

**The Honourable and Right  
Reverend Alexander Macdonell, D.D.**

First Bishop of Upper Canada

BY

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It is eminently fitting that a meeting of our Historical Society in this city should renew the memory of the first Bishop of Upper Canada, – now the Province of Ontario, – the first occupant of the Episcopal See of Kingston, the Honourable and Right Reverend Alexander Macdonell.

He was born at Inichlaggan, Glengarry, Scotland, on July 17, 1762. His early education was obtained at Strathglass. He attended the little Seminary at Sealan, hidden away in the Highland vale of Glenlivet. After Culloden it was destroyed. It was rebuilt. As the young student seemed destined for the priesthood, braving the severe penalties for sending a son to be educated on the Continent, his parents sent him to the Scots' College in Paris. Because of the rising political and social turmoil, he entered the Scots' College at Valladolid, Spain, where he was ordained priest on February 16, 1787.

He began immediately a missionary career on the west coast of the Scottish Highlands. He came into action at the time the cruel persecution of Catholics and destruction of things Catholic were in the ebb, though the penal laws were still on the Statute Books.

These laws provided severe penalties for the performance of nearly every Catholic duty, private and public; such as heavy fines, confiscation of property, and even exile. It was punishable for Catholic parents to teach religion to children, to possess any Catholic book or tract, to refuse attendance at Protestant services. It was sought even to establish in every Catholic home a Protestant to teach the new doctrines to the children. No Catholic college or seminary could be maintained, and confiscation of property was decreed against parents who sent sons abroad to be educated.

A Catholic could not sell or by will dispose of his property. The law ordered that property could not pass by will to a Catholic child but should be given instead to a Protestant relative. It was death for a priest to be taken, and complete confiscation of property for harbouring a priest. Yet there were among the people active priests in various disguises. Mass was attended by the people and the Sacraments were received, in barns, in caves, and in forest places. Such was the

picture which formed the background of the new Missionary's career.

Upon persecution soon followed the abolition of the feudal system of clanship and the conversion of mountain-side and glen into sheep walks, ending in the eviction of farmers from their homes. The Missionary records that he saw two hundred such families at a time on the road-side. As a relief measure he conceived the idea of getting employment for his people in the great factories of Glasgow. Hither he repaired and interviewed the manufacturers. They were sympathetic and willing to give the desired employment. They pointed out, however, that the men were Catholics, that the penal laws against laymen and priests still remained in full force, and that they knew not the English language. The Missionary replied that he would come with them as priest and interpreter. It was pointed out, that as a priest, he would be in danger of legal prosecution and certain banishment. He replied that for himself he would take his chances. And so they came, eight hundred strong, under his guidance, in June, 1792. The Missionary feared not the anti-Catholic rabble nor the Courts. He opened a chapel to the street, and there regularly celebrated Mass and preached in Gaelic and in English, soon convincing the manufacturers that Catholics, following the dictates of their religion and restrained by its morality, made faithful and industrious servants.

The declaration of war between Britain and France caused the closing of the mills. The Highlanders were again out of employment, and again Father Macdonell came to their relief. He conceived the bold idea of organizing his Highlanders into a Catholic corps in his country's service, under the command of their young Chief, Glengarry. The army alone offered employment, but at this time a Catholic could be enlisted in the British army only by swearing himself to be a Protestant. Father Macdonell organized a meeting of leading men at Fort Augustus. With a deputation from this meeting he proceeded to London where he was graciously received by King George III. He outlined his plan. His offer was accepted. The First Glengarry Fencible Regiment accordingly was authorized and raised in 1794. For the first time since the Reformation there was in the British army a completely Catholic corps, with a Catholic chaplain – the Reverend Alexander Macdonell.

After service in the Channel Islands, they were sent to Ireland where the rebellion of 1798 had broken out. The newly arrived troops, "the Glengarries," were ordered by the General in command to protect the lives and property of the inhabitants from pillage and plunder which they had suffered under the Orange Yeomanry. The Chaplain extended his labours of mercy to the people, whom he invited to attend their chapels where he celebrated Mass for them and his regiment.

The Reverend Bernard Kelly, Liverpool, England, in his "Fate of Glengarry" says of the Fencibles in Ireland: "They everywhere won golden opinions by their humane behaviour to the vanquished, which was in striking contrast with the floggings, burnings, and hangings which formed the daily occupation of the rest of the military. Father Macdonell, who accompanied the

regiment in all their enterprises, was instrumental in fostering this spirit of conciliation, and his efforts contributed not a little to the extinction of the Rebellion. The Catholic chapels in many places had been turned into stables by the yeomanry, and these he caused to be restored to their former use. He often said Mass himself in these humble places of devotion, and invited the inhabitants to resume their wonted occupations, assuring them of the King's protection. Such timely exhortations had almost magical effect, though the terror-stricken population could scarcely believe their eyes when they beheld a regiment of Roman Catholics, speaking their language, and among them a soldier, a priest, assuring them of immunity from a government immemorably associated with every species of wrong and oppression."

