

THE RIGHT REVEREND WILLIAM FRASER
SECOND VICAR APOSTOLIC OF NOVA SCOTIA
FIRST BISHOP OF HALIFAX
AND FIRST BISHOP OF ARICHAT.

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William Fraser, the subject of this paper, was born in the vale of Strathglass, Scotland, in the year 1779. He was one of a family of ten children — nine boys and one girl. His father, John Fraser, was descended from famous Highland chiefs — Chisholm and Cameron — and a kinsman of Lord Lovat, whose son, Simon Fraser, raised a Highland regiment and commanded it at the battle of the Plains of Abraham. His mother, Jane Chisholm, had been a Presbyterian, but became a Catholic before her marriage.

Young William Fraser inherited to a marked degree some of the finer traits of his high ancestry, and was consequently the favourite of the family. After having attended the elementary school of his native district, he entered the Seminary of Samalaman, in Moidart, the small institution which was later transferred to Lismore. At the age of fifteen, he was sent to the Scots' College at Valladolid, Spain. The following record is taken from the archives of that college. — “The Reverend William Fraser arrived in January 1794, went through the usual course of studies, was ordained priest and on the 2nd of September 1804, set out for the missions.” During his ten years at Valladolid he was noted for his deep piety, his thorough knowledge of theology and of the classics, and his more than ordinary physical strength — about which characteristics of his a tradition still remains at Valladolid.¹

A story is popular in the Highlands about Father Fraser's visit without notice to his native Strathglass when he returned from Spain. The annual athletic games were in progress when a stranger appeared on the scene. This stranger could throw the stone and the hammer far beyond the best competitor. His prowess did not please old John Fraser, and the latter was heard to grumble, “If Williammy son were here, the stranger would not have his way.” Father William overheard the remark, quietly approached the old man and made himself known. “God bless you, young hero,” said the father, “I did not recognize a bit of you.” Another Highland tradition assures us that “Mr. Friseal,” as he was known in Gaelic, was very strong and that he could straighten out a horseshoe.²

Bishop John Chisholm gave Father Fraser charge of all the missions of Lochaber, with headquarters at Fort William, which was centrally located, and where a small church had been built in 1794. The Catholics were few in number and the missions were scattered. Amid great difficulties Father Fraser laboured here for ten years with the greatest prudence and zeal. Lord Strathcona, High Commissioner for Canada, stated that Father Fraser, a kinsman of his, was well loved in Scotland. He is authority for the statement that Father Fraser was the first priest to be allowed to put a bell in a Catholic church in Scotland after the Reformation. Not even the most bigoted would denounce him to the officers of the law.

¹ Article by Dr. D. C. Gillis in *The Casket*, Antigonish, December 20, 1923.

² Letter of D. C. MacPherson, Librarian of the Advocates' library, Edinburgh, May 19, 1880.

Father Fraser was next placed in charge of the College of Killichiarain, at Lismore, where he remained for eight years.³ Tradition tells us that he and his brethren were much respected by all the people, and that Father Fraser was a great favourite with D. MacNichol, the minister. He always called in passing, and, when late, would dine with the worthy Johnsonian antagonist.⁴

The high standing of Father Fraser is attested by the fact that his name was one of those proposed as a successor to his kinsman, Bishop Aeneas Chisholm, who had died in 1818. Another priest was chosen for the honour, and Father Fraser was thus allowed to cherish a desire that had long possessed him, to join his countrymen who had emigrated to America.⁵ The great exodus from the Highlands had begun as far back as 1772, when the first body of Scottish Catholics came out to Prince Edward Island.⁶ Immigration to Nova Scotia began in 1785 and continued steadily for thirty years and longer.⁷

