

Missionary Priests in Quebec's Eastern Townships: The Years of Hardship and Discontent, 1825-1853.

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Les missionnaires de nos cantons n'ont pas, il est vrai, de peuplades sauvages à instruire et civiliser; ils ne sont pas exposés comme ceux de contrées plus lointaines à être décapités, brûlés à petit feu, scalpés ou massacrés, par la main des barbares, mais ils se dévouent à toutes les privations que peut endurer la nature humaine, au froid, aux fatigues, à la faim, à tous les maux qui résultent de la pauvreté, de l'isolement et d'un travail dur et constant¹.

With these words written in 1864, the novelist Antoine Gérin-Lajoie dramatically captured the essence of the daily routine faced by the first Catholic priests to serve in Quebec's Eastern Townships, that region encompassed by the Richelieu-Yamaska, St. Lawrence and Chaudière seigneuries, and the American boundary. Occupying an ambiguous position between the traditional missionary and the parish priest, they ministered to whites with a long Catholic tradition living in a basically Catholic province, yet they had to travel great distances over barely passable roads to serve these poor and widely-dispersed families. Consequently they enjoyed neither the adventure and fame of the missionary, nor the material comforts of the parish priest. To make matters worse, whether the Catholics were settlers isolated in the backwoods, or craftsmen and labourers scattered among English-speaking Protestant employers, the result was often the same – poverty and indifference towards religion. Finally, most of the priests were recently-ordained English-speaking immigrants to Quebec, and therefore relatively unprepared to exercise the normal functions of a community leader, much less face the frontier cultural and physical environment of the Eastern Townships. Small wonder, therefore, that their letters to the bishops were filled with complaints and pleas to be relieved from their posts.

¹ A. GÉRIN-LAJOIE, *Jean Rivard, Économiste* (Montréal, J.-B. Rolland et Fils, 1876), p. 25.

Priests were first sent into the Townships to serve the Irish who had arrived as part of the British wave of migration to North America after 1815. Travelling southward from the St. Lawrence River, the British tended to settle in the northwestern section of the region, whereas approximately 20,000 Americans² already inhabited the zone closer to the international boundary. During the twenties French Canadians began to trickle southward as well, attracted in part by the fact that the missionary priests had been trained in the Quebec Seminary and were therefore bilingual.

In 1825, John Holmes became the first priest to actually reside in the Eastern Townships when he moved to Drummondville, a struggling village of about twenty houses³ which had been established as a military settlement on the lower St. Francis River ten years earlier. One of the most remarkable priests ever to serve in Quebec, Holmes ironically had studied to become a Wesleyan minister before leaving his native Vermont. Because his father had withdrawn him from college to help with the farm work, the headstrong boy had fled to Lower Canada where he had worked his way through the Eastern Townships to Trois-Rivières. Here he had converted to Catholicism, then entered the Quebec Seminary to emerge as a priest. For the duration of his life, Holmes pursued his vocation with the zeal characteristic of a true convert.

The only resident priest in the Townships, Holmes' territory extended as far south as the American-settled Ascot Village (Sherbrooke), which made a round trip on horseback of 125 miles. At that time, the region had no more than 500 Catholics, most of whom were barely able to support themselves, much less a missionary. The Drummondville parishioners promised fifty pounds per year, but actually donated only nine or ten, and it was unusual for those on Holmes' mission circuit to contribute even to his travel expenses. Nonetheless, he remained optimistic: "Les ressources pour vivre sont bien modiques – mais celui qui nourrit les oiseaux ne me laissera pas mourir de faim." His chief complaint was the evil influence of the Protestant majority upon his charges. The Catholics were so contaminated, Holmes complained, that the example they in turn set for the Protestants made conversions impossible. Experience had proven to him that "Votre grandeur a bien raison de dire point de mélange."⁴

² This is the population figure given in R. L. JONES, "Agriculture in Lower Canada, 1792-1815," *CHR*, XXVII (1946), 50.

³ *Appendix to vol. XXXIII (1824) Journals, Legislative Assembly of Lower Canada*, Appendix R, Olivier Arcand's testimony.