At the peace of 1802, the "Glengarrys" were disbanded. They had rendered service to the Crown, and the Chaplain was determined that they should receive compensation. The demand he made was that they should be allotted lands in Canada where many of their own people were already settled. Then began negotiations with the British Government which were to be of inestimable value to the people of Upper Canada and to the Catholic Church in all this land. Obstacles were thrown in his way. Government officials and members of the Ministry had not yet learned that they were dealing with a man equal in statesmanship to any of them, and superior to some. Inviting offers were made to him to establish his people on the Island of Trinidad, then recently ceded to Britain by Spain. No, it would be Glengarry in Canada. Then was made the offer of territory on the north shore of Lake Superior. Also an offer was made to Father Macdonell that would ensure to him a comfortable living for all his days. In addition, there was offered the sum of two thousand pounds to meet certain expenses which he had incurred. This too was spurned. For him this was the thirty pieces of silver. He would not be so recreant to duty and so disloyal to his people who had reposed their confidence in him, as to accept. He finally convinced the Colonial Office that the surest way to maintain Upper Canada within the Empire was to settle Scots Highland Catholics in the country, as later he urged the same on behalf of Irish Catholics. The Missionary wisely decided that Upper Canada was the place to which his disbanded Highlanders would come and no other.

Prior to 1784, Upper Canada, now Ontario, was almost an unbroken forest and wilderness. French explorers and fur-buyers had passed up the Ottawa River, over Lake Nipissing and Georgian Bay to Lake Superior and beyond. They had travelled the St. Lawrence and the Great Lakes. They had established military and trading posts at Frontenac (now Kingston), on the Niagara River, and at Detroit. The French names given, and yet borne, by headlands, islands, rivers and rapids attest the nationality of the explorers; the place names of saints, their Catholic religion. The Name and Cross of God's church are plentifully impressed on our beautiful land. Indians alone roamed the forests and rivers; white men were few –

a regiment of French soldiers in barracks at Fort Frontenac, and a settlement of French families with their priest at Sandwich.

In 1784 the first permanent settlement of Upper Canada was begun, by the arrival on the shores of the St. Lawrence, of Lake Ontario, and Lake Erie of ten thousand people from the state of New York. This group with others who streamed into Quebec and the Maritime Provinces became known as United Empire Loyalists. These men had refused to join the American revolutionaries, preferring adherence to the British Crown. They had been organized into two regiments, the King's Royal Regiment of New York and the Royal Highland Emigrants. Finding a way, in danger and in great privation and suffering, to Canada, they fought through the American War. They were disbanded in 1784 and allotted lands on the St. Lawrence and lake fronts. To the western part of Glengarry and about St. Andrew's in Stormont County there came the Catholics from the Mohawk River in the State of New York.

An officer in the British army, William Johnson, had distinguished himself in the war between England and France, ending in the cession of Canada. For his services he was rewarded with a baronetcy and the grant of a large tract of land in New York on the Mohawk and Schoharie Rivers. He invited and obtained the migration of several hundred Catholic Highlanders to his estate in 1773. Sir William died a few months before the outbreak of the Revolutionary War. A son, Sir John Johnson, fought through the war with the British. The village of Williamstown in Glengarry he had so called in memory of his father.

The Catholic Scots Highlanders of the Mohawk Valley declined the entreaties and resisted with energy the attacks made upon them by the revolutionaries. They had two reasons for their stand. The first was that they were Catholic and resented the abuse and atrocious falsehoods that the agitators poured upon the Church and their faith. The British guarantees of liberty to Catholics in Canada, in the practice of their religion, embodied in the Quebec Act of 1774, were readily seized upon by promoters of the revolution as evidence of Britain's intention to subject the colonies to the tyranny of the Catholic Church, "which," they said, "had drenched every state in Europe with blood." The other reason was that they were almost all of them Jacobites or descendants of Jacobites. In fighting for the Stuarts they had lost everything but honour. They transferred their allegiance to another king, the lawful ruler by the fortunes of war. Their allegiance could not be shaken. The men capable of bearing arms made their way to Canada and enlisted under the British standard. Their families came to Canada in several parties in the years 1780 to 1784.

