

The Scottish Background to the Immigration of Bishop Alexander Macdonell and the Glengarry Highlanders

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The distinguished career of Bishop Alexander Macdonell and the importance of the Glengarry settlements in the history of Ontario are so well known that they need not be related here. Instead I shall concentrate on the formation of the Glengarry Fencible Regiment in the Scottish Highlands, the first and last Catholic regiment on the British establishment, and the reasons for the departure from Scotland of the discharged soldiers of that corps under the leadership of their chaplain, Father Macdonell.

The migration of the discharged soldiers of the Glengarry Regiment to Upper Canada in 1803 was part of a great movement out of the Scottish Highlands which had been in progress even before the American Revolution.

The first substantial emigration from the Glengarry region of Inverness-shire took place as early as 1773.¹ These early emigrants settled in the neighbourhood of the Mohawk River in New York, and at the Revolution they moved to Upper Canada where they received lands in Glengarry County. The initial emigration from Scotland appears to have been due to economic changes in the Inverness-shire Highlands, where rents were being sharply increased in the 1770's as landowners adjusted their system of land management to the changed conditions of the second half of the eighteenth century.

Independence was a major factor in inducing Highlanders to emigrate because it offered an alternative to submission to the landowners' demands. But in September 1775 emigration was severely curtailed when the Government instructed the Customs Commissioners to refuse clearance to any ship carrying more than the usual number of hands,² and as a result the flow of emigration was much reduced until 1783. During the intervening period, however, the Government itself offered an alternative means of escape for the redundant population of the Highlands in an expanding army, which once again took many Highlanders across the Atlantic and reinforced the connection

¹ Information concerning the reasons for Scottish migration out of the Highlands can be found in *Scots Magazine*, July 1771; August, 1773; December, 1775. See also Wilfred CAMPBELL, *The Scotsman in Canada*. Vol. I, Toronto, n.d., p. 155.

² *Scots Magazine*, September, 1775, p. 523.

between Scotland and America. In 1783, however, the emergency regiments were disbanded and the soldiers arrived back in Scotland to be greeted by one of the worst famines of the century.³

Undoubtedly this helped to revive the emigration movement, and in the Highlands it was stimulated as well by the tendency of more and more landowners to enclose their estates into sheep pastures.⁴

The Year 1792 is known in Highland folklore as Bliadhna nan Caorach, "The Year of the Sheep."⁵ In that year riots erupted among the people of County Ross. The trouble was caused by the attempts of the Inverness Highlanders to send sheep from their area into the Counties of Ross and Sutherland. The disorder was serious enough to cause the law officers to summon three companies of the Black Watch from Fort George to suppress the rioting. These events aroused the greatest interest throughout the Highlands. Proprietors everywhere were alarmed and organised their foresters, bailiffs and ground officers to assist the military in case it could not suppress the rioting. The disturbances were of course alleged to have been influenced by the French Revolution, but there is no evidence to substantiate this claim. In any case, the tenants drew their own conclusions from the events in the neighbouring counties. The sympathy of ordinary people everywhere was with the rioters, as is evidenced by the fact that the organisers of the disturbances who were sentenced to transportation to the penal colonies in Australia all escaped from custody and were never recaptured. But above all, the events of "The Year of the Sheep" stimulated emigration; those who had been evicted to make way for sheep, and those who expected the same fate, became desperate to join their friends in the Scottish settlements in Canada and the Maritime Provinces while they still could.

The renewal of enthusiasm for emigration aroused the fears of those who believed that the country was in some danger of depopulation,⁶ and after the outbreak of war with Revolutionary France in 1793 the Government also began to throw difficulties in the way of would-be emigrants. Highlanders were once again viewed as a source of recruits for the Army. It had been relatively easy to prevent emigration to the United States during the Revolutionary War because it would have aided the rebels, but the same argument could not be used in 1793 since the emigrants wanted to go to Canada, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. Thus, the Government hit

³ Henry HAMILTON, *An Economic History of Scotland in the Eighteenth Century*. Oxford, 1963, p. 8.

⁴ Alexander MACKENZIE, *History of the Highland Clearances*. Glasgow, 1946, p. 171.

⁵ Bliadhna nan CAORACH: *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness, 1877-1878*. VII, pp. 254-279.

⁶ William FERGUSON, *Scotland, 1689 to the Present*. Edinburgh, 1968, p. 176.

upon another solution to preserve their source of manpower in the Highlands. According to Bishop Macdonell, who was then in the West Highlands, warships were stationed off the coast to intercept emigrant ships with orders to press every able-bodied man into the Navy.⁷ This proved to be an effective measure to deter prospective emigrants because the adult males among them could not risk abandoning their dependents.

