

**Father Edmund Burke:
Along the Detroit River Frontier,
1794-1797**

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Edmund Burke's priestly and episcopal career, which spanned forty-four years, took him to four very different parts of the Catholic world: Ireland, Quebec, Upper Canada and finally Nova Scotia. Much of his public life was marred by factional fighting typical of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century clerical politics. The time he spent in Upper Canada as that province's Vicar-General and Superintendent of the Missions, from 1794 to 1801, was no exception. In light of his subsequent transfer to Nova Scotia, where he became the first Vicar Apostolic in 1816, previous biographers have tended to downplay the importance of Burke's seven-year struggle to regularize the Church's sacramental and administrative life in the western portion of the diocese of Quebec. In particular, they have glossed over Burke's three years along the Detroit River frontier. Nowhere in Upper Canada did the Irish clergyman exert himself more in the name of the Catholic faith and in defence of its morals, and nowhere did he fail so miserably to win the people and their priests to his side. He also failed to rid the region of its adherence to republican principles, then in vogue because the expansion-minded Americans already had a republic of their own.

There are reasons for Burke's having failed, of course, and they will become apparent as this essay unfolds. By way of introduction, however, let it be noted that Edmund Burke was a capable and ambitious man. He was sensitive to his times and, to a certain degree, he was able to predict the changing face of the Church in Upper Canada. This unofficially Protestant province was to become home for literally thousands of Irish, Scottish and English Catholics in the nineteenth century.

Burke's greatest flaw was his disputatious and undiplomatic nature. Like many of his generation, he was no stranger to controversy and even relished a good battle with his adversaries, regardless of their religious affiliation or political inclination. One of Burke's greatest impediments when he served the predominantly French-speaking Church along the Detroit River was his staunch loyalism. Although bitter about the legal and social status of the

Catholic Church in Ireland,¹ Burke believed that the welfare of Catholics in British North America would best be served by having cordial relations with the government of the day. This never sat well with the French in Upper Canada, and they were to cause him considerable pain and embarrassment throughout his ministry. An examination of Burke's life, between 1794 and 1797, will provide us with some insights into his personality, his style of administration, and his hope for the future of Catholicism outside of Lower Canada. In addition, it will give us a glimpse of parochial life at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Prior to his coming to Upper Canada, Burke had held several important ecclesiastical positions. He was born in the parish of Maryborough, Queen's County, Ireland in 1753. As a candidate for the priesthood, he was sent to study at the University of Paris, where he distinguished himself in mathematics and philosophy while at the same time demonstrating proficiency in Latin, Greek and Hebrew.² His was a classical education. In 1776 he was ordained a priest for the diocese of Kildare and Leighlin. For the next ten years he served his home diocese, first as parish priest of the town of Kildare and later as Vicar-General, two distinctions rarely achieved by one so tender in years and experience.³ If it had not been for an unfortunate and nasty squabble over the choice of a coadjutor for Dr. James O'Keefe, the bishop of Kildare and Leighlin, Burke might have remained in Ireland all his life. His vociferous support of a Dr. Delany for the position of coadjutor, however, cost him the respect of many of the diocesan clergy. Delany's election in 1783 caused such intense opposition, Burke heeded the advice of the Archbishop of Dublin, Dr. Carpenter, and quitted the diocese and eventually Ireland. Burke exiled himself for the sake of peace and harmony within the diocese, knowing full well that his continuing presence there would only cause further scandal to a church not only disabled by the penal laws but also dissipated by its own petty quarrels.

In early 1786 Burke came into contact with Father Thomas Hussey, a fellow Irishman who happened to be the London agent for Bishop d'Esglis. Hearing that the bishop of Quebec wanted at least one Scottish and one Irish missionary,⁴ Burke decided to join Father Joachim Roderick Macdonell and sail for Quebec that summer. By September 17, 1786 they had arrived safely

¹ Leonora A. Merrigan, *Life and Times of Edmund Burke in Nova Scotia, 1801-1820* (Halifax: St. Mary's University, 1971), p. 1.

² *Ibid.*

³ M. Comerford, *Collections Relating to the Diocese of Kildare and Leighlin* (Dublin: 1883), Vol. 1, p. 227.

⁴ Quebec Archdiocese, *Mandements, Lettres Pastorales et Circulaires des Évêques de Quebec; publiés par Mgr. Têtu et l'abbé C.-O. Gagnon* (Quebec: Imprimerie Générale A. Cote et Cie. 1888), Vol. II, p. 428.

in the cathedral city. Father Macdonell was immediately sent to the Glengarry District where he was official Catholic Chaplain to the Highlanders. On the recommendation of Lord Sydney, he was given a government stipend by Lieutenant-Governor Hamilton.⁵ Father Burke, meanwhile, was posted to the Seminary. He was made professor of mathematics and philosophy, and taught for nearly five years, becoming during that time a popular and distinguished lecturer despite some difficulties he encountered conducting classes in French.

