

The Early History of St. Michael's Parish, Baddeck, Nova Scotia

BY

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The Book of Proverbs enjoins us: "Remove not the ancient landmark." While Proverbs does not specify further, it is only reasonable for us to assume that this injunction meant that we were to preserve and to protect these ancient landmarks as well.

It is my intention to set forth here the information that I have been able to gather and piece together concerning the early days of our parish – St. Michael's, Baddeck, Nova Scotia.

To begin with, the town of Baddeck is almost in the geographical centre of Cape Breton Island, and is situated on the far-famed Bras d'Or Lakes. It is claimed that the Bras d'Or Lakes form the largest inland body of salt water in the world.

Although Baddeck is one of the oldest settlements in the Island of Cape Breton, it is only within comparatively recent times that it became widely known. In 1874 it became widely known through publication of a book entitled *Baddeck, And That Sort of Thing*, by the late Charles Dudley Warner of New York. Later it received wide advertising when it became the summer residence of the late Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone. It is here that the noted inventor is buried.

To understand properly the early history of St. Michael's parish we will have to hearken back to the Isle of Barra, Scotland. Barra is the southernmost island of the Outer Hebrides, that group of islands called in Gaelic, "Eilean Fada", – Long Island – lying far out in the Atlantic off the northwest coast of Scotland.

For generations it has been a stronghold of Catholicity: in spite of all the vicissitudes to which Barra and its people have been subjected, Catholics they remain to this day. Compton MacKenzie, a writer residing on the Isle, and himself a convert to the ancient faith, tells us in his *Book of Barra* that we have to turn to Jewry for a like example of adherence and fidelity to religion.

The faithful few who banded together in the early 1850's to build St. Michael's church, and to found St. Michael's parish, were, most of them, natives of the Isle of Barra, and the sons and daughters of immigrants from that hardly little island.

St. Michael's church was completed in 1858 after many set-backs and discouragements. From 1851 when the matter of erecting the place of worship was first mooted, there was considerable difficulty in finding the ground on which to erect it. There was no trouble in securing money – donations and the required material, as the few Catholics were glad and willing to make any sacrifice if by so doing they could have a church.

William Kidston, a native of Glasgow, Scotland, a man of violent prejudice against the Catholic Church and things Catholic, owned all the vacant land in the town of Baddeck. In fact we can say that he practically owned the town, as he had received a grant of all the land within the town limits. Mr Kidston did not want to see a Catholic church erected in Baddeck, and did not hesitate to say so. When first approached sometime previous to 1858, Mr. Kidston refused to sell the required real estate, telling the Catholics that he could not be a party to any plan that would make possible the erection of "a popish mass-house." I may remark in passing that none of this man's descendants live in Baddeck today, and for that matter, none of them holds any property whatsoever within the confines of Victoria county.

Faced with this opposition, the project was allowed to drop for a time, – there was nothing that the first parishioners could do to help themselves, – although the money to pay for the land, and some to be used in the erection of the building had been collected. It may be here said that Alexander MacLean (Alasdair 'ic Lachlann) of Lower Washabuck, was the first to agitate for the erection of a Catholic church in Baddeck, and others of that little community, – all devout sons of Barra Islesmen – contributed materially to its erection, – some with money, some with materials, and all of them with their labour.

It was in 1857 that John Murdoch MacNeil, of Lower Washabuck, visited Baddeck and obtained an interview with William Kidston, and negotiated with him for the purchase of a piece of property located in the centre of the town of Baddeck. It would appear that Kidston understood that John Murdoch MacNeil was desirous of moving to Baddeck, where his brother Hector had already taken up residence. He was successful in purchasing this piece of land which adjoined that of his brother.

This was the property that the little band of Catholics had been anxious to obtain from the first, and it did not require much persuasion on their part to induce John Murdoch MacNeil to sell the land to them. Indeed, it seems that MacNeil changed his mind about moving to Baddeck within a day or two after paying one hundred and sixty dollars for his quarter acre of ground.

The land was now in possession of MacNeil, and soon a building was seen in course of erection. To the observing it seemed at first glance as it began to take form that it was not at all like a house, and, – another thing, – there where ever so many carpenters at work around it. Then a great light began to dawn! To William

Kidston's amazement and chagrin, it was not a house that was being built, but a church.

St. Michael's was dedicated soon after its completion by the Most Rev. Colin Francis MacKinnon, Bishop of the Diocese of Antigonish, in the presence of practically all the Catholics within travelling distance.

The property remained in John Murdock MacNeil's possession until 1865, – he probably would be acting as a warden or trustee in the meantime, – and it was then deeded over to the Roman Catholic Episcopal Corporation of Arichat, as the episcopal corporation was then styled.

