

John Elmsley and the Rise of Irish Catholic Social Action in Victorian Toronto

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Although the career of John Elmsley as a member of the Family Compact and a benefactor of the Catholic Church has been recorded,¹ there are other intriguing and important facets of his life that should be examined. As a convert, his social position set him apart in a leadership role from the majority of Toronto's Irish Catholic population. Initially, the relationship between them was an uneasy one, wrought with hatred and contempt. However, Elmsley seemed to undergo a second conversion² and, with compassion, became the servant of the Famine Irish immigrants. In that capacity it seems fair to state that, with Bishop A. Charbonnel, he was a central figure in instigating what could later be called Irish Catholic Social Action.³ That social thrust, which began in 1850 as a Catholic response to problems encountered in Victorian Toronto, is comparable in some ways to the Protestant Social Gospel of the 1890's.⁴ Fostered by the minority

¹ Brother Alfred, "The Honourable John Elmsley, Legislative and Executive Councillor of Upper Canada (1801-1863)," *CCHA Report*, 1936-37, pp. 23-40; Henri Pilon, "John Elmsley." *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. IX (Toronto, 1976), pp. 239-42.

² Archdiocese of Toronto Archives (hereafter ATA), Bishop A. Charbonnel Papers, J. Elmsley to Bishop Charbonnel. 3 January 1851. This letter summarizes a change in J. Elmsley's religious philosophy. He had begun to read religious works and decided to dedicate the remainder of his life to the service of his Church and the Catholic population of Toronto. Because of family commitments, he abandoned the prospect of entering a religious order, choosing instead to employ his business acumen and fortune for the benefit of his Church.

³ Prior to 1850 there was little concerted social action which united the Catholic Church and Irish laity in a specific movement that could be identified as Irish Catholic Social Action. Individual acts of charity were common because the Irish were a voluntary and generous group. Participation in charitable works led to involvement with so-called secular organizations, like the Widows and Orphans Fund, the House of Industry and the General Hospital which were ill-prepared to deal with the influx of Famine Irish. Moreover these institutions used proselytizing tactics and it became evident the laissez-faire approach to charity must be abandoned if the Irish were to be retained as Catholics. See: *The Toronto Mirror*, various issues, 1853; M.W. Nicolson, "The Irish Catholics and Social Action in Victorian Toronto, 1850-1900," *Studies in History and Politics*, vol. I, no. 1, 1980, pp. 30-55.

⁴ Richard Allen, "The Background of the Social Gospel in Canada," Richard Allen, ed., *The Social Gospel in Canada* (Ottawa, 1975), pp. 2-35.

Catholic elite, Catholic social action became vibrantly Irish and retained that ethnic identity for over a half-century;⁵ having changed and expanded, it is still a vital movement in this present age.

Born in York (Toronto) on 19 May 1801, John Elmsley was the son of Mary and John Elmsley, the second Chief Justice of Upper Canada. Following the death of his father in 1805, Elmsley went to England with his mother, brother and two sisters. On the advice of his maternal uncle, Admiral Benjamin Hallowell, Elmsley joined the Royal Navy in 1815 and rose to the rank of lieutenant, retiring in 1824 on half-pay. It seems that even at this young age Elmsley's personality reflected a concern for the welfare of others that was to become so apparent in his later years, for he had resigned a promising career in the belief that naval or military attachment involved the destruction of human life.⁶

After residing in England for a year, Elmsley returned to York in 1825 to manage his father's estate, becoming a gentleman farmer. As a wealthy bachelor, he was accepted quickly among the social elite and enjoyed a pleasant life-style. Yet, apparently John Elmsley was searching for a cause or a purpose, because at times he would reflect upon the emptiness of a frivolous life.⁷ In 1830, as a member of the Family Compact, Elmsley was appointed to the Executive Council and, one year later, to the Legislative Council. As a prosperous businessman, he was a director and shareholder of the Bank of Upper Canada, founder of the Home District Agricultural Society, one of the incorporators of the British American Assurance Company, a shareholder in the Welland Canal, and a promoter of the City of Toronto and Lake Huron Rail Road Company.⁸

In 1831 Elmsley married Charlotte Sherwood, daughter of Levius Peter Sherwood, a judge on the Upper Canadian Court of the King's Bench. Elmsley, a leader in the Protestant Compact, had married into a section of the Compact composed of families with mixed religious background where in boys were raised Protestant and girls retained the Catholic faith of their mothers. Included in this group were the Boultons, Sherwoods, Crawfords, McNabs, Joneses, and Stewarts. The Elmsleys were married first in St. Paul's Church by Father W.P. MacDonald, then again at St. James by Archdeacon Strachan, a custom contrary to church law but common in that

⁵ Nicolson, "The Irish Catholics and Social Action," *passim*.