The early history of the Church in Nova Scotia is well known in its main lines. In the year 1817 the mainland of the Province was erected into a Vicariate Apostolic under the Right Reverend Edmund Burke, this being the first partition of the parent diocese of Quebec. The island of Cape Breton remained attached to the old diocese for twelve years - longer. Most of the Highlanders had settled in the eastern end of the vicariate and on the island of Cape Breton, but, at the death of Bishop Burke - in 1820 - there were only two priests who spoke their language - Father Colin Grant of Arisaig and Father Alexander MacDonell of Judique.⁸ There were, of course, other priests, from Ireland and Quebec, who cared for the Irish immigrants and the Acadians, but these priests were also few in number and their missions were far scattered. In 1818, Bishop Burke had sent to Tracadie the saintly Father Vincent de Paul, who, six years later, founded there the Trappist monastery of Petit Clairvaux.⁹ In 1819, Father Remi Gaulin succeeded Father Francois LeJantel at Arichat,¹⁰ and in the same year Father James Grant, a young Irish priest, took charge of Antigonish.¹¹ In October 1820, the Bras d'Or missions in Cape Breton received as their first resident missionary Father William Dollard,¹² who, later became first bishop of Saint John, N. B. Thus we see that only six priests were available to care for the wide territory of the present diocese of Antigonish, whose people must receive ministrations in four languages — Gaelic, French, English and Micmac. When Bishop Burke died — on November 29, 1820 — he left seven priests to care for the territory that is now the archdiocese of Halifax.¹³ One of these priests was his nephew, Father John Carroll, whom he had ordained in the spring of 1820. This young priest was appointed administrator of the vicariate, and was

³ Article by Dr. D. C. Gillis in *The Casket*, Antigonish, December 20, 1923

⁴ Letter of D. C. MacPherson, Librarian of the Advocates' library, Edinburgh, May 19, 1880.

⁵ Article by Dr. D. C. Gillis in *The Casket*, Antigonish, December 20, 1923.

⁶ MacMillan: *Catholic Church in Prince Edward Island*, Vol. I.

⁷ D. O. G. in Allison: *History of Nova Scotia*, Vol. II.

⁸ Article by Dr. D. C. Gillis in *The Casket*, Antigonish, December 20, 1923

⁹ O'Brien: *Memoirs of Bishop Burke*.

¹⁰ Parish records, Tracadie, N. S.

¹¹ O'Brien: *Memoirs of Bishop Burke*.

¹² MacKenzie: *Centenary of Bras d'Or Missions*.

¹³ O'Brien: *Memoirs of Bishop Burke*.

destined to act in that capacity for seven years.¹⁴

Bishop Burke, in communication with Father Fraser, had offered him his choice of missions among the Nova Scotia Highlanders, and he also promised the Highlanders of Antigonish that they might have him or any other Highland missionary, who would come out well recommended.¹⁵ In the summer of 1822, Father Fraser finally obtained the necessary *exeat* from his Scottish ordinary, Bishop Randal MacDonald, and came to Nova Scotia. On August 8th of that year he met Bishop MacEachern of Charlottetown at the Strait of Canso, and the latter gave him faculties for Cape Breton and also for the mainland, over which Bishop Burke had continued and extended Bishop MacEachern's jurisdiction.¹⁶ In the absence of the Antigonish missionary, Father Fraser attended to sick calls there and preached a number of times in Gaelic to all the Highlanders, including some Protestants.¹⁷ After the return of Father James Grant to Antigonish, Bishop MacEachern appointed Father Fraser to the Bras d'Or missions, which had been without a missionary since the departure of Father Dollard about a year before. Here he laboured for nearly a year, dividing his residence between Grand Narrows and East Bay.¹⁸ In a letter to Bishop Plessis written Sept 8, 1823, Bishop MacEachern says:

Mr. Fraser, who is strong and healthy, well used in his new country to mixed missions, much respected, preaches every day, and has made many conversions. He does not mind where he is employed, but will most effectually do his duty wherever he is. People in these places think nothing of any service without some homily on the gospels.¹⁹

Another phrase of the letter — “If Mr. Fraser will be left with us” — refers to the efforts made by the Antigonish Highlanders to have Father Fraser missioned among them. They knew little English, and their pastor, Father Grant, knew no Gaelic; so, in the autumn of 1823, Father Fraser went to Antigonish to assist Father Grant by hearing Gaelic confessions. The petitions of the people to the administrator in Halifax were successful, for, on December 31, 1823, Father John Carroll appointed Father Fraser to Antigonish and sent Father Grant to Guysborough.²⁰