⁴ See Maurice O'BREADY, "Jean ou John Holmes" (unpublished manuscript, Eastern Townships Historical Society), p. 104; Maurice O'BREADY, "Lettres de l'Abbé John Holmes. 1823-1832" (unpublished manuscript, E.T.H.S.), p. 17, Holmes to Plessis, February 2, 1825; p. 25, Holmes to Plessis, April 20,

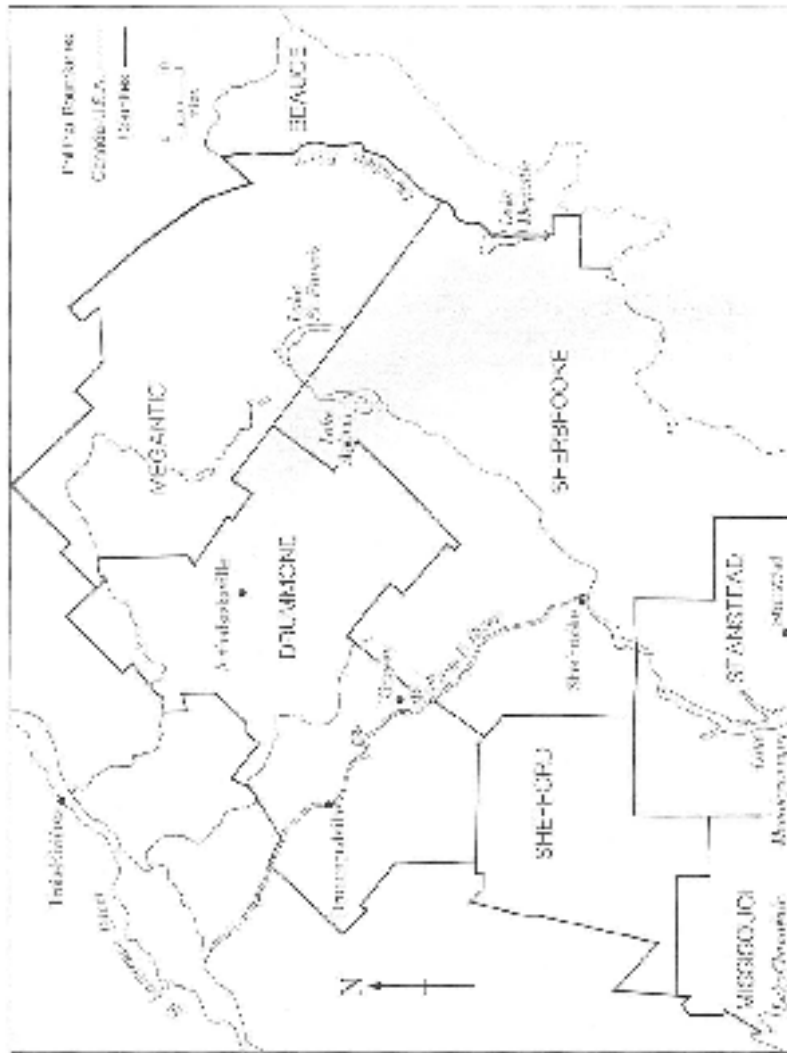
Holmes began to fear that his presence in the Eastern Townships was doing the faith more harm than good because he was attracting French Canadian settlers who risked losing “leur langue, leurs mœurs et leur piété [dans] ce mélange déjà trop confus de sectes.” If a priest’s presence were limited to occasional visits, French Canadians would expand their settlement southward from the seigneuries in a more gradual compact fashion, thereby safeguarding their language and faith from pernicious contacts with English-speaking Protestants. When the Protestant élite expressed the desire that he stay, Holmes’ hostile attitude was not softened; he claimed that they simply needed him to attract clients to their land. However, Mgr. Plessis was not to be swayed by Holmes’ logic. He concurred that the Catholics drawn by his presence would be subjected to contamination by infidels and heretics, but what could one do? “Il est difficile qu’à beaucoup de bien il ne se mêle pas un peu de mal.”⁵

The following year, 1826, brought little improvement. In February, Holmes reported that of the 110 families under his charge within twenty-five leagues, twenty to thirty were half Catholic and half Protestant. His income was so small (eighteen to twenty pounds a year) that he was often forced to beg, but he insisted that this was not the chief reason for his desire to leave Drummondville. He remained convinced that his presence was doing as much harm as good by encouraging poor Catholics to cast themselves among the Americans of the Townships, “où ils perdent tout sentiment de religion, abandonnent la confession et toutes les lois de Dieu et de l’église.”⁶

1825; p. 36, Holmes to Plessis, October 20, 1825.

⁵ Archives de la Chancellerie de l’Archevêché de Québec (ACAQ). Registre des lettres (RL), XII, 382. Plessis to Holmes, November 14, 1825.

⁶ O’BREADY, “Lettres,” p. 44, Holmes to Panet, April 8, 1826; pp. 4243, March 1826; p. 39, Holmes to N.-C. Fortier, February 1, 1826.