On July 7, 1788, nearly two years after he had come to Canada, Burke wrote his first letter to Dr. John Thomas Troy, Archbishop of Dublin since 1786 and soon one of Burke's closest friends and trusted advisers. In a fit of melancholy he told Troy why he had left Kildare:

You must, My Lord, have heard of the several parties and factions which divided the Diocese of Kildare previous to the appointment of Doctor Delany to the coadjutorship of that distracted See. I was thought to possess the confidence and direct the motions of the late Bishop (tho' I never interfered in his business, nor would he permit any man) consequently I incurred ambition, and after a long struggle was forced to give way to its resentment. Your predecessor Doctor Carpenter (who was pleased to honour me with his esteem) advised me to imitate Jonas. I did so, and friendless and moneyless a stranger and unknown I arrived in Quebec, obtained a place in the seminary which requires greater talents than these with which the author of nature was pleased to bless me.⁶

In August 1789 the colonial administration, in the person of Chief Justice Sir William Smith, proposed to Bishop François Hubert the establishment of a religiously and culturally mixed university. The proposal was certainly a novelty, but it had the approbation of Lord Dorchester, the Governor-in-Chief of British North America. The idea attracted a favourable opinion from Bishop Bailly de Messein, coadjutor to Bishop Hubert from 1788 to 1794, and from Father Burke, who was willing to compromise on the question of higher education. The bishop, he believed, could ill afford any additional erosion of his position in Canadian society. The government did not recognize his title or the right to be referred by it. Burke felt that Dorchester was planning to curtail the bishop's jurisdiction even further by taking away his right to appoint parish priests. This anticipated move could be blunted if Hubert proved himself amenable on the rather innocuous

⁵ Public Archives of Canada [PAC], *Report on Canadian Archives: 1896* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1897), p. 74.

⁶ Public Archives of Nova Scotia [PANS], Edmund Burke, *Letters*, No. I, *Burke Papers*, Vol. 1, Microfilm Reel No. 2.

question of mixed education.⁷ Burke also realized that without a university Canadian society would be slow in developing her own professional class capable of competing against the small but privileged English minority. In the end, the bishop refused to relinquish his control over the higher education of Catholics under his pastoral care, and the university was never built. Throughout the debate Burke kept a low profile, not wishing to insult or upset either the bishop or the Governor. But he made sure that his conciliatory and liberal-minded opinions made their way to Lord Dorchester, who was apparently pleased at Father Burke's good will. He later let the priest know how much he appreciated his support.

After four years of teaching, Burke seemed to have tired of the classroom and of the government restrictions placed on the teaching of religion. He wondered if his talents were calling him to a radically different ministry. In a letter of October 20, 1790, he wrote to Archbishop Troy about his desires to leave the Seminary and become a genuine missionary:

There is a vast extent of country north of the lakes, beginning at Lake Ontario, and running westwards to Lake Minitti, and thence to the Pacific Ocean, possessed or claimed by England, in which, though there are a great number of posts and several Indian villages whose inhabitants are Catholics, there is not, nor has there been a single missionary since the conquest of this province. There is not on earth a country where missionaries are more wanted, or a country more difficult of access to strangers, it being absolutely necessary to have a passport from the Governor. I have been so cautious in my political conduct since my arrival in Quebec that I have at length (T.G.[Thank God]) set all prejudices aside, and am on the best terms with the Governor and all the general officers, so that I can obtain a passport when I please, and permission to establish a mission in whatever quarter I please. I have no doubt of being able to obtain a pension from government for the support of a missionary. Let us, therefore, request that you will, My Lord, graciously please to write to the Cardinal Prefect of the Propaganda to obtain a mission for me in that region; and as the sacrament of confirmation was never administered to those poor Catholics, a power of administering that sacrament would be of infinite use, if His Holiness should think proper to grant it, with any other indulgence which may be for the spiritual welfare of an hitherto abandoned people.⁸

Troy immediately obliged Father Burke by writing to Cesare Brancadore, the titular Archbishop of Nisibis and Superior of Missions in the

⁷ Cornelius O'Brien, *Memoirs of the Rt. Rev. Edmund Burke* (Ottawa: Thoburn and Co., 1894), pp. 10-11.

⁸ PANS, *op. cit.*, No. 4.

Netherlands. Troy asked his friend if it would be possible to have Father Burke designated as an official missionary to Canada's western territories. If the territory in question fell under the jurisdiction of the bishop of Quebec, François Hubert, and not under that of the bishop of Baltimore, John Carroll, and if the British approved the sending of a Catholic missionary to these parts, Troy was of the opinion that Burke would be the right man. In closing his letter, Troy asked Brancadore to forward his letter and Burke's petition to Cardinal Antonelli, the Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of the Propaganda Fide and the Vatican official directly responsible for the missions. Troy's correspondence was dated December 31, 1790.⁹

Burke apparently bypassed Bishop Hubert in his initial attempt to have himself made an apostolic missionary to what he called the Canadian Northwest. Hubert seems to have been surprised by Cardinal Antonelli's letter of April 6, 1791, asking for additional information on Burke, a priest of the Diocese of Quebec who had petitioned the Holy See concerning a transfer to the Canadian missions.¹⁰ Hubert's reply of October 25, 1791 was essentially a diplomatic note of caution. On the one hand, he described Burke as "prudent, learned, sound in faith and correct in morals; that in the Seminary of which he was one of the directors he had taught with much applause the course in Philosophy; that he was versed in the Scriptures, in Theology and Canon Law."¹¹ On the other hand, however, Hubert told Antonelli that Burke "had left the Seminary to take charge of souls in a mission, with which he was fully satisfied; but he (the bishop) did not think he would remain long in it by reason of a certain inconsistency of character"¹²

