

The Early History of St. Francis Xavier University

by

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“We have much pleasure in announcing to our readers that His Lordship Dr. MacKinnon has, on Wednesday last, opened a Seminary at Arichat, on a principle which is likely to produce a new era in the history of Literature in the Diocese . . . We understand that the Reverend Doctor has procured the services of Clerical Gentlemen – the most eminent scholars in his Diocese to take charge of the Seminary.” This is part of a brief news item which appeared, in the Antigenish *Casket* of July 28, 1853, announcing the opening of the Arichat Seminary, the precursor of St. Francis Xavier College.

Before entering into the early history of the College itself, we shall first review the situation in eastern Nova Scotia which necessitated the founding of the institution. After examining these circumstances we shall review very briefly the history of two schools which are in some ways ancestral to the present-day Saint Francis Xavier University. These were the grammar school at Grand Narrows and East Bay, and the St. Andrew’s Grammar school. This finished, we shall then sketch the story of the college during the first fifty years of its existence.

Bishop Edmund Burke died on November. 29, 1820. In that year the territory which today constitutes the diocese of Antigonish – the eastern half of the province – was served by only six priests. These six men faced the challenge of four different languages, for there were Micmacs and English-speaking Catholics in the area; there were French-speaking Acadians and Gaelic-speaking Scots. They faced the challenge of primitive communications, for the principal mode of travel was by sea, by horseback or by foot, and roads were little more than blazed trails or crude bridle paths. They faced the challenge of large and scattered flocks, for already the Catholic population of the eastern half of the province was large.

Onto this pioneering scene stepped a vigorous Scottish priest, in the year 1822. He was Father William Fraser, who in 1827 became Vicar-Apostolic of Nova Scotia. In 1844 Nova Scotia was divided into two dioceses, and Bishop Fraser chose as his see the island of Cape Breton and the three eastern counties of the peninsula. This new see was known until 1886 as the Diocese of Arichat, but territorially it was identical with the present-day diocese of Antigonish.

Even before the division, Bishop Fraser continued to live at Antigonish, delaying his removal to Halifax, the seat of the original diocese, because he was the only one available to minister to the needs of the Gaelic-speaking population of Antigonish. After the division, although the seat of the new

diocese was at Arichat, a great seaport of the period, the Bishop still found it necessary to remain at Antigonish. He spent his time more as a missionary priest than as a bishop, serving as pastor a territory which today embraces six parishes. The need for more clergymen was great; and there was no seminary in which new laborers could be trained. Nor was it yet feasible to establish such an institution, for the people of the little diocese were poor.

Bishop William Fraser died at Antigonish in 1851. He was succeeded by a native of Antigonish County, Father Colin Francis MacKinnon of William's Point. The need for clergymen at the time can be learned from the letter written by the newly-consecrated bishop to the Archbishop of Dublin in July, 1853, appealing for one or two priests and a group of nuns. Bishop MacKinnon explained that there were 40,000 Catholics in the diocese, and that he had only twenty-one priests. When we allow that two of these were engaged in work other than active missionary work, we can see that the average flock committed to a pastor would number more than 2,000. This would be a heavy assignment under any conditions; it was particularly onerous under the conditions prevailing in eastern Nova Scotia in 1853. The need for more priests was extreme.

The Archbishop of Dublin sent one priest. But the old country needed her own priests. The infant Diocese of Arichat must in some way supply her own needs, from her native stock. But native sons must be trained and well educated before they could be ordained. This was not such an easy undertaking. True, there were seminaries in Rome and there was a seminary at Quebec. Yet these were far away and both students and diocese could ill afford the expense of attending them. The obvious solution was the establishment of a seminary for the instruction and training of priests within the diocese. Bishop MacKinnon, as we shall presently see, was well qualified by experience to be the founder of such an institution. Little more than a year after his consecration he was to found the Seminary of Arichat, the direct precursor of Saint Francis Xavier's College.

Before we turn to the story of Saint Francis Xavier's let us examine the educational institutions which already had played a role in the life of the diocese, and which in a sense were ancestral to the new seminary or college.