The writer has in his possession a copy of this deed, prepared and certified by the Registrar of Deeds for the County of Victoria, Nova Scotia, and in addition to the signatures of John Murdoch MacNeil and his wife Ann, (the wife made her "mark") it bears the signatures of Michael MacNeil (Gobha) and his son, Michael MacNeil Jr., as witnesses. It is interesting to note that this deed contains a provision, quoted from the Provincial Statutes, limiting the holdings of the Catholic corporation to property not exceeding 400 pounds in value in any one county. This would amount to approximately two thousand dollars.

This was one very effective way of preventing the erection of Catholic houses of worship, and it is very probably for this reason that the property was held in John Murdoch MacNeil's name until seven years later. Already a Catholic church had been erected in Ingonish, in the northern part of the county, and dedicated in 1843. It is only reasonable to assume that the combined value of both edifices would exceed two thousand dollars. This very unfair and discriminative legislation was repealed by the Legislature of Nova Scotia in 1884.

Naturally, William Kidston was not very well pleased with the way in which he had been outwitted, and did not disguise the fact, but the builders did not worry, – they kept right along with their work.

When the church was completed, it was noticed that the spire was decorated by the customary cross, which was surmounted by a rooster, out out of, and fashioned from sheet-iron. This iron rooster remained there until the church was undergoing repairs and renovation in 1900 during which time the late Father Lauchlin John MacPherson, of revered memory, was our parish priest. The rooster stands for vigilance in Christian symbolism, and although French Catholics use it widely on their steeples, Father MacPherson was not pleased to have it stand on the cross surmounting St. Michael's spire.

On a particular day, while the church was undergoing repairs, he happened to engage in conversation with David Hartigan of Baddeck River, who was at that time our oldest parishoner. In the course of the conversation it was brought out that Mr. Hartigan was one of the many present the day that the church was dedicated in 1858, – over forty years before. Father MacPherson asked him if he could give any explanation for the presence of the sheet-iron rooster that

surmounted the cross. What was the explanation of this unseemly thing? Why did they want to have a rooster surmounting the cross? At once the old gentleman replied that he had an explanation, and it was this: "THE ROOSTER WAS PLACED THERE TO CROW OVER OLD KIDSTON". Needless to say, Father MacPherson was able to appreciate the reason for the rooster appearing on the spire.

Today this sheet-iron rooster is considered to be a very interesting museum piece. It occupies a place of honour on the walls of the Municipal Clerk's office in the County Building at Baddeck. A short history is attached to it, setting forth some of the data referred to above.

The old church was a substantially built structure. Very heavy timbers were used throughout, – the rafters were all twelve inches square, and no nails or spikes were used in the framework; wooden trunnels were used instead. The original builders were engaged in a labour of love, and what they fashioned, they wished to endure as long as humanly possible.

It must not be assumed that the Catholics who lived in Baddeck and vicinity did not have the services of a priest before they were able to erect a church. While we may be certain that they would be visited by the priests who had charge of the Bras d'Or missions, and at a later date by the priest stationed at Christmas Island, we know definitely that the Rev. Father Julian Courteau, who was stationed at Cheticamp, in what is now Inverness county, used to minister to them. I recall very distinctly hearing the older residents of Baddeck speak of this Father Courteau.

They used to tell me how he would leave Cheticamp, where he had his residence, travelling on horseback to Margaree where he would stop off to minister to the Irish Catholics there before continuing his journey to Baddeck. While in Baddeck he at first lodged at the home of Hector MacNeil. Mrs. MacNeil was a French lady, née Virginia Marmout, a native of Arichat, Richmond county, and no doubt the good priest found it convenient to be there as they could converse in French. Later, Father Courteau stayed at the home of the Hon. Charles J. Campbell when he would come to Baddeck. Father Courteau and the Hon. Mr. Campbell, were very good friends although the latter was a non-Catholic, – a Presbyterian in religion. Indeed all throughout his long and useful life Mr. Campbell was a staunch friend of the little settlement of Scottish Catholics.

Another priest who visited Baddeck after Father Courteau's time, was the Rev. Eugene O'Reilly. He was stationed at Northeast Margaree, having emigrated from Ireland in company with a large number of Irish families who left the "Old Sod" to settle in Cape Breton. Father O'Reilly was ordained in Ireland in 1819. He died in 1859.

Mention must be made of Father Donald MacKinnon, in whose charge St. Michael's was for a few years. Father MacKinnon died at Christmas Island on

May 6th, 1862, a victim of a fever contracted while administering the last sacraments to one of his widely scattered flock at Lower Washabuckt. This parishoner was a young girl, Catherine MacNeil, 19 years of age. Newspapers published in Sydney, Nova Scotia, record the fact that “the Protestant merchants of Baddeck closed their stores on the day of the funeral.” This is not difficult to believe or understand, as the principal merchant of Baddeck in those days was the late Hon. Charles James Campbell, a man who was noted particularly for his friendliness and kindness to the Catholic clergy. The death of Father MacKinnon was an exemplification of the words of Holy Writ, “I am the Good Shepherd who layeth down his life for his flock.”