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Holmes' fears stemmed partially from his extremely scrupulous nature. Flexibility was as important as firm leadership in a frontier outpost, yet Holmes referred the most insignificant problems to his bishop. For example, he expressed doubts as to whether he should accept the invitation of Stephen Burroughs to say Mass in his Shipton home because Burroughs, a Catholic convert, had once been a notorious American criminal. What makes Holmes' hesitation so astonishing is that Burroughs had not only given him a job as school teacher in Trois-Rivières, but had been instrumental in Holmes' conversion.⁷ The missionary came to realize that he was ill-suited by temperament to fill his assigned role; all his tastes and inclinations were toward the study of philosophy and theology. As a practicing curé, "à peine serais-je bon à confesser des Religieuses."⁸

Poor Holmes' troubles were aggravated by a hernia which made travelling over the Townships' makeshift roads almost impossible. Finally, in June, a fire destroyed all his possessions, along with the greater part of the town of Drummondville. In spite of his misfortunes, Holmes' plea to be allowed to return as a teacher to the Quebec Seminary had still not been heeded a year after the fire. Luckily for him the Bishop of Boston began to claim his services as an American, thereby prompting Mgr. Panet to appoint him to the seminary in 1827.⁹

Here he became an active and influential proponent of French Canadian colonization of the Eastern Townships, coining the famous slogan "Emparons-nous du sol."¹⁰ Having overcome his fears of French Canadian assimilation shortly before leaving Drummondville, Holmes had gone so far as to oppose Mgr. Panet's suggestion that his replacement live in the Abenaki village at the mouth of the St. Francis River. His concern was that his Anglican rival would take advantage of such a situation to avenge himself for the conversion of his clerk during his absence the previous winter.¹¹

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5, Holmes to Plessis, March 3, 1824; Maurice O'BREADY, "Stephen Burroughs. Documentation Burroughs Pelletier" (unpublished manuscript, E.T.H.S.).

⁸ O'BREADY, "Lettres," p. 38, Holmes to Plessis, October 20, 1825.

⁹ *Ibid.*; see also *Ibid.*, p. 58, July 26, 1827; p. 46, Holmes to N.-C. Fortier, June 24, 1826; p. 48, Holmes to Panet, June 1826; p. 49, Holmes to Panet, August 22, 1826; ACAQ, RL, XII, 383, Panet to Holmes, November 14, 1825, 541, Plessis to Holmes, August 10, 1826.

¹⁰ O'BREADY, "Jean ou John Holmes," p. 154; Charles E. MAILHOT, *Les Bois Francs, I* (Arthabaskaville, Imprimerie d'Arthabaska, 1914), p. 16.

¹¹ O'BREADY, "Lettres," p. 51, Holmes to Panet, September 15, 1826; p. 55, January 17, 1827; p. 59, August 24, 1827; Réal G. BOULIANNE, "The Royal Institute for the Advancement of Learning: The Correspondance, 1820-1829, A

Though they numbered more than 4,200 in 1831 (some 2,800 in Drummond and Sherbrooke Counties),¹² the plight of the Catholics did not change markedly during the residence of the newly-ordained Michael Power.¹³ He bewailed mixed marriages, poor roads and insufficient revenue. After reaching the conclusion that his charges were not making a sincere effort to support him, he advised the bishop to teach them a lesson by temporarily depriving them of a resident missionary. But the bishop seems to have sympathized with the poverty of the Catholic colonists, for when Power left the Townships in 1831, he sent Hugh Paisley to take his place.¹⁴ After a brief sojourn in the Townships, Paisley was replaced by Hubert Robson in 1832.

Father Robson, who remained in the region for twelve years, became so popular that his name is associated with several miraculous legends.¹⁵ Nevertheless, he experienced his share of difficulties while he served in the Townships. Robson's problems began in 1842 when he moved about twenty miles further south to the new parish of Kingsey.¹⁶ Here he inherited the beginnings of a stone church – an overly ambitious project undertaken by Father Rimbault of Nicolet in 1835. Spurred on by the hope that Kingsey would one day become the seat of a bishopric, Robson further impoverished

Historical and Analytical Study” (Ph.D. thesis, McGill University, 1970), p. 968.

¹² Canada, *Census Reports*, 1870-71, IV, 108-109. The total population was 42,200.

¹³ Power was born on October 17, 1804 in Halifax, Nova Scotia. After serving Drummondville, he became curé of Petite-Nation in 1831, of Sainte-Martine in 1833, and of Laprairie in 1839. He became bishop of Toronto in 1842 and died ministering to cholera victims at Grosse-Île five years later. Cyprien TANGUAY, *Répertoire Général du Clergé Canadien* (Montréal, Eusèbe Senécal et Fils, 1893), p. 15.