The mission Hubert referred to was Saint-Pierre and Saint-Laurent, two parishes on the Ile d'Orleans, where Burke seems to have prospered in his sacerdotal duties. His two years as a parish priest in Quebec were probably the most serene of his career in Canada. The faithful were content with their priest, whose Irishness, higher education and professorial accomplishments made him a curiosity for many, and their priest in turn was satisfied with the progress of religion and the enhancement of the faith in his people.¹³ There is no evidence to suggest anything to the contrary. But Hubert never explained what he meant by "a certain inconsistency of character." It was a

⁹ Archives of the Sacred Congregation of the Propaganda Fide, *Scritture riferite nei congressi S. C.*, Vol. 894 (1792), 170rv-171rv. (From "Inventory of Propaganda Archives," St. Paul's University, Ottawa).

¹⁰ Quebec Provincial Archives [QPA], *Rapport de L'Archiviste de la Province de Québec* (Québec: Imprimeur de Sa Majeste Le Roy, 1920-64), Vol. 11, p. 247.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 265. O'Brien, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-11.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ O'Brien, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

phrase whose power to persuade Antonelli to say “no” to Burke lay in its ambiguity. Hubert finished his letter by claiming that Illinois, where Burke wanted to be stationed, belonged to the bishop of Baltimore and Detroit, where any missionary from the Diocese of Quebec to the western district would be located, already had two priests and was not in need of a third. As a sop to Burke and his influential petitioner in Dublin, Archbishop Troy, Hubert closed his communication with Rome by promising his full support for Father Burke if the Holy See decided in its wisdom to make him a Vicar Apostolic.

This was an easy promise for Bishop Hubert to have made to Cardinal Antonelli. At this time there was no serious move afoot to have the western portion of the Diocese of Quebec erected into a Vicariate Apostolic. In regards to Father Burke, it is not clear from his preliminary letters to Archbishop Troy, or even from correspondence as late as 1797, that he was presenting himself for the post of Vicar Apostolic of what became Upper Canada in 1791. “Apostolic missionary,” the only phrase employed by Burke to describe his priestly ambitions, from 1790 to 1797, is open to various interpretations. It is unrecognizable canonically and could mean Apostolic Prefect as much as Vicar Apostolic. The former is the lowest rank of quasi-episcopal authority in a mission territory under the jurisdiction of Propaganda Fide. The latter, however, implies full powers of a bishop and the right to supervise the local clergy. When Burke was created Vicar Apostolic for Nova Scotia, there is no doubt that he was the driving force behind Rome’s decision to divide the huge Diocese of Quebec into more manageable portions. He actually visited Rome in 1815 and presented his case before the cardinals. But it is not easy to discern whether or not this was Burke’s motivation in 1790. He may have simply wanted official Roman recognition of his wish for missionary status. But we are aware of Hubert’s opinions on the matter: he believed that Burke wanted nothing less than to become a Vicar Apostolic. What surprises one, these many years later, is how he ever came to that conclusion. It certainly affected – one might say distorted – his relationship with Burke.

The whole affair may have ended with Hubert’s last letter to Antonelli if secular politics had not intervened on Burke’s behalf. To counteract the republican mischief-making of a certain Dominican priest by the name of Jean-Antoine Le Dru, who was thought to be stirring up trouble at the French settlement of Rivière-aux-Raisins – now Monroe, Michigan – Lieutenant-Governor John Graves Simcoe had requested Lord Dorchester to send him a “loyal good clergyman of the Church of Rome.”¹⁴ The request was some

¹⁴ John Graves Simcoe, *The Correspondence of Lieutenant-Governor John Graves Simcoe, With Allied Documents Relating to his Administration of the Government of Upper Canada*, collected and edited by E. A. Cruikshank (Toronto: Ontario

what unorthodox, but Simcoe felt that he had no choice except to conscript a Catholic priest to bring the people of Rivière-aux-Raisins back to their senses. Negotiations on a boundary treaty, involving the United States and British Canada, were progressing smoothly, so it was imperative for Simcoe to ensure tranquility along the disputed frontier. Any last-minute eruption of republican sentiments amongst the French would have been a disaster for Simcoe's administration. Remembering Father Burke's moderate stance on the university question in 1789, Lord Dorchester prevailed upon Bishop Hubert to release Burke from his parochial duties. The bishop readily consented – he did not have much leeway in the matter – and Burke quite naturally jumped at the opportunity.

