

John Palliser's Buffalo Adventures

by Mike Phifer



John Palliser
Library and Archives Canada

John Palliser was excited and eager to be heading to the New World. Once there he was “determined to make acquaintance with our Trans-Atlantic brethren, and to extend my visit to the regions still inhabited by America’s aboriginal people, – now indeed, driven far westward of their rightful territories, and pressed backwards into that ocean of prairies extending to the foot of the great Rocky Mountains.”¹ He also intended to do a lot of hunting.

It was 1847 and Palliser was steaming out of Liverpool aboard the steamship *Cambria*. The thirty year old adventurer came from a distinguished Irish family and was well educated. He could speak four languages and had served as a high sheriff and justice of the peace. He was also a captain in the local militia artillery company of which his father commanded. Although his family status may have obligated him to accept these positions temporarily, Palliser’s real passion in life was travelling in search of adventure and big game. He was to find both in the western United States and would afterwards write a lively book about it entitled *Solitary rambles and adventures of a hunter in the prairies* (a later edition was called *The Solitary Hunter; or Sporting Adventures in the Prairies*). Although he would hunt a variety of game such as grizzlies, deer, elk, and antelope, it was the noble buffalo that caught his imagination.

After refueling with coal in Halifax, the *Cambria* arrived in Boston where Palliser set out to visit New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. From Cumberland, Maryland he made a rough trip by stagecoach to Wheeling, West Virginia, and then down the Ohio and up Mississippi to St. Louis. He then traveled to New Orleans by steamboat. From there he headed back up the Mississippi and Arkansas Rivers to do some hunting. After a brief visit to Louisville, Kentucky, Palliser made his way to St. Louis and then finally to Independence, Missouri, from where his western adventure would finally start.

“Every year, at the beginning of September,” Palliser later recalled in his book about Independence, “the American Fur Company sends off an expedition to the different trading posts on the banks of the Missouri and Yellow Stone Rivers. This caravan is composed of the traders, workmen, artificers, and hunters of the company, who go up to their forts or trading posts....”² In May each year a steamboat, Palliser added, set out from St. Louis up the Missouri to carry up trade goods as far as Fort Union. Downriver it brought back furs and buffalo robes.

At Independence, Missouri, Palliser headed over to the farm of James Kipp, a key American Fur Company man. For the last 20 years, according to Palliser, Kipp had made the

1,500 mile ride to the mouth of the Yellowstone every autumn and returned the following summer by barge or mackinaw boat. Kipp agreed to take Palliser along on this year’s journey and even helped the Irishman obtain three horses for the journey to Fort Union.

On September 2, the party of 17 or 18 men, which besides Palliser and Kipp, included a Scotsman in charge of Fort Alexander along the Yellowstone, and the rest of the men being French Creoles or French Canadians, rode out from Independence. Things were a little rocky at the start as Palliser wrote: “We had a grand confusion at starting – kicking horses, obstinate mules, packs sliding off, & c., with the usual amount of oaths and maledictions; but things fell into working order after a while, and we continued our course without much further disturbance.”³

Upon reaching Council Bluffs they tarried there a day re-supplying themselves with coffee, beans, sugar, salt pork, and biscuits as they did not expect to reach good hunting country for some time. They were right as they soon found the Indian had recently “scoured the country” of heavier game. Palliser did manage to shoot some ducks, much to the astonishment of the French hunters who could not “shoot on the wing.” Palliser tried to show them how, but found they could not shoot quick enough.⁴

The night before the party reached Fort Vermillion, they were all alarmed at seeing “a lurid glare of red light” to the windward of them. It was a prairie fire. Not wasting any time they started a back fire being careful to extinguish it when they figured enough food for the approaching prairie had been burned off. As it turned out the prairie fire did not come within a few miles of them, but according to Palliser it “was a splendid and terrible sight!”⁵

The next day they rode into the American Fur Company post of Fort Vermillion, surrounded by an Indian camp of



Closing with a straggler by James Henry Ware
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Buffalo hunting in the summer – Library and Archives Canada

about 600 Sioux. While at the post, Palliser, Kipp, and Murray were invited by a Sioux chief for a dog feast, which the Irish adventurer found “not bad,” but was rather disturbed by the boiled dog’s skull grinning at them from “a conspicuous place.” During the meal the chief told of capturing a woman who they planned to put to death. The three men managed to convince the chief to sell her to them and they set her free that night.⁶

Two days later Palliser, Kipp, and the rest of the party joined the Sioux as they rode out for their fall buffalo hunt. The Sioux had requested they join them for a couple of days as they did not want them riding ahead and frightening the game. The second day of their journey with the Sioux, Palliser headed out on foot to hunt ducks with his smoothbore double-barrelled gun.