It was at this point that Father Macdonell began to take an interest in the emigrants and their problems. When a number of Catholic emigrants from the Island of Barra were stranded at Greenock where they were without resources, and unable in many cases even to speak the language of the Lowlander, he hurried to Glasgow to see what could be done. In view of the attitude of the government there was not hope of assistance from that source, but Father Macdonell called on the professors of the university and the leading manufacturers of Glasgow and together they worked out a plan to deal with the problem of those people who were forced from the land. If they would give up the idea of emigrating to America, the manufacturers promised to provide them with employment.⁸

Thanks to Father Macdonell's efforts the Barra people were rescued from economic hardships, but one serious difficulty remained in their inability to speak English. To overcome this difficulty Father Macdonell, at some personal risk to himself, took up residence in Glasgow, in order, as he put it: "to encourage them, and reconcile them to their new mode of life, as also to ensure their good conduct to their employers."⁹ Father Macdonell was the first Catholic clergyman to reside in Glasgow since the Gordon Riots of 1780, and in his dual capacity as interpreter and clergyman he soon attracted many more Highlanders to the area until he had 600 people under his immediate charge.¹⁰

Much of the Catholic emigration thus flowed into the Lowland area around Glasgow for two years, but in 1794 the prosperity of the manufacturing districts suddenly ended as a result of a trade recession. Mill hands everywhere were laid off, and as Bishop Macdonell remarked, the condition of the Highlanders was worse than that of their Lowland counterparts, for they were "unaccustomed to hard labour, and totally ignorant of the English language," and consequently "they became more helpless and destitute than any other class in the whole community."¹¹

Once again Father Macdonell found a solution. This time he approached the Government with a plan to form the unemployed Highlanders into a new

⁷ *Canadian Canadian Literary Magazine*, April, 1833, p. 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4. See also, *Scots Magazine*, October, 1791, pp. 513-514.

⁹ *Canadian Literary Magazine*, April, 1833, p. 4. Memorial of the Right Rev. Alexander Macdonell to Earl Dalhousie, Quebec, December 9, 1820. *Macdonell MSS.* St. Mary's Cathedral Kingston. A15ED2 (3).

¹⁰ *Canadian Literary Magazine*, April, 1833, p. 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

regiment for the rapidly expanding army. But Father Macdonell's followers were not to be enlisted into any regiment. They wanted one of their own, an exclusively Catholic corps, and Macdonell successfully persuaded the Government to accept this truly revolutionary plan to form the first, and last, Catholic regiment on the British establishment.¹²

The instigator of this unprecedented demand that Catholics should have their own corps was undoubtedly Father Macdonell himself. He organised a meeting of Catholic gentry at Fort Augustus in Inverness-shire and enlisted the assistance of his own ambitious chief, Alasdair Macdonell of Glengarry, who was to be the colonel of the regiment. The loyal address of the Catholic gentlemen of the Highlands was carried to London by Father Macdonell and he seems to have carried out the negotiations with the representatives of the Government without much assistance.¹³

Since the outbreak of war with France, the British Army had conducted a vigorous campaign of recruitment in the Scottish Highlands, and the number of regiments formed was unprecedented.¹⁴ The number of these units created substantial difficulties for the Government. Scotsmen preferred to enlist in a Fencible corps, particularly one raised by their chief, rather than the general service regiments of the Line which could be posted anywhere in the world. The Government, after enlisting so much of the available manpower as fencibles, began to regret its agreement in the 1790's and it tried on several occasions to induce Fencible regiments to march into England where there was greater danger of invasion. The soldiers, however, refused to obey these orders.¹⁵ They feared, with some justification, that if they once allowed their terms of enlistment to be ignored, they would be sent to the East or West Indies. The fate of soldiers sent to these areas was common knowledge and it is probably the main reason why Scotsmen were reluctant to enlist for general service.

Highlanders regarded enlistment as a bargain, and if they kept their agreement they expected the Government to do the same. It was in fact the increasingly mutinous state of the fencible regiments in Scotland which induced Henry Dundas, the Secretary of War, to endorse Father Macdonell's plan for a Catholic corps. Macdonell "offered to extend the service of the men under his influence to any part of His Majesty's Dominions where their

¹² Memorial of Rev. Alexander Macdonell to Earl Bathurst, June 1817. *Macdonell MSS.* St. Mary's Cathedral Kingston. A12C5 (12).

¹³ Memorial of Right Rev. Alexander Macdonell to Earl Dalhousie, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Major-General David STEWART, *Sketches of the Character of the Highlanders of Scotland.* Vol II, Edinburgh. 1825, p. 514.