In a letter to Cardinal Antonelli, dated November 21, 1794, Hubert apprized the Prefect of Propaganda of his decision to send Burke to Upper Canada. He also reiterated his earlier assessment of Burke and repeated the idea of his inconsistent character. Once again, the bishop did not elaborate on this:

In sending Rev. Edmund Burke in September last to minister to Canadians living along Raisin River, seven leagues from Detroit, I gave him a commission of Vicar General for the whole of Upper Canada, but gave him no reason to hope for anything more; for because of a certain inconsistency of character that he has shown these last years, I do not believe him suitable to be an Apostolic Prefect nor to prepare the way for the erection of a new bishopric.¹⁵

Father Burke was ecstatic. He wasted little time preparing himself for the arduous journey that awaited him and, on September 14, 1794, the eve of his departure, he wrote the following letter to Archbishop Troy:

My Lord:

Tomorrow, I set out from Quebec with provisions from the Bishop as ample as possible, and with orders from the Governor to all the Officers at the different posts to furnish the necessary conveyances to the Upper Country: *A Domino factum est istud* [May God see that it happens]. Government here is more zealous in the support and extension of the Catholic religion than in any other country on earth; in sound policy they act judiciously; but 't is yet astonishing that a Protestant Government should pay the expenses of sending Catholic Missionaries, and supporting them, not only amongst the Indian Nations, but even amongst the civilized

Historical Society, 1923-1931), Vol. 111, p. 90.

¹⁵ QPA, *op. cit.*, Vol. 11, pp. 209-10.

people; yet 't is not more surprising than true. I must request that Your Grace will please to let Cardinal Antonelli know that a more favorable occasion of sending a Missionary to the Upper Country has happened [i.e., has not happened], and the Bishop, in compliance with His Eminence's orders, has immediately appointed your humble servant. Many in the diocese would have filled the place with greater advantage. I now begin to feel the folly of having desired so great a field; 't was an act of levity. I'm not equal to the task; may God, of His infinite mercy, support me. Many different Nations, whose languages I don't understand, expect instructions: *Parvuli petierunt panem, et non eras qui frangeret eis* [The poor asked for bread and there was no one to break it for them].¹⁶

On the day Burke left for Rivière-aux-Raisins, Bishop Hubert wrote a series of letters giving notice of Father Edmund Burke's appointment as Vicar-General and Superintendent of Missions in Upper Canada. To Simcoe, Hubert wrote that he was sending "Fr. Edmund Burke, an Irish priest who, in the eight years he has lived in this country, has given unequivocal proof of his loyalty and attachment to the government under which we have had the privilege of living." In addition, the bishop recommended Burke to Colonel England of the 24th Regiment then stationed at Fort Detroit, and to Father Pierre Frechette, parish priest at St. Anne's Church. Both men were advised of Father Burke's status as Vicar-General and of his specific assignment to Rivière-aux-Raisins. To Father François-Xavier Dufaux, parish priest at L'Assomption and a veteran clergyman of the diocese, Hubert wrote that Father Burke was to be treated as his Superior. This Irish priest, he added, as if to smooth the man's entry into the rough world of frontier politics, is a "sociable man, whose conversation edifies, and who is especially highly recommended for his profound learning." Bishop Hubert had once been the parish priest of L'Assomption, from 1781 to 1785, and was well aware of the difficulties in store for any priest seeking his vocation there. He may not have been too confident of Burke's abilities to endure what surely was an inhospitable political climate for one so loyal to the crown, and he may have underestimated Burke's stamina to survive on the fringes of civilization. The last item of business covered by the bishop in his letter to Dufaux was the formal banning of Father Le Dru from the Diocese of Quebec. The Dominican was suspended from any further employment therein.¹⁷

After a brief stopover in Kingston, where he disciplined Father Alexander Macdonell (Scotus) for not wearing his ecclesiastical habit and for

¹⁶ George Paré, *The Catholic Church in Detroit, 1701-1888* (Detroit: Gabriel Richard Press, 1951), pp. 246-47.

¹⁷ QPA, *op. cit.*, Vol. 11, p. 305.

spending too much time in Montreal,¹⁸ by mid-October Burke was in Niagara where he had a lengthy and successful interview with Simcoe. The latter came away from the arranged meeting with a most favourable opinion of the Irish missionary. Writing to Alexander McKee, the Superintendent of Indian Affairs at Detroit, on October 22, 1794, the Lieutenant-Governor gave his reasons why he was sending Burke into what had lately become a hornets' nest of republican agitation:

Dear Sir,

I beg to introduce to you Mr. Burke, a Romish Clergyman. This Gentleman had been sent down to Detroit purposely to operate on the Riviere au Raisin, whose Inhabitants requested Pere Le Dru: a Jacobin Emissary for their Minister.

Mr. Burke is furnished with the most respectable recommendations, of his Loyalty Education & Understanding, & in the handsomest Manner has offered to exert their Influence, & that of some Ecclesiastical Authority which He possesses over the other Priests in the support of his Majesty's Government.

I have particularly requested him to consult with you on all occasions in the most confidential Manner being the Person in whom I (& his Majesty's Ministers) repose the most unbounded Confidence. I believe He will be serviceable in checking the rum traffic. My Dear Colonel ten thousand thanks for your late civilities which I shall be happy to return whenever It shall be in my power.