¹⁴ O'BREADY, “Lettres,” p. 65, Power to Panet, August 10, 1828; Paisley was born in Scotland on April 16, 1795. After being ordained in Quebec in 1824, he became chaplain of Saint-Roch. From 1825 to 1828 he was a vicar at Quebec, then he became curé of Petite-Nation until he and Power switched places in 1831. Like both his predecessor and his successor at Drummondville, Paisley would die of cholera at Grosse-Île in 1847. TANGUAY, p. 192.

¹⁵ Joseph-Charles SAINT-AMANT, *Un coin des Cantons de l'est; histoire de l'envahissement pacifique, mais irrésistible d'une race* (Drummondville, *La Parole*, 1932), pp. 49, 69-72. Robson was born in Quebec on May 4, 1808. He had been ordained only a year before moving to Drummondville. TANGUAY, p. 207.

¹⁶ The Drummondville mission was first divided when Sherbrooke received its own priest in 1834. By 1840 its Catholic population had become so large once more that those of Kingsey Township threatened not to complete their church or pay their tithe until they were granted their own curé. ACAQ, RL, XIX, 297, Signay to J-B. Vincent (Kingsey notary), October 7, 1840; 239, Signay to Robson, July 4, 1840; 298, October 7, 1840.

his parishioners by attempting to complete the building. By 1844 he had become enmeshed in such serious financial difficulties that he was forced to leave.¹⁷

When Sherbrooke became independent of the Drummondville mission in 1834, its Irish-born curé, John Baptist McMahon,¹⁸ was also placed in charge of Stanstead, due south on the American border, as well as parts of Shefford, Missisquoi and Megantic Counties, to the west and north-east. In this vast area, about four hundred miles of travel for a complete circuit, there was a total of 1,124 Catholics, of whom about a quarter were French-speaking.¹⁹ At forty, Father McMahon was of a relatively advanced age to be given such a difficult assignment. The bishop may well have kept him in frontier posts because of his penchant for embroiling himself in controversial issues. McMahon had been involved in minor squabbles in 1829 and again in 1833, when Mgr. Signay had warned him to confine himself strictly to this ministry.²⁰ To his own undoing, this would prove too difficult a task for the wilful priest once he took charge of Sherbrooke.

The first lesson McMahon learned in this mission was that his new charges were more ready to promise money than to give it.²¹ Even the Protestant landowners who had actively encouraged the appointment of a Catholic priest, apparently in order to attract French Canadian clients to their real estate,²² no longer felt the need to be generous. In fact, McMahon claimed

¹⁷ SAINT-AMANT, pp. 59-61; *Rapports sur les missions du Diocèse de Québec*, 1839, p. 70. In 1847 the mission still owed £ 150 for its church, a debt which the Association de la Propagation de la Foi considered too exorbitant to pay. ACAQ, RL, XXI, 589, Signay to P.-J. Bédard, February 27, 1847.

¹⁸ A former officer in the English army, McMahon became chaplain of the Saint-Jacques Church in Montreal after being ordained in 1824. In 1828 he was sent to the Gaspé where he stayed until moving to Sherbrooke in 1834. TANGUAY, p. 192; Léonidas ADAM, "L'Histoire religieuse des Cantons de l'Est," *Revue Canadienne*, XXVI (1921), 24.

¹⁹ ACAQ, RL, XVI, 210, Signay to Robson, June 17, 1834; Maurice O'BREADY, *De Ktiné, à Sherbrooke. Esquisse historique de Sherbrooke des origines à 1954* (Sherbrooke, Université de Sherbrooke, 1973), p. 78; *Annuaire du Séminaire Saint-Charles-Borromée* (1881-82), p. 35.

²⁰ Albert GRAVEL, *Messire Jean-Baptiste McMahon, Premier curé-missionnaire de Sherbrooke. 1834-1840* (Sherbrooke, 1960), pp. 2-3.

²¹ ACAQ, RL, XVI, 257, Signay to McMahon, August 27, 1834.