A short time after his ordination in 1824, Father William Bernard MacLeod, the first native priest of the Diocese of Antigonish, was placed in charge of the missions at Bras d'Or in Cape Breton. At his residence at Grand Narrows he gathered about him a group of young men to whom he taught the rudiments of a classical education. After a new glebehouse had been erected at East Bay, Father MacLeod converted the old house at that site into a regular school to which he brought his former pupils from Grand Narrows. A famed classical scholar was placed in charge of the new educational venture: Malcolm MacLellan of Aberdeen, Scotland. From this humble institution of Grand Narrows and East Bay Saint Francis Xavier University can trace a tenuous but definite descent. The descent involves a change of locale and the committing of the heritage to an intermediary

institution. This is how it came to pass.

Four of the original students finished their course at East Bay in 1828. All four went on to study for the priesthood: two at Laval Seminary in Quebec, and two at the Propaganda in Rome. All four, were in due time ordained to the priesthood and returned to serve in their native diocese. Of these four men one is particularly significant for our story: Colin Francis MacKinnon. MacKinnon, not only served as a priest in the diocese, but he eventually became bishop of the diocese, and then founded Arichat Seminary, the original institution which would grow into St. Francis Xavier College.

After completing his theology course and returning to the diocese, Father MacKinnon was appointed to the parish of St. Andrew's. There he experienced the heavy burden which was the lot of every pastor in the diocese at the time. Despite extensive pastoral activities, spurred by the need of more priests and teachers, and realizing the necessity of a school for basic training, he opened the St. Andrew's Grammar School in the summer of 1838. It was an important year for education in Nova Scotia. Acadia University opened its portals for the first time. St. Mary's College was established in Halifax by Bishop Fraser in the same year. Dalhousie College was opened under the principalship of Dr. Thomas McCullough of Pictou Academy.

The St. Andrew's Grammar School flourished for many years, and it may undoubtedly be credited with a major contribution to the distinguished caliber of the professional men which honor that district as their birthplace and the old school as their place of early training. That standards of education were high at the grammar school is evident from the report of the closing exercises which appeared in the *Casket* of November 18, 1852. The classics course, as usual at the time, was the mainstay of the curriculum. The students, according to the reporter, handled Virgil, Cicero, Sallust and Caesar with an ease which could well be the envy of any undergraduate of our time. It is undoubtedly more than mere coincidence that the new grammar school should have had for its principal the same Malcolm MacLellan who had taught Colin Francis MacKinnon at the East Bay school. Mr. MacLellan and Doctor MacKinnon constitute the two connecting links between the Grand Narrows and East Bay, school and the St. Andrew's Grammar School.

The latter school has its particular interest for us because Doctor MacKinnon gained there the experience and encouragement which would later qualify him, after he had become bishop of the diocese, for the founding of the Arichat Seminary. It was at this school that many of the students of the future college were given their early training. But above all it was there that John Cameron received his classical training, the man who would later as Doctor Cameron be the energetic first rector at Antigonish and the principal professor, the same man who as bishop of the diocese would during the latter part of the century actively support and in every way encourage the growth

of the institution. The story of St. F X, would be seriously incomplete without the biography of bishop Cameron. We shall discuss the man and his relations with the college presently. In the meantime we must see the founding of the Arichat Seminary itself.

In February 1852 Doctor MacKinnon, the pastor of St. Andrew's, was consecrated. Bishop of Arichat, succeeding the late Bishop Fraser. Bishop MacKinnon's major step in the educational field was taken over a year later when on the 20th day of July 1853 he opened the Arichat Seminary at Arichat in Cape Breton. In a letter to his old friend of seminary days in Rome, Cardinal Franzoni, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, the bishop expressed his gratitude to the Cardinal for having sent out Doctor John Schulte to be the rector and a professor of the new seminary. Dr. Schulte, a native of Paderborn, West phalia had studied at Rome with Dr. John Cameron who would in the following year succeed him as rector.

The nature of the need determined the form of the new school and its curriculum. The primary purpose was the education of priests. The other was the training of lay teachers. Three years later Bishop MacKinnon in a pastoral letter stressed the primary need of providing an educated clergy for the diocese. Then he pointed out that lay teachers were next in importance, and said "the portals of our college are open to receive, and qualify young men to become Teachers."

The first lectures were delivered in a hired building at Arichat to a small student body of fifteen. But the school compensated for its limited size with the quality of its course. At the end of the first session four of its students had been prepared for and did enter the University of Laval.