I am with great truth your faithful serv't

J.G. SIMCOE¹⁹

In Simcoe's mind the things of Caesar had become conveniently confused with the things of God. For him Father Burke was a government agent whose role was political and practical. He was to stem the tide of republican sentiments by replacing the Dominican Le Dru, who had become so popular that the settlers had once petitioned the government to have him appointed their parish priest.²⁰ The Indians, too, had to be brought back into the British fold. Burke's coming to the Detroit River region, then, was the

¹⁸ PANS, *op. cit.*, Letter of October 24, 1794.

¹⁹ Simcoe, *op. cit.*, Vol. V, p. 116.

²⁰ *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966--), Vol. IV, p. 445.

result of a political decision taken by Simcoe to guarantee Le Dru's banishment while the boundary negotiations were still in process.

As for Burke, he seemed to understand the nature of his engagement as a Commissary in the Department of Indian Affairs. He certainly never had any hesitation about being recruited, so to speak, "to counteract the Machinations of Jacobin Emissaries, whose influences amongst the Settlers and numerous Tribes of surrounding Indians, might, not to say infallibly would, have caused an Insurrection, the consequences of which might prove fatal to the King's 24th Regiment then stationed in the Forts of Detroit & the Miamis (near Toledo), about Eighty miles distant one from the other, the strong settlement of the River Raisin meeting between."²¹ This, anyway, is what he told Lord Hobart in a memorandum written in 1803. Like many others, Father Burke was horrified by the excesses of the French Revolution and anything resembling it in the New World was to be despised automatically. The interests of the Catholic faith and of the Church could best be advanced if Catholics worked with the government to rid British Canada of any vestiges of republicanism.

Concerning Father Le Dru, Burke took pity on him when he visited the Dominican in jail at Fort Niagara.²² Le Dru was eventually deported to Fort Oswego but, according to a letter from Bishop John Carroll of Baltimore to Bishop Hubert, Le Dru may have made his way back to Rivière-aux-Raisins only to cause Burke additional headaches in the administration of the parish.²³

A less than enthusiastic reception was awaiting the Vicar-General once he arrived in early November. Although Father Dufaux showed Burke every outward courtesy, his coolness towards the man was revealed in a thoroughly caustic letter he sent Bishop Hubert on November 7, 1794. In it he told the bishop he was glad the people of Rivière-aux-Raisins were finally acquiring a priest of their own, especially one of such "well known merit. They were sadly in need of one. My opinion is that he will suit the congregation of River Raisin very well, but I doubt if the River Raisin will suit him."²⁴ One wonders if Dufaux delighted in the disaster that awaited the bookish Burke as he set out to meet his boorish parishioners.

At first, matters went smoothly for Father Burke. On November 16, 1794 the parish accepted Mr. Joseph Iraque's donation of land for a church,

²¹ Simcoe, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, p. 246.

²² PANS, *op. cit.*, Letter of October 23, 1794.

²³ John Gilmary Shea, *Life and Times of the Most Rev. John Carroll, Bishop and First Archbishop of Baltimore, Embracing the History of the Catholic Church in the United States, 1763-1815* (New York: John G. Shea, 1888), p. 479.

²⁴ Camillus Maes, *A History of the Catholic Church in Monroe City and County, Mich. (n.p.: n.d.)*, pp. 4-5.

and chose St. Anthony of Padua as patron saint. Everything was conducted in an atmosphere of peace and co-operation. In December Burke was able to report to Hubert that “the good people here are beginning to turn to God; I have no reason to complain.”²⁵ On January 4, 1795, Burke presided over the election of Mr. Martin Nadeau as a trustee, and a year later, on January 6, 1796, he witnessed the election of a second trustee, Mr. John Dussault.²⁶

Between these two elections, however, Burke’s world collapsed around him once he tried to stop the local traffic in liquor. From the pulpit he exhorted his parishioners to abandon this evil and inexcusable commerce, but the more he preached on the topic, the more he insulted his congregation. Trading in liquor with the neighbouring Indians was so much a part of the local economy Burke was, in effect, asking his people to forsake their livelihoods in return for the dubious prospect of greater rewards in the hereafter. This they were unwilling to do, and Burke was just as adamant when it came to the rigours of morality. Before long many saw him as one of Simcoe’s stooges, a man to be feared but not necessarily respected, and Burke in return held them all in contempt.

On February 2, 1795 he wrote a lengthy epistle to Archbishop Troy. It says a lot about local politics and Burke’s frame of mind after being at the frontier for less than four months. After describing the Battle of Fallen Timbers (August 20, 1794), which saw four thousand Americans under General Wayne defeat a force of about twelve hundred Indians, Burke continues by painting a most unflattering picture of his mission:

I am here in the midst of Indians, all heathens. This day a grand council as held in my house by the Ottawas, Chippawas and Poutowatomis. These people receive a certain quantity of Indian corn from government, and I have been appointed to distribute it, that gives me a consequence amongst them which I hope will be useful, as soon as I can speak their language, which is not very difficult.

This is the last and most distant parish inhabited by Catholics on this earth. In it is neither law, justice, nor subjection; you never meet a man, either Indian or Canadian, without his gun in his hand and his knife at his breast. My house is on the banks of a river which falls in the lake, full of fish and fowl of all sorts. The finest climate in the world and the most fertile lands, but no industry. The Indian lives on hunting. the Canadian resembles him nearly. At night the howling of wolves in pursuit of deer. the growling of the bear, the hissing of the rattlesnake, the war-whoop of the Indian and the sound of his rifle are rather disagreeable sounds, but not at all uncommon.