²² Holmes to Plessis, March 28, 1825. Quoted in O'BREADY, *Jean on John Holmes*, p. 111. To be fair to W.B. Felton, the most prominent local citizen, he and his brother also desired the services of a priest for their Spanish wives and French Canadian servants.

that W. B. Felton and the British American Land Company, proprietors of all the town's land, wanted only Protestant settlers with capital. Pretending that he had not sold the land for the church site, but had merely leased it for a limited time, Felton was now asking \$2,000 for a two acre extension. Mgr. Signay replied that the sum asked for was ridiculous; with \$2,000 one could purchase one or two townships. He also insisted that there was no question but that the land where the chapel stood belonged to the Church. However, he felt that McMahon was being too hasty in his judgment: "Je ne crois pas que la Compagnie des terres ait l'intention expresse d'exclure les Catholiques si ceux-ci font son profit. Ne soyez pas trop pressé à le croire."²³

The first months of McMahon's tenure brought another problem, one which would plague the mission for seven years. The beadle and mass server, a Mr. Cotter, had built a house and stable on the one and a quarter acre church lot which already contained the cemetery as well as the chapel. Because there was no place left for a presbytery, and because Cotter asked a high price both for the sale of his house and for lodging the priest, McMahon had to live half a mile away. Mgr. Signay's threats to take legal action were to no avail, and the parishioners were unable to pay the price asked by Cotter – so the matter rested throughout McMahon's residence in Sherbrooke.²⁴

Father McMahon soon became discouraged with what he considered to be indifference on the part of his parishioners. He complained that "c'est un péché pour un jeune prêtre de dépenser ses meilleures années ainsi, il aurait plus de succès en allant prêcher à des protestants du Vermont qu'en demeurant avec des indifférents à Sherbrooke."²⁵ He began to ask for an *exeat* from the diocese, to which Mgr. Signay replied with promises of another parish, as well as with small sums of money to alleviate his financial difficulties. The bishop also reminded McMahon that because the Irish priests had been trained at the cost of the Canadian Church, they should only leave Canada when they had a legitimate reason to do so. Finally he tried to improve McMahon's position by addressing a pastoral letter to the Catholics of the Sherbrooke mission, warning them to support their missionary or lose him. This brought

²³ McMahon to Signay, August 19, 1834. Cited in GRAVEL, *McMahon*, p. 7; ACAQ, RL, XVI, 258-259, Signay to McMahon, August 27, 1834.

²⁴ O'BREADY, *De Ktine*, p. 83 ; ACAQ, RL, XVI, 476, Signay to McMahon, February 25, 1835.

²⁵ McMahon to Signay, March 28, 1835. Quoted in GRAVEL, *McMahon*, p. 9.

a positive reaction from the Protestant Felton at least, for he went to Mgr. Signay in person in order to plead that McMahon be kept in Sherbrooke.²⁶

During the following two years conditions slowly improved, but not enough to satisfy Father McMahon. He took advantage of the 1837 Rebellion to repeat his request for an *exeat*. The bishop replied that Sherbrooke was still orderly, but if trouble arose he could simply go to Trois-Rivières rather than leave the diocese. This may well have been true, but McMahon, who was no coward, could have had some grounds for his fears. While making a tour of his mission-posts, he had roundly condemned the rebels. In addition, he had written a long article in the *Sherbrooke Gazette* to the same effect.²⁷

Eighteen thirty-eight brought another refusal of an *exeat*, and 1839 found McMahon still in Sherbrooke with no relief in sight. At the point of despair by this time, his overly-aggressive behaviour began to involve him in a series of embarrassing incidents. First, he succumbed to his predilection for writing controversial letters to newspapers. Aside from the 1837 missive on the rebellion, he had already published letters in the Montreal *Vindicator*, one addressed to the “English Nation,” and one to O’Connell and Roebuck, in which he attacked the Anglican Church’s new Quebec missionary society. The violence of his language (“religious pretenders,” “unblushing hypocrites”), and his mistaken identification of the still inoperative society with the American-based religious tract societies, led one member of the committee to comment that the best defence possible “wd. be to re-publish a letter which carries its own refutation, adorned by numerous inconsistencies upon its own face.”²⁸ Whatever McMahon’s 1839 letters contained, they greatly displeased Mgr. Signay who warned him not to repeat the action.²⁹ Unfortunately for McMahon, his behaviour quickly took a still more objectionable turn.

²⁶ ACAQ, RL, XVI, 499, Signay to McMahon, March 30, 1835; 517, 519, April 17, 1835; 523, Signay to McMahon, April 21, 1835; XVIII, 147, October 7, 1837; 181, November 27, 1837; ACAQ, Registre de l’Évêché, L, 168, September 16, 1835, Pastoral Letter to Sherbrooke, Stanstead, etc.

²⁷ ACAQ, RL, XVIII, 189, Signay to McMahon, December 16, 1837; O’ BREADY, *De Ktiné*, p. 81. For an account of McMahon’s attempts to prevent an uprising in the Townships, see Jules MARTEL, *Les troubles de 1837-38 dans la région de Sherbrooke* (Victoriaville, Collège de Victoriaville, 1964), pp. 4-7.