Even as Bishop MacKinnon reported to Rome the founding of the Arichat Seminary, he also in the same letter expressed his intention of moving it to the village of Antigonish. In this he was falling in line with the views of one of his predecessors, Bishop Edmund Burke, first vicar-apostolic of Nova Scotia. Not later than 1820 during his last visitation to the County of Sydney (later Antigonish) Bishop Burke declared that should Providence prolong his days and enable him to found a seminary, Antigonish should be the site of it.

Within a few months of the founding at Arichat preparations were underway for a change of locale. A new wooden structure was erected on the site of the present post office building in Antigonish. Funds for the work came from a legacy of £5805 recently received by the diocese, and half of which the bishop set aside for the new college. This was supplemented by a grant of 20,000 francs from the French Society of Foreign Missions. This building served for a good many years as one of the principal college buildings. It is now located at Court Street, a different site to which it was moved to serve, municipal purposes after the college acquired new facilities.

In 1854 another building called the "Big House" was prepared for use as a residence. It had originally been built by Bishop Fraser, and was located

on the present college campus. Half of this building still stands on West Street opposite the more recent structures which have succeeded it on the campus.

With a classroom building and a residence in readiness the seminary was transferred from Arichat to Antigonish in the summer of 1855. With it came its new rector, Dr. John Cameron, who had replaced Dr. Schulte in that office during the preceding year. Dr. Schulte was now Director of Studies. Dr. Cameron would very probably have been the first, rector, if he had not been detained in Rome in an administrative capacity with one of the Sacred Congregations. It is no trifling evidence of Dr. Cameron's ability and the esteem in which he was held in Rome that he should have been appointed acting rector of Urban College or the Propaganda for a period of three months. That a foreigner, newly ordained, and only twenty-six years of age should be even temporarily appointed rector of a Roman college was a situation doubtlessly unique in the annals of Roman universities.

The name of St. Francis Xavier University has always been a bit of a puzzle to those acquainted with the racial character of its constituency. Bishop MacKinnon intended to call the new institution the Seminary of St. Ninian in honor of the eminent Celtic saint who was already patron of the Church in Antigonish, the village in which the college would be permanently located after a year or two, according to its founder. That name, however, was never used. While at Arichat the institution was called the Arichat Seminary, and after its transfer to Antigonish it was always known as St. Francis Xavier's College. One thing we do know: the new name was proposed by Dr. Cameron. Two theories have been advanced in explanation of his choice. One is that the French Society of Foreign Missions when making their contribution of 20,000 francs to the erection of the first wooden structure at Antigonish, had also passed on the suggestion that the new college be named after the great patron of the missions: St. Francis Xavier. The other theory is that the celebration three years previously of the tercentenary of the death of St. Francis Xavier, and the consequent great devotion to the missionary account for the name.

The quickening influence of Doctor Cameron soon made its distinctive mark on the institution. He added theology to the curriculum, thereby enabling candidates for the priesthood to complete their training within the walls of the little institution at Antigonish. The college grew in numbers. Instead of the fifteen who had heard the first lectures at Arichat in 1853, there were in 1856 already forty-nine students enrolled. The staff had been increased to six. By May of 1860 eleven priests had been ordained and thirteen other young men were being trained for the, priesthood. A gratifying number of men had been prepared for teaching and further studies in other branches of learning. Bishop MacKinnon wrote in that same year that St. Francis Xavier College "bade fair to realize to religion and to society all the benefits anticipated at its foundation."

In 1866 the institution had grown to the point where Bishop MacKinnon

felt justified in petitioning the Nova Scotia Legislature for a charter to confer degrees. On this occasion he described the buildings as “spacious and commodious.” He stated that “he had secured the services of highly efficient Professors to impart instruction in the various branches of higher collegiate education.” The enrollment had reached 58 in the Classical, Philosophical and Theological departments of the college. St. Francis Xavier’s was, moreover, the only institution in eastern Nova Scotia where the sciences of Logic, Metaphysics, Ethics, and Moral and Dogmatic Theology were taught. The petition pointed out that “Students whose entire literary training was received in said College have studied successfully in other institutions, medicine, or law, or engaged in the occupation of teaching superior schools, or conducting country Academies or have entered the work of the sacred ministry in various, parts of the province.” The Bishop concluded the descriptive part of the petition with the information that there were many students, male and female, attending the two preparatory schools which had been locally organized in connection with the college.