Early in 1824, Father Fraser, then aged 45, moved to Antigonish and began his missionary labours in a country that had no roads, and that included the present parishes of Antigonish, Lochaber, Morriston, Heatherton, St. Andrew's and St. Joseph's. In his ministry he occasionally crossed through Brow's Mountain to Bailey's Brook. Tradition remembers his great kindness and a generosity, which often led him to give his last penny in order to help the needy. He never exacted his dues, and many a time he was known to hand back to the bride the fee he was offered at a marriage. His noble features, however, were marked

¹⁴ Article by Dr. D. C. Gillis in *The Casket*, Antigonish, December 20, 1923.

¹⁵ Committee of Quebec priests: *Memoirs sur Les missions de la Nouvelle-Ecosse*, etc.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ MacKenzie: *Centenary of Bras d'Or Missions*.

¹⁹ Episcopal archives of Quebec.

²⁰ Episcopal archives of Antigonish.

with an air of sternness, which made his personality impressive and masterful, and an old parishioner once called him the "First Field Marshal of Nova Scotia."²¹

Father Fraser's old friend and former ordinary in Scotland, Bishop Ranald MacDonald, writing to Rome on December 29, 1823, spoke of him as follows:

He is a man of notable piety and ability; moreover, work does not discourage him, for I have never known anyone of greater physical strength.²²

Bishop MacEachern, too, writing to the Propaganda on July 8th, 1824, says: "If no one has yet been nominated to the Vicariate of Nova Scotia, there is not among us one more worthy of being constituted Bishop of that Vicariate than William Fraser; for he is a learned priest and excellent preacher in English and Gaelic, sound in faith, and imbued with the virtues that adorn the clerical state."²³

Before the arrival of this letter, the Propaganda, on July 26th, 1824, nominated Father Dionysius Lyons, of the diocese of Cork, Ireland, to the Vicariate of Nova Scotia, chiefly because Bishop Burke had requested that he be made his coadjutor. Father Lyons without delay declined the honour, and the Sacred Congregation, on May 21st, 1825, sent to Father Fraser the necessary documents appointing him to the vicariate.²⁴ These papers were lost in transit, but, on October 7th, 1826, new copies of the Apostolic Bulls were sent to him, and these were received. By these Bulls Father Fraser became the second Vicar Apostolic of Nova Scotia and titular Bishop of Tanen.²⁵

Bishop Fraser was consecrated on the feast of St. John the Baptist, June 24th, 1827. The Halifax "Acadian Recorder" of July 7th, 1827, has an Antigonish news item dated June 27th:

On Saturday last this community had the peculiar gratification of witnessing the consecration of Rt. Rev. Bp. Fraser. The ceremony was performed by the Rev. Dr. M'Eachern, assisted by the Rev. Peres Vincent and Francis of Tracadie, and attended by the Rev. Colin Grant of Arisaig and the Rev. James Grant of Guysborough. The ceremony was solemn and imposing throughout: there were upwards of two thousand persons to witness it. Dr. Fraser is the first R. C. Bishop consecrated in this province.

On December 8th, 1827, Father John Carroll, the former administrator, retired from the vicariate,²⁶ and Bishop Fraser sent Father John Loughnan to Halifax in his stead to act as parish priest and vicar general. Meanwhile the Bishop felt it necessary to remain in Antigonish, where for many years he did the work of an active missionary, without assistance, in the Gaelic-speaking missions of the county. After Sept. 4th, 1829, his episcopal jurisdiction included the island of Cape Breton as well as the mainland of Nova Scotia. In 1827 he appointed Father

²¹ Article by Dr. D. C. Gillis in *The Casket*, Antigonish, December 20, 1923, and oral tradition from Bishop John Cameron.

²² Archives of the Propaganda.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Archives of the Propaganda.