²⁸ *Missiskoui Standard*, May 10, 1836, May 17, 1836; ACAQ, RL, XVIII, 220, Signay to McMahon, February 3, 1838; McCord Museum, Hale Papers, Correspondence 1829-1913, Miscellaneous, Jeffrey Hale to E. Hale, April 23, 1836. The Bishop of Montreal asked the Bishop of Quebec to stop McMahon from writing these embarrassing letters, ACAQ, D.M. -VI-152, May 1, 1836.

²⁹ ACAQ, RL, XVIII, 470, Signay to McMahon, February 26, 1839.

He stirred up a hornet's nest of recriminations by reportedly breaking up a Methodist meeting with sword and pistols. McMahon's defence was that he had simply confiscated the weapons from a drunk before stepping into the meeting house. However, reports that McMahon himself was overindulging in alcohol began to circulate. Father Robson of Drummondville repeated these rumours to Mgr. Signay. Though the facts may well have been exaggerated in the transmission, it was clear that McMahon was becoming a problem. He was officially reprimanded and, after an official investigation by Grand Vicar Cooke in 1840, was finally granted his long-awaited *exeat*. The hapless priest left Sherbrooke disgraced, broken in health, and £ 200 in debt to the British American Land Company for the fifty acres he had bought near his church. The crowning touch to his humiliation was a summons to appear in court on a libel charge.³⁰

A few months prior to McMahon's departure, Mgr Signay warned that if the Sherbrooke Catholics wanted another curé they would have to provide for his lodging either by purchasing Cotter's house, or by renting one near the chapel.³¹ Nevertheless the replacement, Peter H. Harkin,³² arrived before any definite arrangement had been made. Negotiations with Cotter proved futile, so in 1842 it was finally decided to squeeze a presbytery in beside his house.³³ This only aggravated the financial problems which continued to plague the mission throughout the decade. The government had extended the parish system to the free and common socage territories in 1839, but because there were no syndics nor a fabrique to take charge of the property in Sherbrooke, the priest continued to be personally responsible for the parish's debts. Nor was it possible to use the law to enforce collection of tithes.³⁴ The missionaries, therefore, continued to depend heavily upon the generosity of the Association de la Propagation de la Foi, a missionary society established in Quebec in 1836.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 471; p. 568, June 15, 1839; XIX, 31, November 12, 1839; p. 86, January 9, 1840; p. 109, February 11, 1840; p. 122, Signay to Robson, February 29, 1840; GRAVEL, *McMahon*, pp. 7, 13, 31; O'BREADY, *De Ktiné*, pp. 82, 85.

³¹ ACAQ, RL, XVIII, 594, Signay to McMahon, September 3, 1839; XIX, 66, Signay to Robson, December 17, 1839.

³² Harkin was born in Ireland on November 26, 1810. After his ordination at Quebec in 1838, he became vicar of Saint-Roch, where he remained until moving to Sherbrooke. TANGUAY, p. 225.

³³ ACAQ, RL, XIX, 374, Signay to Harkin, January 21, 1841; *Annuaire*, I, no. 7 (1881-82), 50.

³⁴ For a good outline of the Church's legal position in the townships during this period, see Jean-François POULIOT, *Traité de droll fabricien et pnaoissial* (Montreal, Wilson et Lafleur; 1936), pp. 452-453.

In 1840 Father Harkin received only £ 4 from his parishioners (McMahon had collected £ 21), and in 1842 Mgr. Signay had to address yet another pastoral letter to Sherbrooke exhorting payment of the £ 50 owing on the presbytery.³⁵ When the Sherbrooke Catholics did not respond, the discouraged Harkin began to ask for a new post. By 1843 he was even threatening to leave on his own accord. Mgr. Signay replied that giving him any more Propagation of the Faith money would cause dissension among the other missionaries. He suggested that Harkin tell his parishioners to pay off the debt or he would be forced to sell his horse, which would oblige them to drive him to his mission posts. Furthermore, if they refused to pay for his necessities, they were to be warned that they would be deprived of his services. In the end, however, the bishop again relented and “nonobstant le mauvais précédent que votre nouvelle allocation va donner,” he granted Harkin another £25 from the society’s funds.³⁶

By 1844, with the town’s Catholic population already at 248 (135 were francophones), the church’s size became a rapidly-growing problem because the establishment of a number of industries was attracting an influx of French Canadian workers. The cotton factory alone was to employ forty to fifty French Canadian girls. A new church meant new expenses, and Harkin was careful to emphasize that he had already done his share. Nevertheless, he remained in Sherbrooke for another two years before being removed because of ill health.³⁷

Harkin’s successor, the twenty-nine year old Bernard O’Reilly, was most unhappy about his exile from Quebec City to Sherbrooke,³⁸ but he made the best of his stay by bringing the Institut Canadien and the bishops of Montreal and Quebec together to form the widely-publicized – “Association pour l’établissement des Canadiens français dans les Townships du Bas-Canada.” The shock of the sudden French Canadian exodus to the United States had encouraged the young radicals and the clerics to briefly set aside their differences in an attempt to divert families to the Eastern Townships. Because of internal political dissension, the association’s concrete achievements were

³⁵ ACAQ, V.G. XI-19, T. Cooke to Signay, May 8, 1840; ACAQ, Registre de l’Évêché, N, 25, October 19, 1842, Pastoral Letter to Sherbrooke, etc.