⁶ Brother Alfred, "The Honourable John Elmsley"; ATA, Bishop Alexander Macdonell Papers, Elmsley section.

⁷ Pilon, "John Elmsley," pp. 239-42.

⁸ ATA, Bishop Macdonell Papers, Elmsley section, *passim*. See also: Murray W. Nicolson, "The Catholic Church and the Irish in Victorian Toronto," Ph.D. Thesis, University of Guelph, 1981.

age.

Elmsley's attendance at St. James Church became irregular in 1832 and he informed Bishop Alexander Macdonell of a desire to become a Catholic. However, Elmsley wished to do so secretly in order to avoid hurting his mother who was vehemently anti-Catholic, and also, perhaps, to protect his inheritance. But, in 1834, Elmsley printed and distributed five thousand copies of a work by the Bishop of Strasbourg on the defence of the doctrine of transubstantiation. There followed a bitter debate between Strachan and himself, with Father W. P. MacDonald joining Elmsley in the attack on the Protestant theological position. Strachan attacked Elmsley for his apostasy of Anglicanism and accused him of speculating in St. James's pew rents. Additionally, Elmsley's fortune was based in land speculation and Sir John Colborne attempted to curb this to end speculation in United Empire Loyalist location grants. Elmsley resigned as an Executive Councillor.⁹

To fill the vacuum created by that resignation, Elmsley took up a new cause. He became advisor to Bishop Macdonell, in fact the lay vicar in York. This was no easy task for the congregation at St. Paul's Church was bitterly divided between Tory elite and Irish peasants. The turmoil that existed between 1829 and 1832 stemmed from political differences and the struggle of the reform-minded Irish laity to gain from the elite some administrative control of the church. Bishop Macdonell and his Tory supporters were pitted against the Irish laity led by their priest, William O'Grady, and James King, journalist and lawyer, both reformers and friends of William Lyon MacKenzie. The dispute ended in revolt and, as a consequence St. Paul's had been placed under interdict, O'Grady was suspended, and the leaders among O'Grady's followers excommunicated.¹⁰

Elmsley was accustomed to a leadership role, but his elevated social position placed him above what the bulk of the Irish laity could ever hope to achieve. In 1827, he had written his mother about the growth of York:

... A few years of such increase will place York on the scale of cities, its Harbour is secure and capacious; The Country behind it fertile, The people industrious; The Laws mild & beneficial. The govermt only felt in acts of kindness; The Society highly respectable. If such a state of Things does not offer inducements to mankind to be happy and contented they richly deserve to be wretched & dissatisfied...¹¹

⁹ *Ibid.*; C.A. Carter, T.M. Bailey, eds., *The Diary of Sophia MacNab* (Hamilton: W.L. Griffen Ltd., 1968), pp. 7-9; Pilon, "John Elmsley," pp. 239-42.

¹⁰ ATA, Bishop Macdonell Papers, W.O'Grady Section, *passim*.

¹¹ ATA, Macdonell Papers, John Elmsley to Mary Elmsley, 10 December 1827.

Elmsley began to apply that vision of the development of Toronto to his new-found church, but the methods he employed were not always well received.