The Catholic United Empire Loyalists were thus established in Glengarry and Stormont counties. To the former county in 1786 came a body of Highlanders with their priest, the Reverend Alexander Macdonell of the House of Scots. On the day of sailing, June 29th, Mass was celebrated and the voyage placed under the

patronage of the Archangel Raphael, patron of wayfarers.

They were the original settlers in the Parish of St. Raphael's, in the county of Glengarry, truly the cradle of Catholicity in Ontario. To join these, their fellow Highlanders, in the Canadian Glengarry, the Missionary sent out his people, some in 1803 and others in 1804. With the group of 1804 the Chaplain himself came to Canada. He presented himself to Bishop Denaut of Quebec and received the necessary jurisdiction. On November 1st, 1804, at York, he presented his credentials to Governor Hunter, to whom he had been well known in Ireland. His first care was to obtain the land stipulated for his friends according to the Order of the Sign Manual. He discovered that few of the earlier settlers had legal tenures of their properties. He gave months of labour in the Government offices and secured for the inhabitants of Glengarry and Stormont patent deeds for one hundred and sixty thousand acres of land. The Catholics of Stormont County were attended by the Reverend Roderick Macdonell, resident at St. Regis on the South bank of the St. Lawrence River. At his death there arrived a body of his people from St. Andrew's to convey the priest's remains to St. Andrew's for burial. The Indians refused consent. They secretly and in a place known to themselves alone buried his remains. The Pastor at St. Regis narrated this incident to the writer, and said that the burial place had never been revealed. It was thought to be in the foundation of their parish church.

The Chaplain then repaired to St. Raphael's in Glengarry where he made his home for the next twenty-five years. His parish was the whole of Upper Canada from the Ottawa River to Sandwich and north to Sault Ste. Marie. The first pastor at St. Raphael's, the Reverend Alexander Macdonell, had died in 1803 and was succeeded by Reverend Father Fitzsimmons, previously associated with Lord Selkirk's settlement on the Red River, Manitoba. He left the country within a year after the Chaplain's arrival. The only other priest in the province was the Reverend Father Marchand at Sandwich, whose lack of English limited his services to his own flock.

And now we are to know the Reverend Alexander Macdonell as a Canadian by adoption. Sir John A. Macdonald, who had a keen perception of men's worth, declared that Britain gave no more useful man to Canada than this Reverend Missionary. Of his advent to this country, the late Reverend Doctor O'Gorman of Ottawa observes in his "Canada's Greatest Chaplain": "it is no exaggeration to say that he enters on the stage of the world's history. His zealous and far-seeing patriotism was henceforth one of the forces which were to build up the British Empire."

Upper Canada afforded the new pastor of St. Raphael's a theatre for his activities commensurate with his great ability, strength of body and mind, and indomitable will. He was a universal genius. He had been in Scotland, a pastor of souls and a military organizer and chaplain, courageous with the courage of the

giant that he was. He stood six feet four inches in height, built in proportion, with a handsome, kindly Highland face and a genial smile that placed his visitors at once at their ease, and with delightful manners and sparkling wit. He gained readily and maintained in a remarkable manner the respect, admiration, and love of those with whom he came into contact, whether high or low, rich or poor.

He is known in our history as zealous pastor and missionary, as colonizer, patriot and Bishop. As missionary he travelled through the whole province, to places on the lake fronts and in the interior. The principal settlement was in Glengarry. Others there were at Kingston, York, Newark and Sandwich as well as at Detroit, still in the diocese of Quebec. The back townships were at this date, 1805, rapidly filling up with arrivals from Great Britain and Ireland. Father Macdonell was appointed Vicar General by the Bishop of Quebec in 1807, and Assistant Bishop in 1819. His consecration took place at Quebec on December 31st, 1820. During the first twelve years of his residence in Upper Canada he travelled the whole of his extensive territory, visiting the towns springing up on the shores of the St. Lawrence and the Great Lakes, and penetrated the forests to all the inland settlements. Wherever Catholics dwelt he went, offering for them the Holy Sacrifice, administering the Sacraments, instructing the old and the young, consoling the sick and preparing the dying for death. The difficulties encountered were almost insuperable. Roads there were none. He traveled the forest trails, sometimes on foot, sometimes on horseback, and the rivers and lakes in the Indian bark canoes, carrying his vestments and other things necessary for the missionary work. Like the great Saint Paul he was often in perils, – perils of waters, perils of disease, perils – of savages, and perils of false friends, though happily the latter were not of his own kin or people, but they were of the household of the Faith. Their attacks he met openly and squarely and he had the satisfaction of public and complete vindication. Of necessity he lived as did the people with whom he spent weeks and months, with civilized or savage, sharing their meagre fare and crude habitations. His labours were almost incredible: none too great to be undertaken, no sacrifice too painful to be endured. He knew in advance of his coming the life that lay before him. He embraced it willingly and lovingly for Christ, his Master. Even when assistance came and he was elevated to the purple, he continued for years the same strenuous labours as in the days of his simple priesthood.