²⁶ Wardens' Minutes, St. Mary's Cathedral, Halifax.

William B. MacLeod to the parish of St. Andrews, but the bishop himself had to care for that parish from 1830 to 1832 and from 1834 to 1837.²⁷ His most pressing problem was the need of priests. Through Father Angus MacDonald, Rector of the Scots' College, Rome, he petitioned the Holy See for the privilege of sending some students to the Urban College.²⁸ His petition was granted, for, in a letter written October 9th, 1828, Bishop Fraser says that he has been accorded the right of sending two students.²⁹ The two students whom he chose were Colin Francis MacKinnon (who later became his successor in the episcopate) and Neil MacLeod. Two other young men were sent to the Seminary of Quebec, and all four had received their elementary education in a school established at East Bay, Cape Breton, by Father William B. MacLeod in 1824.³⁰

While Bishop Fraser was busily engaged in the eastern end of the province as missionary, pastor and bishop, the affairs of Halifax were under the care of Father John Loughnan, the vicar general. Father Loughnan has been described as a zealous and active priest who practised what he preached.³¹ He was, however, somewhat eccentric,³² and it would seem that his lack of tact made him unable to foresee and prevent the disaffection of his parishioners which ultimately resulted in an unseemly quarrel. In July, 1838, Bishop Fraser visited Halifax and was there requested by the Catholics of the town, six thousand in number and all Irish or of Irish descent, to apply to Archbishop Murray of Dublin for two young clergymen, one to act as assistant to Father Loughnan, the other to take charge of a college that they desired to establish.³³ Bishop Fraser gave full approval to their plan, and, ten days later, July 20, 1838, wrote to Archbishop Murray and also forwarded money for the passage of the two priests.³⁴ On May 26th, 1839, Archbishop Murray wrote to Bishop Fraser to announce that two priests were preparing to sail for Halifax. The two priests were Father Richard B. O'Brien and a Franciscan named Father Lawrence J. Dease.³⁵

Father O'Brien was placed in charge of St. Mary's College,³⁶ and Father Dease became assistant to Father Loughnan at St. Mary's Church. The two Irish priests were very popular with the people, but they did not get on satisfactorily with the vicar general.³⁷ Finally, in 1841, Father Dease asked Bishop Fraser for his *exeat*. After giving Father Dease some time for consideration, the Bishop granted the *exeat*, but the priest's admirers called a meeting and, on November 18th, 1841, sent to the Bishop a petition with nearly a thousand names, asking for the restoration of Father Dease's faculties.³⁸ The Bishop's answer, dated November 20th, 1841, was a flat refusal, and it reminded the petitioners that "The *exeat* will

²⁷ Parish records, St. Ninian's Cathedral, Antigonish.

²⁸ Archives of the Propaganda.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ MacKenzie: *Centenary of Bras d'Or Missions*.

³¹ Father Loughnan's tombstone, North Sydney, N. S.

³² Parish records. Sacred Heart Parish, Sydney, N. S.

³³ Wardens' Minutes, St. Mary's Cathedral, Halifax.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ *The Catholic Diocesan Directory of Nova Scotia*, 1935, p. 17.

³⁷ Article by Dr. D. C. Gillis in *The Casket*, Antigonish, December 20, 1923

³⁸ Wardens' Minutes, St. Mary's Cathedral, Halifax.

show that his retirement from my jurisdiction was voluntary on his part, and by no means compulsory on mine. Any further application to me on the subject of the selection and appointment of clergymen to parochial duties, or ecclesiastical offices within the limits of my spiritual jurisdiction, will meet with the unqualified and well-merited contempt of your obedient servant, and sincere well-wisher, William Fraser.³⁹