The Provincial Legislature graciously answered the petition by conferring fullest university powers on the college in 1866. The act of the legislature stated that “St. Francis Xavier's College, at Antigonish, shall be held and taken to be a university, with all and every the usual privileges of such an institution, and the students in the said College shall have the liberty and privilege of taking the Degrees of Bachelor, Master and Doctor.”

One would expect that the new charter would have stimulated the little college to new and intense activity. But if the tempo quickened the annalist has not recorded the change. For the next decade matters went on rather uneventfully. This can probably be explained in several ways. First of all Dr. John Cameron had been transferred from the rectorship to the parish of Arichat in 1863. The absence of his energetic and brilliant personality was bound to be felt. Then there was the vague situation of the rectorship. One of the challenges to the historian of St. F. X. is to determine who was rector from the departure of Dr. Cameron in 1863 until the late 1870’s. Some sources suggest that the Rev. Hugh Gillis, the first priest trained and ordained at Antigonish, succeeded Cameron and held the office until the late ‘70s. Other sources would indicate that the aging Bishop MacKinnon either held the post himself or kept it officially vacant with Father Gillis acting as rector. In any event the Rev. Dr. Cameron was gone temporarily, and Bishop MacKinnon was beginning to show the effects of an extremely active life; he was aging rapidly.

We do know that the B. A. degree was being awarded during this period, but the dearth of records leaves us without any definite information as to the date or recipient of the first Bachelor’s diploma. We also know that St. F. X. was formally affiliated with the University of Halifax in 1876. This latter institution was created by the Nova Scotia Legislature in 1876 and functioned until 1881 when its provincial grant was withdrawn, a blow from which it never recovered. It was never a teaching university, but rather an

organization to conduct examinations and raise the standard of higher education in the province.

What did bestir life on the hill was the appointment of Dr. Cameron as bishop of the diocese in 1877; he had been made Coadjutor Bishop of Arichat in 1870. As administrator he was once more to exert his zealous and enlightened influence on the college. His removal from Arichat to Antigonish in 1880 meant even more opportunity for this influence to make itself felt.

A marble effigy of Bishop Cameron stands guard at the north-east corner of the university campus. It stands in the cool shade of the first brick buildings which were erected during his own episcopate at Antigonish. It is the first object which greets the traveller as he approaches the university from the east. This is very much as it should be. St. F. X. was one of the dearest concerns of his heart; and the University would have been much the poorer if it had not known Bishop Cameron.

The Rev. Dr. Angus Cameron was appointed rector by Bishop Cameron probably in 1877. Numerous, improvements soon took place in the staff and physical equipment of the college. A modern brick building was constructed in 1880. It is now the east wing of the present-day administration building, and, fittingly enough, as the oldest building now standing on the campus, it enjoys the distinction of being the physical cradle of the renowned extension movement. This building was built from funds contributed by the bishop himself and the priests of his diocese.

In 1881 a financial cloud darkened the outlook of the college. The annual grant which had hitherto been paid to the colleges of N. S. by the provincial government was withdrawn. It had not been a large grant, but in the modest budget of the struggling little school it loomed large. The bishop immediately appealed to the Catholics of eastern Nova Scotia for an endowment. The result was gratifying. A substantial sum was raised, and the doors of the college remained open. This was but the beginning of the many generous benefactions of the faithful of the diocese. On numerous occasions the institution has appealed to them for assistance; and always the response has been a hearty and generous one.

An administrative change took place in 1882; the provincial government created a board of governors to hold and administer the property of the university. Later by an amendment of this act two members of the alumni annually elected were to be added to this board,

The rectorship of Dr. Neil McNeil began in 1884. No institution could long stand still with two such men as Bishop John Cameron and the Rev. Dr. McNeil directing it. At the time of his appointment Dr. Neil McNeil was only thirty-three years old; but he already displayed in abundance the qualities of efficiency, competence and energy which marked him for an outstanding church career. He would later become successively the first bishop of St. George's in Newfoundland, Archbishop of Vancouver, and finally Archbishop of Toronto. During the seven years of his administration

the institution experienced great progress. In 1888 a western wing was erected parallel to the original brick structure, and both joined together with a connecting structure. These additions were badly needed, for the student body had grown to 106 during the 1889-1890 scholastic year. Of these 76 were boarders. Academically the institution was moving ahead. In 1890 it granted the first Master of Arts degree. A. J. G. MacEachen, already a graduate of the college, and a barrister, enjoyed the distinction of receiving this diploma.