¹⁵ A Justice of the Peace of Edinburgh to Henry Dundas, March 17, 1794. Melville Castle Muniments GD51/1/858. Duke of Hamilton to Henry Dundas, December 24, 1794. Melville Castle Muniments GD51/1/858/1.

service might be required.”¹⁶ This offer was too good to refuse, for the Government representatives appreciated that if one regiment of fencibles agreed to extend its service, others might follow their example. Accordingly, authority was given to raise the Glengarry Regiment.

Letters of Service were issued to Glengarry and recruiting for the new Highland regiment commenced in 1794, but in spite of Father Macdonell’s belief that the opportunity of enlistment in a Catholic regiment would draw in many recruits, the regiment was difficult to complete. After all, religion was not the strongest inducement to encourage recruits. The normal method was to apply the proper admixture of whiskey and bagpipe music sweetened by a substantial cash bounty. Glengarry seems to have possessed the first two ingredients in abundance, but as usual he was short of cash. As a consequence his bounties were lower than those offered by other colonels. Father Macdonell, who was in charge of recruiting in Glasgow described the outcome of this situation:

Tho’ hard necessity compelled many of Glengarry’s vassals and adherents to scatter over the whole face of the country and some of them even to quit the Kingdom... still he and his friends have been till now very successful in recruiting and have already upwards of 300 men, they would have been by this time near complete but for a report... that new fencible corps are to be raised on the same footing with his, whose colonels (it is said) are allowed ten Guineas of bounty money and leave to draft 200 men out of the other fencible regiments. By this Col. Macdonell’s recruiting is quite obstructed here for some time back....¹⁷

But in spite of this refusal and the inadequacy of the Government bounty which Glengarry with his shattered finances was unable to supplement, the battalion gradually filled up. This was due almost entirely to the efforts of the Catholic clergy who were actively employed in recruiting throughout the Highlands under Father Macdonell’s general supervision. The Glengarry Regiment might take the chief’s name, but it was really Father Macdonell’s regiment for it was he who found the men. The corps remained Catholic, but it did not consist solely of Macdonell’s or even of Glengarry’s tenants. Men were recruited in all the Catholic areas of the Highlands and as far east as Banffshire, where a Mr. Catanach, a local priest, was a zealous recruiter on the Earl of Fife’s estates.¹⁸

In 1795 the Glengarry Regiment was at last ready to muster into the

¹⁶ Memorial of Right Rev. Alexander Macdonell to Earl Dalhousie, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ Rev. Alexander Macdonell to Henry Dundas, October 20, 1794. Melville Castle Muniments. GD51/1/839.

¹⁸ Earl of Fife to Henry Dundas, October 7, 1794. Melville Castle Muniments. GD51/1/831.

service, though it was, and remained, a small battalion for a colonel's command. At first, therefore, the existence of a Catholic regiment had not produced a flood of recruits because Scottish Catholics had been long accustomed to joining non-Catholic corps. On the other hand, without the exertions of Father Macdonell and the other Highland clergy the regiment probably would never have been completed.

After some basic training the Glengarry Regiment was posted to the island of Guernsey where it remained until the summer of 1798. Then it was sent to Ireland where a rebellion was underway. Glengarry, however, stayed in Guernsey where he was put on trial for killing a fellow officer in a duel.¹⁹ In his absence the leadership of the regiment devolved on Father Alexander Macdonell who followed the regiment in his capacity as its chaplain. All that need be said here about the Regiment's activities in Ireland is that it served with distinction in suppressing the Rebellion. In 1802, the Regiment along with all the other Scottish fencible regiments were ordered home and disbanded.

The disbandment of the Glengarry Fencibles left the Highlanders in the same desperate situation from which Father Macdonell had rescued them, and this time there was no employment to be found in the cotton mills, for trade remained depressed. Once again Father Macdonell came to their assistance. He journeyed to London, where he met Charles Yorke, the new Secretary at War, and the Prime Minister, Henry Addington, in order to ask them for government assistance to send the soldiers and their families to Upper Canada.²⁰ The Government, however, was not enthusiastic about the plan. In spite of all Father Macdonell's arguments in favour of emigration to the Scottish settlements in Upper Canada. Addington opposed the idea. The Prime Minister recognized that the services of the regiment entitled them to something better than freedom to starve in Scotland, but he offered them lands in the West Indian colony of Trinidad rather than Upper Canada. Macdonell rejected this plan because of the unhealthy climate of the West Indies and he persisted even when the Treasury offered to provide four slaves for each family together with provision for education and the church and medical care. Only at this point did Addington tell Macdonell that he would offer

to lend some assistance to the Chaplain to convey his adherents to the sea-coast of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, or Cape Breton, but assured him that His Majesty's government considered the hold they had of Upper Canada so slender and so precarious, that a person in his situation would not be justified in putting his hand into the public purse, to assist British subjects to emigrate to that Colony ...²¹

¹⁹ *Scots Magazine*, September, 1798, pp. 646-650.