³⁶ ACAQ, RL, XX, 98, Signay to Harkin, July 15, 1842; 270, February 21, 1843; 283, March 7, 1843.

³⁷ ACAQ, DiSh., I-1, Harkin to C.-F. Cazeau, October 24, 1844; ACAQ, RL, XXI, 424, Signay to Harkin, April 18, 1846.

³⁸ O’Reilly was born in Ireland in 1817, and served in Quebec from his ordination in 1842 until being assigned to Sherbrooke in 1846. TANGUAY, p. 240; ACAQ, V.G., XIV, 144, Cazeau to O’Reilly [n.d.]; Di.Sh. I-la, O’Reilly to Cazeau, October 30, 1846.

minimal,³⁹ but it did serve to link O'Reilly's name to the influx of approximately 17,000 French Canadians between 1844 and 1851. Not surprisingly, the fame achieved by the ambitious young priest only fueled his desire to leave Sherbrooke. Mgr. Signay had promised to make up any deficit in tithes from the Propagation funds, but, in spite of the fact that he was receiving more than any other missionary up to that time, O'Reilly was soon £ 100 in debt. In February, 1848 he wrote to his bishop: "la triste expérience de six ans de troubles et de misères lui [himself] ont acquis la certitude qu'il ne fait plus de bien."⁴⁰ Finally, as with most other Townships missionaries, O'Reilly's health began to fail him. In June of 1848 he received his discharge from Sherbrooke. By this time his finances were in such a state that he had to consider selling his library in order to pay off his debts.⁴¹ He entered the Jesuit order and, like many of the Irish priests trained in Quebec, eventually moved to the United States.⁴²

O'Reilly's successor, Bernard McGauran,⁴³ was destined to be Sherbrooke's last English-speaking curé (before the creation of a separate anglophone parish). In fact, the French Canadian population was growing so rapidly (487 in the town alone by 1851) that he was assisted by a French Canadian vicar. However the financial situation did not improve until October 1849 when Mgr. Signay finally lost his patience. He reminded the parishioners that they had donated only thirty louis to support two priests, barely enough to feed and lodge a domestic. As a result, Father McGauran had been forced to sell his horse to pay debts. The Sherbrooke Catholics had been supported by the Propagation of the Faith long enough – in fact some of the

³⁹ See J.I. LITTLE, "The Peaceable Conquest. French Canadian Colonization in the Eastern Townships during the Nineteenth Century" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Ottawa, 1977), pp. 88-108.

⁴⁰ ACAQ, PP.J., 1-82a, O'Reilly to Signay, February 13, 1848. ACAQ, RL, XXI, 509. Signay to O'Reilly, October 22, 1846; 521, November 5, 1846; McCord Museum, Hale Papers Correspondence, 1829-1913, Miscellaneous, O'Reilly to Edward Hale, December 9, 1847.

⁴¹ ACAQ, RL, XXII, 343, Signay to O'Reilly, June 19, 1848; ACAQ, D-3, R.B.-102, J.-B. Robillard to Cazeau, September 6, 1848.

⁴² J.-B.-A. ALLAIRE, *Dictionnaire Biographique du Clergé Canadien-Français I* (Saint-Hyacinthe, Imprimerie du *Courrier de Saint-Hyacinthe*, 1934), 405.

⁴³ ACAQ, RL, XXII, Signay to L. Trahan, October 10, 1848. McGauran was born in Ireland on August 14, 1821. After his ordination at Quebec in 1846, he became the vicar at Saint-François du Lac. He survived an attack of typhus at Grosse-Île in 1847, to become vicar of Saint-Patrick's, then curé of Sherbrooke in 1848. TANGUAY, p. 258.