The descendants of the “Barramen” who founded the parish of St. Michael’s have, with very few exceptions, been faithful to the trust handed down to them, and they have always been ready and willing to sacrifice, and, if necessary, to fight for their faith.

In 1873 a party of Catholics coming from Washabuckt to attend Midnight Mass in St. Michael’s on Christmas Eve, came in contact with a party of Protestants who were assembled outside the church door, imitating the actions and gestures of the priest, who, at the time, was engaged in the most solemn ceremonies of the Mass. One of the offenders, a tailor named Matheson, was struck by Michael MacLean (Michaill Chalum) of Lower Washabuckt. Eye-witnesses have told me that only one blow was struck, and that blood poured from Matheson’s mouth, nose and ears. It was noted that Catholic worship was never disturbed or interfered with again.

Mention must be made of the four Irish Catholic families who resided at Baddeck River. Although living a considerable distance from the parish church nothing would deter them from attending Mass when the opportunity afforded. There are no Catholics residing at Baddeck River today. The last of the faithful Irish went to his reward a few years ago. I remember waiting, along with others, a few years ago in front of St. Michael’s church, for the arrival of the funeral cortege of the last of these faithful Irishmen. He was the last survivor of the Catholic families who settled there. The hearse (an express wagon) drew up in front of the church, – the driver was one of the deceased’s Protestant neighbours, and the procession was made up of practically every male Protestant residing at Baddeck River. They had looked after him in his last illness, and had taken care that a priest was called when he requested one, and now they were delivering his mortal remains to the church of his fathers.

It is worthy of note here that the Rev. Father Myles D. Kiely, who was permanent rector of St. Ann’s church, Gloucester, Mass., and who entered into his eternal reward four years ago, and his brother, His Grace the Most Reverend Moses M. Kiely, the present Archbishop of Milwaukee, are sons of the late John Kiely, at one time a resident of Baddeck River.

.When St. Michael's was completed in 1858 the parish obtained a bell from some friends residing in the Margarees. This bell was taken off a ship that had been wrecked on the Inverness county coast. It would weigh about two hundred pounds, and had the name and date "Ship John, 1801" in raised letters and figures on it. This bell served in the tower for thirty years, – until 1888 – when a much larger bell was purchased from the McShane Bell Foundry of Baltimore, U.S.A. This last bell cost five hundred dollars. I happen to know this, as my father was the Secretary-Treasurer of the parish at the time, and I used to glance over his letter files for many years after he had passed on.

In all the long history of this parish we have had only two resident pastors, – Father Lauchlin J. MacPherson previously referred to, and the Rt. Rev. Monsignor Donald MacIntosh. Father MacPherson came to the parish in 1901. At that time the church was in pretty much the same condition as it was when built. The interior was finished with plaster, and contained but one altar. Shortly after assuming charge of the parish, Father MacPherson had the old building renovated and remodelled. The plaster was replaced by sheathing, and two side altars were added. The vestry was enlarged to twice its original size, and it also was provided with an altar and furnished with pews, and it was here that he used to celebrate Mass on week-day mornings during the winter months. New window sashes and coloured glass windows were installed. The grounds surrounding the church were landscaped and trees planted. All this was accomplished with very little expense to the parish. Father MacPherson was a great man to plan and to co-ordinate work. Everybody, young and old could do something towards the work of building and renovating. The writer remembers well doing his "bit" with a shingling hatchet, along with other boys of the same age, – most of the others have died since then. For the most of the work Father MacPherson furnished the money himself. Indeed, at that time, the parish was in no condition financially to undertake so ambitious a program. But where there is a will, there is a way. Father MacPherson owned a gramophone, a source of wonder in those days, more so than a television set today. He raffled the gramophone, and it brought in a lot of money. Tickets were sent broadcast and sold by the thousands throughout the United States and Western Canada.

This faithful priest was a cripple, the result of an attack of rheumatic fever. He was unable to walk, but could celebrate Mass without much difficulty, being able to support himself while at the altar. He would always be seated while delivering his sermons. He would be conveyed to the church in a wheel-chair in summer, and in winter a sled with a chair fastened to it would be used. The boys of the parish used to vie with each other for the privilege of taking him to and from the church every morning, and it would not be unusual to find five or six of them waiting around his residence, all anxious to assist in getting him to the church. Sometimes this was not altogether from a disinterested motive, for if there was a concert or entertainment in the town that evening, they would contrive to let him know, and they would all be certain to obtain the price of admission.