²⁰ *Canadian Literary Magazine*, April, 1833, p. 7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.8.

The disbanded Glengarry Fencibles adamantly refused to consider this proposal. Eventually Addington promised 200 acres of land to any of the disbanded soldiers who made his own way to Upper Canada.

This promise of land alarmed the Scottish lairds and military men who regarded it as a most unwelcome precedent. If disbanded soldiers were to receive land grants in the colonies they feared that the whole country might be depopulated in view of the great numbers of Scotsmen with military service. Highland landowners were still being drawn in two directions while the Napoleonic Wars lasted; on the one hand they desired the profits that came from new methods of estate management which rendered much of the population redundant. On the other hand, their pride was gratified by the prestige which accrued to noblemen who could bring large numbers of fine recruits into the Army in an emergency, and it was clear after a few months of the Peace of Amiens that war would soon recommence.

The ex-soldiers were not impressed by arguments that they were deserting their country in its hour of need. But the opposition to land grants for disbanded fencibles was so strong that Father Macdonell had to change his tactics in order to outwit the Highland gentry whose influence was making itself felt in London. In association with an Army officer, Major Archibald Campbell, who later became Lieutenant-Governor of New Brunswick, Macdonell produced a plan to take his people to Canada as an organized military force. It was to be a corps of Canadian Fencibles which, in Macdonell's words, would serve

the double purpose of forming an internal defence, and settling the country. It was requested that a certain portion of land should be granted to every man, after a service of five years, or on his furnishing a substitute; so that the same force might always be kept up, and the settlement of the country go on...²²

Since the new scheme offered obvious advantages in making the military settlers the principal part of the defence force of the colony, and of course lessening the annual loss by desertion from the garrison regiments in Canada to the United States, some of the hostility of the British Army officers to the emigration plan abated, and Macdonell's scheme was about to be put into effect when the outbreak of war in the Spring of 1803 transformed the situation. This left Father Macdonell in a somewhat embarrassing predicament, for he had discouraged the departure of his people in the hope of enlisting them in the Canadian Fencibles. As he wrote at the time

Many of them who had contracted with others to bring them to America before I came down to Scotland, relinquished those engagements even

²² *Canadian Literary Magazine*, April, 1833, p. 9.

at considerable expense in order to concur with the view of Govert. & thereby lost their passage which they could then have obtained upon easier & *cheaper terms* than now... As I prevented a great many of them from emigration when they had engaged early in the season, consider myself in some measure the cause of their present distress.²³

The Government had not abandoned the idea of a Canadian Fencible regiment, but such a corps had a low priority compared with the desperate need for troops for service in Europe. The attitude of the War Office can be summarised in a letter written to Father Macdonell in June, 1803:

What is particularly wished is, that if they cannot be induced to enter into the established national Regts, measures ought to be adopted for forming them into second Battalions of the 42nd, 78th, 92nd or other Highland Corps; & I am inclined to think that if they would do so, they might be allowed to engage to serve in *Europe & N. America only*, during the war; & that after it was over, every possible encouragement would be held out to them as settlers in the British possessions, if they preferred quitting their Native Country ...²⁴

Although many Highlanders did enlist, Father Macdonell's immediate followers were determined to join their friends in Canada without further delay. The obstinacy of Father Macdonell and his followers ultimately forced the War Office to resurrect the earlier plan for a regiment of Canadian Fencibles and in August, 1803, Macdonell was advised that since

the men entering into the Canada Corps will be allowed, on their discharge, allotments of Lands in those Provinces, ...the object which the Highlanders have in view, as well as the publick service, will be forwarded by their entering into the that Corps ...²⁵

Fortunately for themselves most of Father Macdonell's people were unable to delay any longer while the proposed regiment was organised. They were impatient to get away, and as the Chaplain informed the Government:

Those of them who could afford it have advanced... the passage of such as are not able to pay for themselves so earnest are they to get their poor

²³ Draft of a letter, dated June 29, 1803. *Macdonell MSS.* St. Mary's Cathedral Kingston. A12C5(1).

²⁴ Charles Yorke to the Rev. A. McDonell, July 10, 1803. *Macdonell MSS.* St. Mary's Cathedral Kingston. A13C30(2).