He had walked about a quarter of a mile when he heard the report of a gun and a bullet whiz by his ear. Quickly turning around, Palliser spotted an Indian lowering his gun to reload. Palliser quickly reached the Indian before he could finish reloading and pointed his double-barrelled gun at the native’s head. Palliser then clicked both hammers back. Before anything fatal happened an old Indian intervened and explained through sign that the Indian had given Palliser a warning shot wanting him to stay back in camp. Palliser had not heard the previous order that the white men were not to get ahead of the Indian hunters.

To Palliser and the rest of the party’s relief, the Indians turned in a southerly direction, while the Irishman and the others continued on toward Fort Pierre which they reached a couple of days later. They stayed there for two days to refresh themselves and their worn out horses. On October 5 or 6 they rode out again headed for Fort Union.

Although passing through buffalo country, as yet Palliser had spotted only a few old bulls. He would see a lot more, but not before they reached Fort Union on October 27. Fort Union was the key American Fur Company’s post and supply depot on the Upper Missouri River, located near the mouth of the Yellowstone River.

After resting for a day or two, Palliser joined the fort’s hunter in quest of the abundant buffalo nearby. Each man “rode a hack, leading a hunter (or runner).” They soon found the buffalo. They dismounted from their “hacks” and tightened up the girths on their fleet buffalo horses and mounted up. They were soon galloping after the buffalo herd which was thundering away in a whirl of dust. The two men overtook the herd and began shooting and loading. Palliser failed on his first shot to bring down a buffalo, but managed to drop a fine four year old bull on his second try.

In his book, Palliser goes into some detail of hunting buffalo from horseback. The advice is interesting, although probably not safe to try today:

“The first object in approaching a herd of buffalo should be, to get near as possible before charging them; then, rush in with your horse at full speed, single out one animal, and detach him from the herd, which you will soon do, and after a turn or two be able to get a broadside shot, when you should endeavour to strike him behind the fore-shoulder. While reloading, slacken your horse’s speed to a hand gallop. The general method of loading is to empty the charge from the horn slung round your neck into the palm of your hand, whence you can more easily pour it down the barrel; you then take a bullet wet out of your mouth, and throw it down upon the powder; by which means you avoid the necessity of using the ramrod, a most inconvenient process when riding fast on horseback. I found it from experience better to dispense with both powder-horn, ramrod, and copper caps altogether, and use a light self-priming flint gun, carrying the powder loose in the skirt pockets of my shooting-coat, and thereby having no further delay than to thrust my hand in for it and empty it down the barrel of my gun; accuracy in quantity at such close quarters was of small importance. Taking the bullet from the mouth is both the quickest and safest method of loading; quicker than fumbling for it in your pocket, and safer, because its being wet causes it to stick for a moment without rolling forward on depressing the muzzle to take aim; and my brother sportsmen are doubtless aware of the

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danger of leaving an empty space in the barrel between the powder and the ball. I would not, however, recommend any one to depend too much upon the detention of the wet bullet, but to fire immediately on lowering the muzzle. I ought here to mention, that in running buffalo, you never bring the gun to your shoulder in firing, but present it across the pommel of the saddle, calculating the angle with your eye and steadying yourself momentarily by standing in the stirrup as you take aim. This is difficult to do at first, and requires considerable practice....”⁷

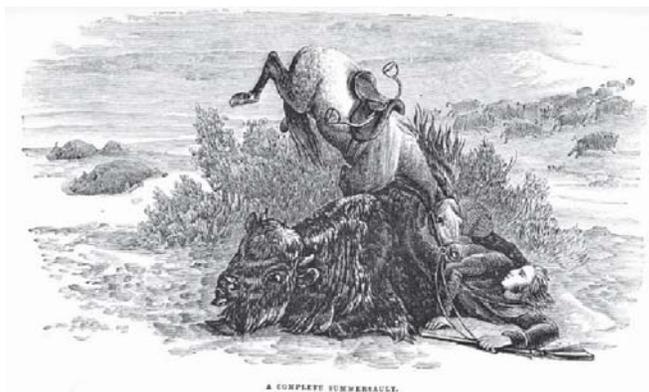
Palliser did a lot of hunting of both big and small game during the coming winter and not always for sport as illness plagued much of the fort’s employees. At one point during the winter the fort’s hunters were sick and Palliser hunted buffalo mostly to provide fresh meat for the post. Not all the buffalo hunting Palliser did was from horseback as he recalled:

“I started one day by myself after a large herd of buffalo, about three miles westward of the fort, adopting the novel expedient of carrying with me a white blanket in order to stalk them. I took such a course as not to give the herd my wind, and with the cover afforded by the timber on the point, succeeded in getting within a couple of hundred yards of them; I crept forward on my hands and knees, covered by the blanket, which prevented them from distinguishing me amidst the surrounding snow, and enabled me to approach until I came within shot. I continued creeping about and around them, singling out the best and fattest of the cows for upwards of an hour, and it was not until I had laid five of their numbers low that they smelt a rat, and bolt off unanimously tossing their shaggy heads and ploughing up snow.”⁸

Buffalo running could be dangerous as Palliser soon discovered one winter day. Riding one of Kipp’s favorite horses – “a very gallant little grey buffalo-runner,” Palliser took after a fine fat cow. The buffalo gave Palliser “an awful chase, turning and doubling incessantly,” playing out his grey horse in the snow.⁹ The Irishman had a hard time getting a broad shot at the cow, but finally he managed to shoot her, breaking her spine. The buffalo went down and the little grey Palliser was riding was unable to stop and rolled right over the downed cow making a complete somersault. Palliser was sent flying into a snow drift. He quickly came to his feet and ran and caught his horse which was uninjured as was he.