The petitioners met again on Sunday, November 28th, 1841, read a highly complimentary address of farewell to Father Dease, and arranged with him that he should present to Archbishop Murray and to the Holy See a report on the state of the parish, which was to be drawn up by a committee of thirty.⁴⁰ Meanwhile the unfortunate quarrel was made the subject of public discussion, even in the press of Halifax⁴¹ and elsewhere in the province. Father Hugh O' Riely, the Irish pastor of the Catholic missions of Pictou County, stronghold of Scotch Presbyterianism, assembled the parishioners of his missions to pass resolutions in support of the bishop and his vicar general, and wrote in the *Pictou Observer* a series of letters in defense of the bishop, which he later re-published in a booklet entitled *Letters of Hibernicus*.⁴²

Meanwhile the Bishop of Quebec had submitted to the Propaganda a proposal whereby all British territory in America would be confederated into one ecclesiastical province with bishops suffragan to a metropolitan at Quebec. On June 19th, 1841, Bishop Fraser and Bishop Bernard Donald MacDonald of Charlottetown wrote a joint letter to the Cardinal Prefect of the Propaganda, expressing their dissent in no servile language, and stating that no sufficient reason occurred to them why so great and sudden an innovation in the administration of their ecclesiastical affairs should be essayed.⁴³

Father Dease left for Dublin and Rome, and in May, 1842, Bishop Fraser sent to Father Loughnan a new assistant in the person of Father John Quinan,⁴⁴ who for six years had been pastor of Tracadie. The bishop's opponents thought that their petition had brought them complete victory, for, on February 15th, 1842, the vicariate became a diocese. Halifax was declared the place of residence, Bishop Fraser was appointed first bishop of the new diocese, and the Reverend William Walsh was nominated coadjutor with the right of succession.⁴⁵

Bishop Fraser derived no satisfaction from his promotion, for the reason that he had not been consulted in the appointment of his coadjutor. He wrote a strong letter to Cardinal Acton, and in addition his clergy sent to the Cardinal prefect of the Propaganda a protest signed by twenty-one priests — ten Irishmen, six Frenchmen and five Scotsmen — who comprised nearly all the priests missioned on the mainland and in Cape Breton. In reply, Cardinal Frasoni assured Bishop Fraser that the new arrangement was not due to the appeal of Halifax Catholics but to information received from Doctor C. F. MacKinnon, pastor of St. Andrew's, who

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Letters of Rev. John Quinan to Propaganda: copies in library of St. Francis Xavier College, Antigonish.

⁴² Episcopal Archives of Antigonish.

⁴³ Archives of the Propaganda.

⁴⁴ Parish Records, Tracadie, N. S., and Parish Records, St. Mary's Cathedral, Halifax.

⁴⁵ Archives of the Propaganda.

had always been a warm friend and supporter of his bishop.⁴⁶

The cardinal's explanation failed to satisfy the bishop's clergy. Bishop Walsh, "in obedience to the commands of the Holy See, and after having made repeated attempts to decline the formidable burden,⁴⁷ was consecrated in Ireland on May 1, 1842,⁴⁸ and arrived in Halifax on October 16th⁴⁹ of that year. Ten days later he visited Bishop Fraser in Antigonish, and in his diary he wrote that "he was most kindly received by the worthy Doctor Fraser.⁵⁰ For his part, Bishop Fraser in his later years assured his close friends that he and Bishop Walsh were always on the best of terms.⁵¹ Far less happy, however, were the relations between Bishop Walsh and the vicar general, Father Loughnan. The latter was stoutly supported by his assistant, Father John Quinan, who has left us copies of the letters which he wrote to Rome.⁵² The wardens of Halifax gave Bishop Walsh charge of the temporalities of the parish, and, on November 8th, 1842, Bishop Fraser appointed him president of St. Mary's College,⁵³ which institution had been incorporated by the provincial House of Assembly on March 29th, 1841.⁵⁴

The situation finally became insupportable to Dr. Walsh, and, in the spring of 1844,⁵⁵ he went to Rome to explain matters to the Sacred Congregation. On July 15th, 1844, the Propaganda decided that the diocese be divided so that one part should include the Irish and the other part the Scots. It also decreed that a neighboring bishop should establish the new boundaries, and should give a secret opinion as to whether it would be prudent to appoint Bishop Walsh to Halifax.⁵⁶ When Dr. Walsh heard of this arrangement, he appealed to Gregory XIV, partly on the ground that his cause and his reputation would suffer if he were retained in Europe. As a result of this appeal, the Pope intervened to hasten the proceedings, and, on September 2, 1844, the Propaganda decreed that Nova Scotia be divided into two dioceses "according to the limits proposed by Monsignor Fraser."⁵⁷ The latter chose to retain the island of Cape Breton and the three eastern counties of the mainland.