The college calendar of 1890 pointed proudly to the distinguished men among the alumni. It boasted two bishops, 55 priests, 19 ecclesiastical students, a judge, two senators, five members of parliament, two inspectors of schools, 19 lawyers, 19 doctors, and a great many teachers. It was a creditable record for the 37-year-old institution.

The Rev. Dr. Daniel A. Chisholm, one of the professors at the college, succeeded Dr. McNeil as rector in 1891. During the next nine years many changes and improvements took place at the college.

In October 1893 the Alumni Association was formed. This was an important step ahead, for the association has been a valuable instrument in maintaining the family spirit of the men of St. Francis Xavier. Like similar organizations at other universities it has rendered significant financial assistance to the alma mater. In 1894 the act incorporating the university was amended to allow the addition of two members of the alumni association to the board of governors.

During the rectorship of Dr. Chisholm the Mount Saint Bernard College for women was affiliated with the University. Thus the institution became in 1894 the first Catholic university in America to provide for women courses leading to the Bachelor's degree. Mount Saint Bernard had been founded in 1883 when Bishop Cameron established it as an academy for ladies under the direction of the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame.

The young college finally overcame its rather extreme sense of humility in the same year, 1884, and held its first formal commencement exercises. The institution had come of age, and it was time to celebrate the fact and proclaim it to the world with becoming ceremony.

The administration of Dr. Chisholm was also important from the building point of view. The west wing was substantially extended in 1895 to provide an infirmary and adequate domestic facilities. In 1897 a convent was built for the Sisters of Saint Martha who have since had complete charge of the domestic care of the college.

Unquestionably the most important change in the institution during this period was the handing over of the domestic care of the institution to the Sisters of Saint Martha, a religious congregation founded specifically for that purpose. Since their foundation in 1897 their self-sacrificing and devoted attention to the needs of the university has been easily its richest endowment. It has been the one factor which more than any other has created the home-like atmosphere which captures the enduring affection of the alumni.

of St. F. X. for their alma mater.

When the Rev. Dr. Daniel Chisholm was appointed parish priest of North Sydney in August 1898, he was succeeded in the rectorship by the Rev. Dr. Alexander MacDonald Thompson. During Thompson's administration a large new wing was added, to the administration building. This extension provided classroom and laboratory space, as well as rooming accommodation for students. Around the same time the rest of the college buildings were completely renovated and modernised.

The presidency of Doctor Thompson brings to a close the first half-century of the university's history, and exhausts the scope of this paper. It is a natural point at which to conclude the early history of the institution. The college had reached a certain stage of development which guaranteed for it a permanent place in the educational walks of the Maritimes. It was now equipped with reasonably adequate material resources. It had developed academically to a stage where it could hold its own with the other institutions of higher learning in the Maritimes. It was time to celebrate the achievements of fifty years.

The last outstanding event of the early history and of Doctor Thompson's presidency was the celebration in 1905 of the fiftieth anniversary – actually the fifty-second. On the 6th and 7th of September the town of Antigonish was filled with alumni, friends of the university and distinguished visitors from other educational institutions. They came to rejoice with the little college on the hill over the struggles and achievements of fifty years. At a special convocation over twenty honorary doctorates were conferred on eminent alumni, and heads of other educational institutions.

We conclude this paper with a tribute spoken by the eloquent President Thompson on that occasion – a tribute to the university and its founders:

“No multi-millionaire laid its foundations in wealth or built its walls from his own private fortune. But it boasts a more precious, and, let me add, a more secure foundation: the loving hearts of a loyal people. Many of our fathers came to this chosen land, despoiled of the lands that had been theirs. From the highlands of Scotland, from the valleys of Ireland, they turned their eyes to this blessed land where they hoped to breathe the air of God in the freedom denied them at home. Our Acadian fathers, too, driven from the fertile lands which their industry had reclaimed from the tides of the Bay of Fundy, after they had been decimated by sickness and hardships endured among strangers, turned their eyes once more to the first land of their adoption, and were glad to find refuge among its rocky shores, while strangers reaped the fruits of their former labors. Thus the three elements that form the bulk of our population had passed through the fiery ordeal that tested and proved the genuine metal of which they were made. And is it any wonder that an institution, having its roots in the affections of such a people, should grow and flourish as St. Francis Xavier's College has grown and flourished ?”