Palliser had another close call while helping a Sioux hunter stalk three buffalo bulls. They managed to kill one bull and then split up to get the remaining two. Palliser soon spotted his prey. After putting three bullets into him, Palliser was loading his fourth shot while watching the animal totter. When it didn’t fall Palliser walked to within 30 paces of it and fired “directly at the region of the heart,” but to the Irishman’s “utter amazement” the bull charged him. Palliser ran hard for his life, with the bull quickly gaining on him. He tried to dodge the bull by swerving to one side, but as Palliser recalled, “he bolted round quicker than I did, and affording my barely time to protect my stomach with the stock of my rifle, and to turn myself sideways as I sustained the charge, in the hopes getting between his horns, he came plump upon me with a shock like an earthquake.”¹⁰

Palliser rifle stock was shattered by the bull’s horn and he was tossed in the air landing in the snow. Fortunately he was unhurt and the bull didn’t bother him again. Certainly Palliser



A COMPLETE SOMERSAULT.

The grey horse somersaulted over the buffalo; from Palliser’s The Solitary Hunter.

was not the only hunter to discover that buffalo can be hard to kill. Western mountaineer Osborne Russell in his first buffalo hunt put 25 bullets into a bull with his “elegant rifle” and didn’t kill it.¹¹ Palliser returned the following day to where he had the run in with the buffalo and found a wolf was tearing away at the bull’s remains. He shot the wolf.

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MY LAST BUFFALO HUNT.

Palliser's last buffalo hunt; from Palliser's *The Solitary Hunter*

Palliser would shortly afterwards leave Fort Union where he would find more adventure as his journey would take him to a couple of fur trading posts and, finally, a hunting and trapping expedition with another hunter and two camp tenders along the Yellowstone River.

Upon his return to Fort Union, Palliser did not linger long there, but headed on down the Missouri River to Fort Berthold. As June rolled around, Palliser knew a steamboat would be soon arriving and his western hunting adventure would soon be ending. He decided on one last buffalo hunt.

Saddling up a borrowed horse, Palliser rode out one morning and quickly came upon buffalo. "I chose a band of cows, most of whom had calved, and whose little ones scampered at their heels: passing these easily, I detected one or two fat barren ones in the van and gave chase. Some bulls caught sight of the running cows and began to run as well. The bulls and cows intermingled and were soon pelting along in a confused mass. I did not care to fire at the former, and was pressing on after a fat cow I had selected, when one of the bulls, a little blown by the race, stood for a moment, and as I doubled across him after my cow, made a headlong rush at me; I could not pull in, and to turn was destruction; I had nothing for it but to lift my horse, and giving him a tremendous cut with the whip, he sprang into the air, and just cleared the bull when in the act of charging. I felt my horse's hind-legs carried aside as they caught the brute's shoulder, or head, or neck, I can't say which; but we dashed on happily unhurt, and the next instant I was passing the cow, when, standing up in the stirrups, I gave her a shot that brought her rolling on the plain."¹²

After examining the borrowed horse he was relieved to see it was okay. Palliser was determined never to borrow a

friend's horse to run buffalo again. The following day Palliser had another close call, but this time it was with a grizzly. He only wounded the bear on his first shot which at first caused her to snap at her wound. This gave Palliser time to reload a second shot. He just placed the percussion cap on the nipple when the bear reared up allowing Palliser to quickly put a bullet in the bear's heart.

Shortly after this Palliser hunting adventure was over. Boarding a steamboat to head down the Missouri, he began his long journey home after visiting New Orleans and Panama. The book the Irish adventurer wrote about his western adventure was a big hit going through a number of editions. Palliser would return to the west, only this time further north where he led an exploring expedition in 1850s into the Canadian west.

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Endnotes

¹John Palliser, *The Solitary Hunter; or Sporting Adventures in the Prairies* (London: Routledge, 1857) p. 1.

²*Ibid.*, p. 57.

³*Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 70. According to Palliser she made it safely home.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 80-81.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 84-85.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 86.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 101-102.

¹¹Osborne Russell, *Journal of a Trapper* (Boise, ID: Syms-York, 1921) p. 12.

¹²Palliser, *Solitary Hunter*, p. 192.

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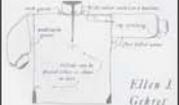
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