On the recommendation of the Pope, the Congregation appointed Bishop Walsh administrator of the diocese of Halifax *ad beneplacitum Sanctæ Sedis*, and on December 14th, 1844,⁵⁸ informed him of his appointment and asked him to resign his coadjutorship. On the same date, Bishop Fraser was asked to choose his title. He chose the title "Bishop of Arichat," but two years elapsed before it was confirmed at Rome. (In 1886 Bishop Cameron had the title changed to "Diocese

⁴⁶ Article by Dr. D. C. Gillis in *The Casket*, Antigonish, December 20, 1923

⁴⁷ Bishop Walsh's Diary, in Halifax episcopal archives.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Oral tradition from Bishop John Cameron.

⁵² Episcopal archives of Antigonish.

⁵³ Bishop Walsh's Diary, in Halifax episcopal archives.

⁵⁴ *The Catholic Diocesan Directory of Nova Scotia*, 1935, p. 17.

⁵⁵ Parish Records, St. Mary's Cathedral, Halifax.

⁵⁶ Archives of the Propaganda.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

of Antigonish.”)

Finally, on September 2, 1844, aforesaid, the Congregation ordered that priests likely to be troublesome in Halifax must be transferred elsewhere. Accordingly Father John Loughnan and Father John Quinan attached themselves to the new diocese of Arichat, and Father Richard B. O’Brien returned to his native Ireland.

Although Bishop Fraser chose Arichat as his new see, he still found it necessary to remain in Antigonish. He died there on October 4th, 1851.⁵⁹ He was buried in the old cemetery at Antigonish, but, on October 29, 1879⁶⁰ his remains were transferred to the vault under the high altar of St. Ninian’s Cathedral.

Bishop Fraser was not eminently successful as an administrator, but this was due to the fact that he had to give so much of his attention to the active work of the missionary. He was a great missionary, and he keenly felt, much more than did his critics, the great need of priests and of educational facilities. The Old Country needed her own priests, and if some of the priests who came out were not entirely satisfactory, it is not clear that the situation would have been helped by a more severe line of action on the part of Bishop Fraser. Due to the poverty of the people, the bishop felt in the early years that the time was not yet ripe for the establishment of a college.⁶¹ However, we have already seen that, in 1838, under his inspiration, the foundations were laid for the establishment of St. Mary’s College in Halifax. In the same year, Father C. F. MacKinnon (who was destined to succeed him as Bishop of Arichat) established the St. Andrew’s Grammar School,⁶² which was the precursor of St. Francis Xavier College, established at Arichat in 1853, and, two years later, transferred to Antigonish. Bishop Fraser was always zealous in the cause of temperance, and ordered the establishment of Total Abstinence Societies at the time of the Father Matthew movement of 1838. Tradition tells us that few Catholics ever broke the pledge given them by their bishop.⁶³

The story of the lamentable discord of a century ago is now of interest only to the historian. That it is long forgotten and is now unknown to the people, is proven by the splendid spirit of goodwill and mutual understanding that exists between the Archdiocese of Halifax and the Diocese of Antigonish, and between the different racial elements — Scottish, Irish and Acadian — that people Nova Scotia today.

⁵⁹ Monument in St. Ninian’s cemetery, Antigonish.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Article by Dr. D. C. Gillis in *The Casket*, Antigonish, December 20, 1923

⁶² Letter of Bishop MacKinnon to Propaganda, July 29, 1839: copy in library of St. Francis Xavier College, Antigonish

⁶³ Oral tradition from Bishop John Cameron.