²⁵ *PANS, op. cit.* Letter of December 13, 1794.

²⁶ *Maes, op. cit.*, pp. 6-7.

So much for the country, now as to my mission. I am in the administration of Upper Canada, with every Episcopal power, except what requires the Episcopal Order; yet I find a very great want of power, for here the limits of jurisdiction are uncertain and unsettled. The very parish in which I live May be a subject of dispute between the Bishop of Quebec and Baltimore, though it be distant 400 or 500 leagues from either. That gives me some uneasiness. I know no jurisdiction certain but that of His Holiness; besides, confirmation is a sacrament here totally unknown, in a country where there are some thousands of Catholics.²⁷

On the same day he wrote Troy in Dublin, Burke sent Bishop Hubert a very gloomy report on his mission at Rivière-aux-Raisins. He told him that when he first came to the settlement he found the people there up-in-arms against Father Frechette from St. Anne's. He blamed General Wayne and his emissaries for all the nonsense about their wanting or needing Father Le Dru. "These same scoundrels," he continued, "had urged them (the parishioners) to draft and sign an agreement to resist civil authority, and would have driven them much further if by accident I had been delayed a week." To make matters worse, the lower part of the parish was battling the upper; the Hurons were feeling neglected by Father Dufaux and, speaking of Dufaux, Burke had punished him by taking away his extraordinary powers. The Vicar-General was convinced that Dufaux should be replaced by a community of priests who would be assisted, he hoped, by a convent of at least ten nuns whose task it would be to teach the young girls of L'Assomption. The report ended with a ringing denunciation of the low moral standards of his parishioners. He called them a "gang of brigands. It is as if this were the home of murder, theft, rape, living in sin, drunkenness and impiety." They were, furthermore, "scoundrels who go among the savages and who are a thousand times worse than the savages themselves."²⁸

Two incidents sealed Burke's fate on the north side of the Detroit River. When James Baby, the new Lieutenant of the County of Kent, requested a pew of honour in St. Anne's Church, Fort Detroit, he was opposed by Mrs. Hay, the widow of the late Lieutenant-Governor of the fort. Passions ran high as the parishioners took sides in the dispute, which had all the makings of a real brouhaha. Father Burke was called upon to settle the quarrel before it erupted into a first-class Donnybrook. He was prepared to support Baby's bid for the pew, believing that his title gave him pre-eminent claim to the honour. Fortunately for the parish, Mrs. Hay died quite suddenly, thereby ending a possible schism at St. Anne's, but Burke's standing in the community was seriously tarnished by his siding with Baby in the first place.

²⁷ PANS, *op. cit.*, No. 6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Letter of February 2, 1795.

Burke may have been technically correct in his reasons for supporting Baby's request, but it was tactless and definitely impolitic of him to have broadcast his intense dislike of Mrs. Hay and her faction at the fort. He simply forgot the dignity of his office. He committed another blunder when in April he travelled to Sandusky – now a part of the modern state of Ohio – where he tried in vain to dissuade the Wyandots from renouncing their traditional allegiance to the British Crown. He also beseeched them not to forget the many good things the Bishop of Quebec had done for them. Lastly, he warned them against the evils of American rum.²⁹ Burke's impromptu harrangue incensed General Wayne, who was then trying to convene a conference of all the Indian tribes he had defeated at the Battle of Fallen Timbers.

May and June of 1795 were busy months in the life of Edmund Burke. Sometime in May he received a communication from Bishop Hubert, congratulating him on his zeal and for having been awarded a government stipend of fifty pounds. But the bishop went on to warn his embattled Vicar-General that his parish at Rivière-aux-Raisins and Father Frechette's at St. Anne's would soon be in the Diocese of Baltimore.³⁰ Burke's reaction to this upsetting news may be found in a letter to Archbishop Troy, dated May 20, 1795. He gave an updated picture of his mission:

The Sans Culotte emissaries kept me in continual danger of my life. Murder is no crime amongst them; to avoid it I have been obliged to keep two Christian Indians well armed, who slept in my room together with a hardy Canadian. I never walked out but in company and always armed. Yet I had the consolation to see some people make their Easter Communion, who have been absent twenty or thirty Years back. I have lived entirely at the expense of the Government and under its protection. As I am stationed on the Canadian lands, which are ceded to the Americans, I must change my quarters. And a Mr. Frechette, a Canadian clergyman, who resides in the Fort, tells me that he intends to go down to Lower Canada; that embarasses me. I wrote by this post to the Bishop of Baltimore, to give him notice that if he can send two clergymen to occupy the vacant parishes I will give them the necessary faculties. I do not know where his jurisdiction ends, nor do I believe that he knows it himself. These regions are immense; and capable of occupying a number of missionaries, if there were means to support them.³¹

On May 27, 1795 Burke addressed a long-winded tirade to G.E. Littlehales, a colonial civil servant, in which the priest poured ample scorn

²⁹ Simcoe, *op. cit.*, Vol. IV, p. 9.