When the War of 1812 broke out the martial spirit within the Vicar General surged up again and the Highlanders' Fiery Cross was aflame throughout the Eastern District. He quickly re-organized the Fencibles. In a month they were 800 strong and ready for action. The Reverend Dr. O'Gorman observes that: "The men of Glengarry were nearly all soldiers or sons of soldiers... No better recruiting ground than the County of Glengarry could then be found in the Empire." The Vicar-General, Chaplain again, was with his men in the field in several of the twenty engagements in which they fought between Ogdensburg and Detroit. By

his addresses and letters he inspired not only the Fencibles but also other regiments with his own high courage and determination to such an extent that a high official asserted that to the Vicar-General more than to any other man was due the saving of Upper Canada, and with it, all Canada to the British Empire in the War of 1812-1814. The beautiful sward in front of the St. Raphael's Church, his own, is pointed out as the parade ground where the Vicar-General himself drilled the Regiment, – his own parishioners. On this site the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, dedicated a handsome granite monument to his memory on June 15, 1930. It carries the following inscription:

Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada.

BISHOP MACDONELL

In grateful remembrance of the eminent public services of the Honourable and Right Reverend Alexander Macdonell, 1760 1840, as Patriot, Military Chaplain, Educator and Legislator. Here he lived and laboured with success for many years.

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As priest and Bishop he gave unremitting care to the establishment of parishes and schools. As in the early Christian days, wherever there was a church, there was also a school. Prior to the establishment of a single school by the Legislature, the Vicar-General, on a visit to England in 1816, obtained from the Government an engagement that three hundred pounds would be paid to three schoolmasters whom he brought from Scotland. The Government of Upper Canada refused to pay the salaries because of opposition within the Executive Council, the while endeavours were made repeatedly to place the whole education under Anglican, that was Protestant, teachers with books of a Protestant character. The first schools established by law in Upper Canada were District Schools for the education of the sons of gentlemen. They were called Grammar Schools, of which there were eight in the Province. The opposition to the promised payment to Father Macdonell's Catholic teachers was strong enough to prevent the payment for seven years. One payment only was made.

The institution of a system of primary, secondary and University education for the Catholics of Upper Canada was an endeavour very dear to the heart of the great pastor. He established in 1826 a Seminary at St. Raphael's for the education of ecclesiastical students. This was Iona College of which he wrote in December of 1827, saying that he had "at present seven most promising subjects studying theology in my small seminary here." At that time five more students were doing preparatory work. This College continued in excellent service till its close on the removal of the founder to Kingston.

The visit to England in 1816 was undertaken to obtain financial assistance for the Missions, which were not self-supporting, and at the request of Bishop

Plessis to urge the Home Government to favour the division of the vast Diocese of Quebec. It comprised all the British Dominions in North America. The British Government was opposed to the erection of new dioceses. Bishop Plessis petitioned the Court of Rome to erect Quebec into a Metropolitan See and to institute several Bishoprics. On the 12th day of January 1819 Father Macdonell was nominated Bishop of Resins, and assistant to the Bishop of Quebec. In 1826 the British Government withdrew its objection and Upper Canada was erected into a Bishopric by Pope Leo XII on the 14th day of February 1826, and the Assistant Bishop became Bishop of Regiopolis (Kingston).

In recognition of the Bishop's services to Government and Country the British Government allotted him a salary for himself and a grant for his students, which was increased to one thousand pounds per year in perpetuity. In this same year the Bishop obtained the appointment of a co-adjutor in the person of Father Weld, an English priest. The co-adjutor repaired to Rome, where he was consecrated and made a Cardinal. He remained in Rome. It is interesting and gratifying to know that considerable financial assistance was given the Bishop by the Sulpician Fathers of Montreal. Further assistance was even obtained from the Leopoldine Society of Vienna, Austria, a society founded to help the Foreign Missions.

The Bishop was insistent on the establishment of Catholic schools, urging his people to make every necessary sacrifice, for, he told them, if they failed they would become hewers of wood and drawers of water to the new-comers who were fast filling up the Province. Especially was he anxious to provide for the proper education of the young girls of his flock, recognizing, no doubt, the tremendous influence of woman in the home and in the school. He made most pathetic appeals to Religious Communities in Lower Canada to come to his assistance, and failing in this, he instituted at Sandwich in 1828 a Community under the name of The Congregation of the Infant Jesus. In the disturbances of the Rebellion of 1837 the Community was dispersed, the Sisters going to the United States.