Father “Lauchie” was a good Gaelic seolar, and spoke the language fluently, but you could not detect this from his accent, and on this hangs a tale. It deals with the occasion when he was called to North River, St. Anne’s, to administer the last rites to the only Catholic living in that section of Northern Victoria. I well recall the evening that he was called on this mission. It was very cold, being winter, and during the season of Lent. When the priest and driver arrived at North River, they found the sickhouse crowded with people of the neighbourhood. They had heard that “the priest” was coming, and they wanted to get a look at him. Most of them had never seen a priest, but they all had heard plenty about priests. Father MacPherson heard many sarcastic and unfavourable comments about his calling being bandied back and forth in Gaelic, but his face never changed a muscle. He prepared the sick man for death, and was getting ready to leave. The sick man’s wife – a non-Catholic – told some one in the house to get the priest and driver something to eat. This hospitable gesture was quickly vetoed by the others present. The lady however, was reluctant to see any person depart from her door without being offered refreshment. She asked Father MacPherson if he would accept a glass of milk. He replied that he would gladly, and drank not one glass, but two, and tendering the empty glass to the lady of the house, thanked her in flawless Gaelic for her kindness, and bade a hearty Scottish Highland adieu to the company assembled in the kitchen. Father MacPherson often used to chuckle over the awful expressions that came over the faces of the company when they realized that the priest had understood all the hard things they had said about him and his calling.

Father MacPherson was in Baddeck only a short time, – only about two years, when he was compelled to retire to Mt. Cameron, Antigonish. He was a helpless invalid from the time that he left Baddeck until he entered into rest. He died at Antigonish on Feb. 8th, 1911. He was born in Cloverville, Antigonish County, on Dec. 15th, 1857.

Father MacPherson was succeeded in Baddeck by the Rt. Rev. Monsignor Donald Macintosh. Monsignor Macintosh held the pastorate for twenty years. He entered into rest, his works following him, on December 24th, 1925.

After Father MacIntosh came the Rev. Dr. Hugh MacPherson, now of the staff of St. Francis Xavier University. Father MacPherson is, happily, still with us, and on the staff of St. F. X. He will recall the many trying trips that he would have to make across the ice on the Bras d’Or lakes during those week-ends of the winter months when he would journey from Antigonish to officiate at the weekly or fortnightly Mass in old St. Michael’s.

It was during his pastorate that the old church was destroyed by fire. This was in the early morning of September 6th, 1926. The fire started in the large departmental store owned by MacKay, MacAskill & Co., which was only about a hundred feet away from the church. With this large building in flames, it was apparent to us all that our church was doomed. Everything was salvaged from the interior with the exception of the two bells. The large bell, which hung in the

tower, could not be removed. The smaller bell, the first bell to be used in the church, was not in use, and it rested on the beams above the organ loft. I often regret that I had not thought of this small bell the morning of the fire, as it could have been removed very easily, but in the attendant excitement, and in the rush and bustle of removing the sacred vessels, vestments, ornaments etc., it was never thought of, for it was not in view, and “out of sight, out of mind.”

Before I proceed further I must make reference to the consecration of the large bell purchased in 1888. This bell was consecrated by the Very Rev. Neil MacLeod, V.G., and the sermon on that occasion was preached by Father Laudhlin J. MacPherson, then a young priest who, some twelve years later, was destined to be our first pastor. Many of the leading non-Catholics of Baddeck were present on that day. Among them was the Hon. Charles J. Campbell who made a very substantial contribution toward the payment of the bell.

The parishoners of St. Michael’s were depressed, as would be expected, when they lost their church by fire. Many of them in the early morning hours of that day watched their church consumed by flames, – the church in which their parents had pronounced their marriage vows, – the church to which those parents had been carried when their earthly course was run, and where they themselves had been baptized, and had received their First Communion. However, they did not lose spirit, and, a few months later, their pastor, the Rev. Duncan J. Rankin, but recently appointed to the pastorate in addition to that of St. Columba of Iona, initiated plans for the construction of a new place of worship. Father Rankin undertook the task with a will, although he was also faced with the task of rebuilding the parish church at Iona, which had fallen a prey to fire shortly after the Baddeck edifice was destroyed. As a result of his labours the commodious and well appointed structure now occupied by the parishoners of St. Michael’s was dedicated on August 26th, 1928, by His Grace, the Most Rev. James Morrison, Archbishop of Antigonish.

The architect was Mr. A. J. MacCormack of Sydney, and to the late Peter MacLean MacFarlane must go the credit for the careful and painstaking way in which construction was carried out. Mr. MacFarlane – a non-Catholic – had to his credit the designing and construction of many church buildings of various denominations. It was characteristic of the man that he made a very substantial contribution toward the cost of the erection of the new St. Michael’s.

Space prevents mentioning many other things of interest in this connection, but we cannot bring this to a close without mentioning the loyalty and generosity of many of our former parishioners and their descendants now living in other parts. Thanks to their assistance in the hour of need, old St. Michael’s – Phoenix-like – arose from its ashes.