³⁰ QPA, *op. cit.*, Vol. 11, p. 306.

³¹ PANS, *op. cit.*, No. 5.

and invective upon the heads of liquor merchants, assassins, sans-culottes, Yankees, and traitors to the Crown. He also mentioned the infighting between James Bâby and the commandant at Fort Detroit, both of whom he mercilessly harpooned for their petty intrigues.³² Littlehales must have been dumbfounded as he read Burke's letter, and he received another one, dated June 17, 1795, this time containing a warning that General Wayne was buying large tracts of Indian land in exchange for American rum.³³ Alexander McKee, the Superintendent of Indian Affairs at Fort Detroit, was next in line for a blast from Burke's polemical pen. This time Burke was worried that any alliance between the Indians of his parish and the British was a virtual impossibility. What was troubling Burke, but which did not seem to disturb the local authorities, was Wayne's clever and calculated attempt to dovetail American interests in the region with the limited aspirations of the Indians he had crushed at Fallen Timbers. Once Wayne had shown the Indians a true copy of Jay's Treaty, he was able to conclude the Treaty of Grenville by August 3, 1795. This was the *coup de grâce* for Burke, who was warned by Littlehales, in a letter dated June 26, 1795, that the evacuation of the posts in the District of Detroit was inevitable as soon as the boundary between Upper Canada and the United States was fixed.³⁴

The Vicar-General, exhausted in his efforts to serve both Church and State, saw defeat staring him in the face. Bitter for having failed to keep the District of Detroit in British hands and as part of the Diocese of Quebec, he wrote to both Littlehales and Bishop Hubert, on August 15th and 28th respectively, letting go his final denunciations of General Wayne.³⁵ Burke's conduct must have ruffled a few feathers since General Wayne and Colonel John Francis Hamtramck had seriously considered jailing him.³⁶ In the end nothing of this sort transpired. Burke left Detroit and environs, unharmed, on July 4, 1796, seven days before the fort and adjoining territory was handed over to the Americans.³⁷

Between the summers of 1795 and 1796, Burke was caught up in another and more serious pew controversy, one which finally drove him away from the Detroit River frontier. In the early autumn of 1795 Burke wrote Father Dufaux, by now one of the Irishman's most constant and vociferous critics, asking him to assign a pew of honour in his parish church for François Bâby, the Deputy-Lieutenant for Essex County. Resentful of his

³² Simcoe, *op. cit.*, Vol. IV, pp. 19-23.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 62-65.

³⁶ Paré, *op. cit.*, p. 251.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

recent ecclesiastical demotion, Dufaux took no action on the matter. He was hardly in the mood to satisfy the whims of some petty royal official and, having been parish priest since 1786, he knew the political leanings of his parishioners well enough to let them decide for themselves whether or not Bâby and his family merited a special place in the church. Bâby, meanwhile, became impatient for Dufaux's approval and proceeded to have his pew constructed. This impertinence prompted Dufaux to pen a most scathing attack on Bâby and his main clerical supporter, Father Burke. Dufaux told Bishop Hubert, on October 9, 1795, that Bâby had "a pew made that is higher, wider and deeper by at least four or five inches than any other pew. Moreover, there is a platform inside that raises it by one step covered by an ample green carpet. Unknown to me the said pew was erected in the place occupied by the school girls who are there observed by Miss Victoire, their teacher – i.e., between the railing and the first pew in the row of the warden's pew."³⁸ Of Burke he compiled the following charges:

It is impossible to imagine to what extent Father Burke has disturbed our parishes. For the past two weeks he has been at Ste. Anne's and Assumption trying to elaborate titles for Mr. Baby and sugar-coating pills to have them swallowed more easily by my wardens. But he did not succeed. He is causing trouble everywhere. He does not scruple about absenting himself from his parish for two or three Sundays in a row, and likewise for the feast of All Saints, All Souls, and Ascension, etc. He follows no ecclesiastical rule or regulation, hardly ever wearing his habit. There are many things that I don't want to mention that lead to much public slander. Nearly all the people I meet speak ill of him.³⁹

These sentiments were repeated in a letter, dated October 23, 1795, written by Father Frechette and sent to Bishop Hubert. In part he claimed that "Burke has brought trouble to our parishes. In his own he has alienated the greater part of his parishioners from their Christian duties by his words, his violent discourses, and by his conduct somewhat too relaxed for this section. ..."⁴⁰

Dufaux's initial hesitation to allow Bâby his precious pew meant that the parishioners at L'Assomption could take matters into their own hands. They were so scandalized by Bâby's effrontery that they immediately turned to the

³⁸ Ernest J. Lajeunesse, *The Windsor Border Region: Canada's Southernmost Frontier: A Collection of Documents* (Toronto: The Champlain Society, Ontario Series IV, 1960), p. 146.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 146-47.