But his greatest anxiety was to give to his people a learned, cultured, devoted clergy. He first instituted Iona College as previously said. This College in its ten years of existence gave several priests to the Diocese. In 1837 the Bishop obtained an Act of Incorporation from the Legislature and appropriated a piece of land in the city of Kingston for the erection thereon of Regiopolis College. On June 10, 1838, the Bishop laid the cornerstone of the new building. He was assisted by his co-adjutor, Bishop Gaulin, and the clergy, with a large attendance of the laity. Doctor Rolph of Ancaster, Ont., delivered the principal address. In the erection of the College buildings the Bishop was greatly assisted by his nephew and Vicar-General, the Reverend Angus Macdonell, who became the first Rector of Regiopolis. "He was one of the original trustees of the Incorporated College, a member of the Council of Public Instruction for many years, and a member of the Senate of the University of Toronto. During his long life he had come very much in contact with men of affairs in Canada, and when the Separate Schools Act was

to the fore, he was the representative of the Upper Canada Bishops in seeing that the rights of the Catholics of the Province were safeguarded in the provisions of that measure." Thus has written the Reverend E. Kelly, chief Church historian of Ontario. Vicar General Macdonell was adviser and consultor.

In 1831, January, Bishop Macdonell was informed that he had been appointed a member of the Legislative Council of Upper Canada on the recommendation of the Governor, Sir John Colborne. This appointment occasioned the addition to his official title of the word, "Honourable." The following is the Bishop's comment on this honour: "The only consideration that would induce me to think of accepting such a situation would be the hope of being able to promote the interests of our Holy Religion more effectually and carrying my measures through the Provincial Legislature with more facility and expedition than I could otherwise do."

In 1836 Bishop Macdonell was able to testify that there were in his diocese thirty-five churches and chapels, though several were unfinished, built by himself with the assistance of twenty-two priests, the larger number of whom had been educated at his own expense; that further he had expended thirteen thousand pounds of his own means, in building churches, chapels and schools, educating young men for the priesthood and promoting general education.

For several years prior to 1836 in the field of Government the administration of public affairs was in a bad way, resulting in the Rebellion of 1836-1837. The baneful influence of the "Family Compact," the blunderings of a Lieutenant-Governor, the arrival of a large number of people from the United States, anti-British in politics and Republican in their ideas of government, and the unfair administration of the Clergy Reserves were the principal grounds of discontent. The echoes of the Rebellion brought the desired re-action from the Home Government. An eminent and fearless Governor, Lord Durham, was sent to Upper Canada to ascertain the true conditions and report his recommendations for redress. For thirty-four years Bishop Macdonell had lived in the Province. He knew all the people and their temper, conditions of life and government, probably better than did any other man. He could speak from his own experiences and personal knowledge. Knowing that the new Governor wished to obtain all possible information, the Bishop addressed to him a letter setting forth, fearlessly and emphatically, a list of the principal grievances and his own recommendations. Lord Durham reported. Responsible Government followed. The Bishop's letter is placed in the first rank of Canadian political literature, a strong contributory force in obtaining Responsible Government in this country, and marked the Bishop as one of Canada's leading statesmen.

With the vision of a seer he beheld the future towns and cities arising throughout the Province. As his Church was the first in the land, so, first choice of sites should be hers. In 1806 he obtained from the Crown nine blocks of land for churches and schools between Glengarry and Kingston, a number increased to twenty three by the year 1837 elsewhere in the Province. On these

sites stand to-day beautiful churches and cathedrals, schools, hospitals and other church buildings, A rich inheritance, spiritual and temporal, was bequeathed by the great Bishop to the Catholic people of Ontario.

The last visit to Europe was made in 1839. He went seeking funds for the completion of the Regiopolis College, and to discuss with the Scots and Irish Bishops a plan for a large immigration to Canada of Scots and Irish Catholics. He contracted a heavy cold and died at Dumfries, on January 14, 1840, in the home of the Reverend Father Reid from whom he received the Last Sacraments. His funeral took place in Edinburgh. The remains were interred temporarily in the vaults of St. Margaret's Convent. Twenty-one years later the remains of the Bishop were brought back by a successor, Bishop Horan, and laid beneath the Cathedral at Kingston.

This in outline is the life story of one of Canada's greatest men – Priest, Bishop, Patriot, Educationist and Statesman.

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