O'Grady's departure from the church had not ended the revolt within it, for having experienced some responsibility in the administration of their church, the Irish laity wanted it continued. Bishop Macdonell appointed Father William Patrick McDonough as O'Grady's successor and returned to Kingston. Shortly after, the congregation began to organize and McDonough soon became embroiled in the conflict between the elite and the Irish laity. Under the chairmanship of Dr. John King a meeting took place on 16 March 1834. It was a legal meeting at which a committee representing a broad spectrum of the laity was formed. The purpose of the meeting was to decide upon measures which would place the church on a sound financial basis. From a fragmentary notice which begins with Item Seven, it seems that decisions were reached to reinstate the former pew rents, discontinued during O'Grady's tenure. Most pertinently, John Elmsley was elected treasurer.¹²

In the parish of St. Paul's the vacuum created by the expulsion of O'Grady and his followers left no single faction representing the people as a group. The candidates left to fill the vacuum were: Father McDonough, the natural leader; Francis Collins, the Irish journalist; William Bergin, representative of the rising middle-class; or John Elmsley, the Catholic Compact, Tory squire – all members of the church committee. With John Elmsley as treasurer, factionalism increased and Bishop Macdonell had further cause for worry. Macdonell read in Collins' *Canadian Freeman* that there was to be a meeting of members of the Catholic congregation of Toronto in June of 1834, under the chairmanship of William Bergin. Because Macdonell had not been advised as to its purpose he wrote McDonough of his concern.¹³ The meeting had been called to discuss the church debt and John Elmsley's proposal to increase the pew rent to cover it. Because William Bergin and the other collectors of the pew rents were absent from the meeting through drunkenness, Elmsley was able to pass his resolution.¹⁴

He believed in voluntarism and was of the opinion that the laity should pay to maintain the church. However, he was disappointed:

¹² ATA, Macdonell Papers, Father W. O'Grady to Church Wardens, 18 September 1830; Minutes of a Meeting, 16 March 1834; Fragment of Minutes, 16 March 1834.

¹³ Province of Ontario Archives, Bishop Macdonell Papers, Bishop Macdonell to Father P. McDonough, 4 June 1834.

¹⁴ ATA, Macdonell Papers, J. Elmsley to Bishop Macdonell, 17 June 1834.

The pews are empty, the aisles crowded to suffocation and filled with men and women splendidly dressed. The ribbon alone on some of the bonnets would pay a quarter pew rent and yet these fine ladies and gentlemen prefer kneeling in the dirty aisles and body of the Church when they won't pay a farthing to occupy a pew.¹⁵

When Bishop Macdonell had suggested that Elmsley use his influence in the government to gain funds for the church and its clergy, Elmsley reiterated his conviction:

...You may recollect that I have been uniformly opposed to any other mode of supporting the clergy except through the contributions of their Flocks. The grant of a site for a Church and Parsonage and of a small portion of land to enable the incumbent to support a cow or two – is all that I can bring myself to recommend in the shape of Government aid to the Clergy ...¹⁶

However, Elmsley had accepted the de facto appointment of lay vicar, advising Macdonell:

Nothing would please me more than to be your constituted Lay Vicar General for the purpose of placing a substantial edifice for public worship with a school near it in every township in Upper Canada.¹⁷

With John Elmsley as lay vicar, Bishop Macdonell felt secure. Father McDonough reported that Elmsley's influence and effort had a stabilizing effect upon the congregation. Yet, if Elmsley had been unsuccessful in his methods of forcing the Irish congregation to pay off the church debt, he had planned to ask Macdonell to have McDonough withdrawn for two or, three months for a period of forced interdict.¹⁸

It seemed that parish matters were settled for a few months. But on 5 September 1835, a meeting was held at which it was decided that only those who contributed £5 to the building fund and paid 10s per year in taxes could vote for the Wardens. The few who qualified as electors were to chose three church Wardens who would succeed each other as

¹⁵ ATA, Macdonell Papers, J. Elmsley to Bishop Macdonell, 29 June 1835.

¹⁶ ATA, Macdonell Papers, J. Elmsley to Bishop Macdonell, 18 May 1835.

¹⁷ ATA, Macdonell Papers, J. Elmsley to Bishop Macdonell, 16 March 1835.

¹⁸ ATA, Macdonell Papers, Elmsley to Bishop Macdonell, 14 May 1835; Bishop Macdonell to J. Elmsley, 15 June 1834.