funds came from Catholics poorer than themselves. They were given until January to pay the promised contributions, or lose their priest.⁴⁴ The response eased conditions temporarily, but in 1850 McGauran was forced personally to spend £ 60 in order to expand the church's overcrowded one and a half acre lot.⁴⁵ The bishop lent McGauran the money but he was determined not to wait upon the parishioners' whim before being reimbursed. He commanded each communicant to subscribe one dollar, or face the withdrawal of their priest. The more wealthy would be forced to make up for those who could not afford to meet the contribution.⁴⁶ Amidst these trials, McGauran's weakness for alcohol became serious enough to have him transferred from Sherbrooke in 1853.⁴⁷

This does not complete the list of resident missionary-priests prior to mid-century. For example, there were enough French Canadians in Arthabaska County to warrant the appointment of a curé in 1840.⁴⁸ The influx of settlers became so rapid that the bishop divided this mission in 1844, and again in 1848. Although there were few Protestants in the area to pervert the "colons," their priests had an even more difficult assignment than those of the older St. Francis Valley settlements. Not only were the Arthabaska Catholics too poor to support their curés,⁴⁹ but swamps rendered communication within the area extremely difficult. In fact one priest, Father Charles Manger, perished in the Stanfold swamp in 1845. However, the worst difficulties faced by the curés in the areas we have discussed ended with the 1850's. By 1851, with over 41,000 of their faith (approximately 34,000 were French Canadians) in the Eastern Townships,⁵⁰ the Catholics were sufficiently numerous and established to make the missions a manageable size, as well as relatively self-sufficient.

Even taking the poverty of the early Catholic inhabitants of the lower St. Francis Valley (Sherbrooke to Drummondville) into account, the degree of their apparent indifference to the Church needs explanation. To begin with,

⁴⁴ ACAQ, Registre de l'Évêché, 0,54, Pastoral Letter to Sherbrooke, etc., October 12, 1849.

⁴⁵ ACAQ, D.Q. II-141, McGauran to Signay, March 25, 1850.

⁴⁶ ACAQ, RL, XXIII, 228, Signay to McGauran, March 30, 1850; 341, August 5, 1850.

⁴⁷ Archives de la Chancellerie de l'Évêché de Saint-Hyacinthe, Registre des Lettres, Series I, I, 283, Turgeon to McGauran, October 20, 1853.

⁴⁸ *Rapports [...] de Québec* (1840), p. 68; ACAQ, RL, XIX, 507, Signay to C. Gagnon, June 1, 1841.

⁴⁹ ACAQ, RL, XXII, 427-428, Signay to A. Racine, October 4, 1848.

⁵⁰ The total population was 94,300. Canada, *Census Reports*, 1870, IV, 204.

due to a severe shortage of priests throughout Quebec and Ireland prior to mid-century, neither group of colonists had had much respect for the authority of the Church before entering the Townships.⁵¹ In addition, it has been found that the priests who served in Compton County after 1850 were most successful in those communities which were compact, homogeneous, and relatively stable,⁵² none of these conditions existed in the Townships missions (outside Arthabaska) prior to mid-century. Finally, though there can be no questioning the zeal of these anglophone priests for French Canadian migration to the Eastern Townships, a cultural barrier did exist between them and the majority of their charges. In nearly every case it would be unfair to ascribe their many disappointments to the inferior calibre of the priests themselves.⁵³ They were committed enough to sacrifice their lives among the Irish cholera victims at Grosse Ile in 1847, while men like John Holmes, Michael Power (appointed Bishop of Toronto in 1842) and Bernard O'Reilly (biographer of Pius IX and Leo XIII) clearly possessed exceptional talents. In fact, their very endurance of the physical hardships and mental anguish presented by the Eastern Townships is conclusive testimony to their courage and ability.

⁵¹ See Jean-Pierre WALLOT, "Religion and French Canadian Mores in the Early Nineteenth Century," *Canadian Historical Review*, LII (1971), pp. 76-91. Emmet LARKIN, "The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850-75," *American Historical Review*, LXXVII (1972), 625-637. No ethnic breakdown is given in the clergy reports nor in the *Census Reports* prior to 1844 when the Irish Catholics were somewhat less than 4000 as compared with 14,632 French Canadians. (Exact Irish Catholic figures cannot be given because 13,190 people in Stanstead and Shefford Counties were not classified according to religion. However 17,444 Catholics were counted, as well as 5236 Irish of both religions.)

⁵² See J.I. LITTLE, "The Parish and French Canadian Migrants to Compton County, Quebec, 1851-1891," *Histoire sociale—Social History*, XI, no. 21 (May 1978), 134-143.

⁵³ Michael Cross had found that during the twenties and thirties there were many renegades and incompetents among the Irish clergy of the Ottawa Valley. Michael CROSS, "The Shiner's War: Social Violence in the Ottawa Valley in the 1830's," *Canadian Historical Review*, LIV (1973), 9-10.