⁴⁰ Paré, *op.cit.*, p. 250.

three wardens, who picked up the pew and tossed it out of the church. This was not the end of the business, though, for Burke continued to press Bâby's claim. Bishop Hubert, having wisely washed his hands of the entire affair, deferred the matter to Simcoe. On June 7, 1796, Burke was able to procure the following judgement from the Lieutenant-Governor:

Having been informed that great difficulties have arisen respecting the occupation of a pew due to the Government in your church, at which I am greatly surprised; and the Bishop of Quebec leaving to me to determine who is the person who should have the enjoyment of it; I therefore pronounce that the said pew and the honours pertaining thereto are one of the privileges to which the Lieutenant, or, in his absence, the Deputy Lieutenant, had an undoubted right. You will accordingly be pleased to give directions that the same conduct which was observed formerly towards the French Commandant be now kept towards the person who will in future occupy the pew in question.⁴¹

In triumph Burke returned to L'Assomption from Niagara and delivered Simcoe's decision as well as a letter from Bishop Hubert. The Vicar-General demanded that both communications be read at Sunday Mass. Dufaux duly obliged Burke by reading Simcoe's judgement to the congregation, but he did not lift a finger when the three wardens – Pratt, Parent and Maisonville – tossed the pew out of the church for a second time, only a week after Bâby had orchestrated its reinstatement.⁴²

Defeated once again, Burke packed his baggage and departed from the scene, his authority as Vicar-General having completely evaporated. His intention was to visit Hubert and discuss his future in the Diocese of Quebec. During the summer of 1796, while he was in Lower Canada, Burke composed his famous "Memorial" to Bishop Hubert, in which he stated his firm conviction that the future of the Church in Upper Canada would be a prosperous one.⁴³ Many of his suggestions for the administration of the Church were eventually incorporated into his 1797 "Report on the Missions." This document was sent to Propaganda Fide by Archbishop Troy and, although it lay dormant during the difficult pontificate of Pius VII, it may have had an impact on the decision to create the Diocese of Kingston in 1826.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Simcoe, *op. cit.*, Vol. IV, p. 293. Lajeunesse, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

⁴² Lajeunesse, *op. cit.*, p. xcvi.

⁴³ PANS, *op. cit.*, Memoir to Bishop Hubert.

⁴⁴ Archives of the Sacred Congregation of the Propaganda Fide, *op. cit.* (1792-1830), Vol. II, pp. 69rv-71rv.

Once Burke was safely out of the parish, Father Dufaux wrote to the bishop, on July 6, 1796, claiming that Burke “is regretted neither at River Raisin, nor at St. Anne’s, nor at Assumption; and he is regretted by no one save myself who did everything I could to retain him. He is gone; God be praised.”⁴⁵ Later, on September 2, 1796, Dufaux wrote Hubert yet another time. He told the bishop how during supper with General Wayne he learned that “the general and all the officers detest Father Burke for the alarm he caused among the Indians when he was in the Department of Indian Affairs. It is a good thing that he has gone away, and I don’t believe it will be advantageous for him to return to these parts.”⁴⁶

Burke, however, did come back to L’Assomption for one last round over the pew of honour. While in Kingston, Burke learned of Father Dufaux’s sudden death, on September 11, 1796, and he hurried back to the parish where he was administrator for three months while he awaited the arrival of Father Jean-Baptiste Marchand. According to Marchand, who arrived at L’Assomption on Christmas Eve, he was greeted most cordially by Father Burke, who “immediately installed me, and I sang the High Mass.”⁴⁷ On the following Sunday, Marchand complied with Burke’s orders to deliver yet another ordinance regarding the controversial and oftentimes non-existent pew, despite the fact that Bâby himself had previously withdrawn his petition. But Marchand, only newly arrived, could do little to stop the thing from being uprooted and thrown out for a third time and the place where it sat auctioned off to a Mr. Goyeau. Marchand stood on the sidelines of the protracted dispute by simply telling Bâby and Goyeau that the problem was theirs and not his.⁴⁸ There the matter finally ended and Burke’s days along the Detroit River frontier came to a close.

It is difficult to draw many worthwhile conclusions from this three-year period in the priestly life of Father Edmund Burke. Indeed, to judge him only or primarily on the basis of his Detroit River frontier career would be unfair and not in the best interests of Catholic historiography. These years were certainly unproductive ones, consumed by many bitter and petty quarrels hardly worth the energy and passion spent on them. Burke’s successes were precious few and his failures were many. He was a zealous and ambitious man, never one to side-step controversy or shy to give his opinions. Although rarely remembered for his piety or religious fervor, the time he spent along the Detroit River illustrates the thorny problems then facing Catholics practically everywhere in Upper Canada. These problems included too few

⁴⁵ Paré, *op. cit.*, p. 253.

⁴⁶ Lajeunesse, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 151-52.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

clergy, a lack of religious discipline shared by both clergy and laity, the absence of an episcopal presence, and the inability to win the respect of the Protestant establishment. Burke did not resolve any of these issues – at times he was more of a problem than a solution – but as a devoted servant of God and the Church he tried his best to put the faith first before his own desires and needs. As a distinct chapter in his life, his days at Rivière-aux-Raisins, St. Anne's and L'Assomption can only help us to understand and appreciate better this man whose successes in Nova Scotia on behalf of the Church would earn him a place in the annals of Canadian Catholic history.