merged, finally ending their long dispute over mastery of the North American fur trade. With that merger came the usual disruption and displacement of personnel. In 1822 Ross wrote to George Simpson, governor of the new company, that he had had enough of the fur trade and wished to leave the country to raise his three children in a Christian manner.

The final dated inscription in the Koran reads, "Alexander Ross to William Brown Esq. Ft. Nez Perce June 28th 1822." Although Ross had already decided to leave the country, this book was going to stay where it was most needed. William Brown had come to the Columbia Department with instructions to proceed north to open new fur areas at the northern limit of the Hudson's Bay Company's explorations in the New Caledonia district. He was departing in 1822 and founded Fort Kilmaurs on Lake Babine the fall and winter of 1822-23. Ross, it seems, made him a gift of the now well-traveled Koran as he passed through Fort Nez Perces.

What Brown did with the Koran is not recorded, but the volume somehow survived in trunks or on private bookshelves until it was given by a generous donor to the Washington State Historical Society's Special Collections in 1997. It now resides among the many diverse treasures preserved by the Society. Certainly, it is not a book one might have expected to find on the far North American frontiers in the early 19th century, but it bears witness to the early fur trader's wide range of interests, thirst for learning, and hunger for books.

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