²⁵ Charles Yorke to Alexander Macdonell, August 26, 1803. *Macdonell MSS.* St. Mary's Cathedral Kingston. A13C30(3).

friends and connections away from the Highlands. The hurry they have all been in to dispose of their effects at any price in order to be ready for embarkation... the purchase of such articles as would be of most use to them where they expected to have gone but which will be of no value to them in this country and their not being able to settle their minds to work by the daily expectation they have of getting off entirely exhausted the few pence they could command and have deprived them of every means of supporting themselves and their families any longer.²⁶

This as it turned out was a lucky circumstance, because the greater part of the Glengarry people were clear of Scotland before the Highland proprietors could stop them. Immediately afterwards a new Act of Parliament, the *Passenger Vessel Act* of 1803, effectively restricted emigration to those with some capital, thus excluding the majority of those Highlanders who were most desirous of crossing the Atlantic.²⁷

Most of Father Macdonell's people had already got away before the *Passenger Act* came into force, but many Highlanders who had not been so fortunate enlisted in the Canadian Fencibles which recruited in Scotland in 1804. The treatment of this regiment reflected no credit on the British Government which as so often before in its bargains with Scottish soldiers proved to be utterly faithless.

Happily Father Macdonell and his people did not enlist in the Regiment. Furthermore they rejected Lord Selkirk's offer of land in the Hudson's Bay Company territories and a Government proposal to enter Canada via the United States which would have made them eligible to claim land grants as settlers from that country. Instead they went directly to Glengarry County where each fencible received 200 acres of land.²⁸

The steelers thrived from the outset, and in the opinion of Captain Donald Macpherson of the 39th Regiment, who visited the colony for a month in 1814, they had raised their economic circumstances far above anything they could have achieved in the Highlands. He estimated that eleven to twelve hundred families, two-thirds of whom were Macdonalds, had settled in the Counties of Glengarry and Stormont. Each family, he noted:

²⁶ Draft of a letter dated June 29, 1803. *Macdonell MSS.* St. Mary's Cathedral Kingston. A12C5(1).

²⁷ The Act, on the pretext of improving conditions on emigrant ships, imposed regulations which placed the cost of the passage well beyond the means of the ordinary Highlander. *Cf., Canadian Literary Magazine*, April, 1833, pp. 9-10.

²⁸ Hugh Joseph SOMERS, *Life and Time, of the Hon. and Rt. Rev. Alexander Macdonell*. Appendix 24, Washington, 1931, pp. 214-221.

even of the lowest order, has a landed property of two hundred acres: the average value of which, in its present state of cultivation, with the cattle etc. upon it, may be estimated at from 800 pounds to 1,000 pounds. However poor the family, but indeed, there are none can be called so, they kill a bullock for the winter consumption; the farm or estate supplies them with abundance of butter, cheese, etc. Their houses are small but comfortable, having a ground floor and garret, with a regular chimney, and glass windows. The appearance of the people is at all times respectable, but I was delighted on seeing them in church of a Sunday, the men clothed in English cloth, and many of the women wore the Highland plaid... The price of labour is at present very high... This being the case, it is evident that a poor man with a numerous family, who will all assist in the field, will succeed better in this country than he who may have the command of a little money if neither he nor his children will work.²⁹

Obviously the settlers who worked hard had managed to make money which at once raised their standard of living and offered them the opportunity to improve their holdings.

The attraction of the Glengarry settlement, and other Catholic settlements in the Maritime Provinces was such that, if Father Macdonell's account is accurate, most Catholic Scots never considered emigration to any other country, and in later years the original settlers were joined by other Highlanders. To a very large degree the success of the initial venture must be attributed to Father Macdonell's persistence and persuasiveness. Captain Macpherson thought there was no more worthy man in Canada, and he concluded that the priest was:

the mainstay of the Highlanders; they apply to him for redress in all their grievances, and an able and willing advocate they find him. He is well known, from the poorest man to the Governor-General, and highly respected by all. Were he ambitious of enriching himself, he might ere now be possessed of immense property, but this appears not to be his object; his whole attention is devoted to the good of the settlement, and the great and numerous services which he has already rendered, it cannot well be calculated.³⁰

²⁹ Captain Donald Macpherson of Strathmassie to Dr. Angus Macdonald, Taunton, Somerset, England, dated at Chambly, Canada, December 26, 1814. Printed in "A Family Memoir of the Macdonalds of Keppoch," by Angus Macdonald, M.D. (Private printing of 150 copies), p. 20.

³⁰ *Loc. cit.*