Warden-in-charge for a period of three years. This was a reintroduction of the regulations dispensed with by O'Grady when he allowed full suffrage. Other regulations to be introduced restricted the power of the priest. The committee, or the Wardens, were to control the marriage fees; there were to be no charges for sacraments, except for baptism if the parents did not contribute to the church; and the priest was to teach in the Sunday School an half-hour in the morning and afternoon. The elite committee would control all dispersements and receipts, which were to be entered in a ledger. These included pew rents, rentals, fees for burials and Masses. The committee controlled the conduct of services. Masses and vespers were to be sung, evening prayer to be held, and no confessions allowed outside the church unless the penitent was ill. The church bell was to ring one-half hour before Mass. The salary of the priest and sexton were set, and the priest was not allowed to have a female servant under the age of forty. The Bishop was to control charges for dispensations and banns and was to be the final authority on all matters. The Irish congregation were to pay two pennies before entering the church for Mass.¹⁹

Although many of these changes were necessary and showed the beginning of organization within the Toronto Church, they were not initiated by the Bishop, but by Dr. King and John Elmsley, and left the priest and Irish laity under the control of the elite committee. Any disobedience to the regulations could cause the mission to be placed under interdict. So that the situation was understood, the priest was required to sign the regulations set forth by the committee.²⁰ The priest, then, was a servant of the committee; and because of their poor situation, the Irish members of the laity had no say in who was to represent them and, as well, had to pay to hear Mass.

Because of the dissatisfaction in the congregation concerning the regulations, Elmsley informed Father McDonough that Macdonell's newly appointed coadjutor, Bishop R. Gaulin, ordered a meeting to be held to discuss them. McDonough refused to hold the meeting and the committee wanted him removed. Also McDonough would not allow the committee members to examine his accounts, telling them to stay at home and mind their business. The committee replied that the regulations bound both priest and people. Subsequently, Gaulin demanded a meeting to enforce the regulations supported by Bishop Macdonell. McDonough refused to preside over it, and Elmsley and the other wardens accused him with being unfit to be a priest. In defence of his stand McDonough explained that he had been away from Toronto when Bishop Gaulin arrived, that he had received a list

¹⁹ ATA, Macdonell Papers, Regulations of the Catholic Mission of Toronto, no date.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

of rules without instructions and that he had not been invited by King or Elmsley to the original meeting where the regulations were drawn up. Because two excommunicated persons were members of the new committee, McDonough would not allow the meeting to be held in the church in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. Convinced that Bishop Macdonell was not fully informed of the proceedings at St. Paul's, McDonough wrote saying he did not believe the Bishop had given authority to a committee, which included excommunicants, to control the temporalities of the church or the right to restrict the franchise by interfering in pew rents. He pointed out that Dr. King wanted him removed even though King had not attended church for six or eight months prior to Bishop Gaulin's arrival, but added that, in his opinion, "poor Elmsley" was the cause of all the trouble in the mission.²¹

Bishop Gaulin gained the obedience but not the compliance of McDonough for a short period of a time. Because generally the congregation liked McDonough, the regulations were accepted begrudgingly. But McDonough recognized the difficulties. He informed Bishop Macdonell that the £ 5 suffrage was for a few and "the lower class of persons feel indignant that they should be looked on with contempt because they are not able to pay a sum that their means will not allow." He emphasized that the Irish laity demanded the "suffrage be made universal" and hoped that Macdonell would not submit to Elmsley and his elite faction²²

A declaration, signed by the church Wardens, was made to the congregation and a copy sent to Bishop Macdonell. It stated:

Pursuant to the orders of his Lordship, Bishop Macdonell, the church Wardens give notice to the Catholic congregation of Toronto, that upon Sunday next, and upon all future Sundays, every man will be required to pay two pence upon entering the church, and every woman one penny unless they do produce certificates of having paid pew rents 6 months in advance. Every woman being a member of a family, the heads of which have paid, and all children, will be permitted to enter the church free of charge, and the same indulgences will be extended to all persons whether men or women who can produce proof to the satisfaction of the clergy, or any of the church Wardens, that they have large families or that they are too

²¹ ATA, Macdonell Papers, Elmsley to Bishop Macdonell, 5 September 1835; McDonough to Bishop Macdonell, 5 September 1835; Addresses of the Congregation to Bishop Macdonell, 24 September 1835; Resolutions passed by the Catholic Committee, 27 September 1835; McDonough to Macdonell, 29 September 1835.

²² ATA, Macdonell Papers, McDonough to Bishop Macdonell, 5 October 1835.

poor to afford even the above small weekly pittance for the support of their Religion.²³

That precipitated further controversy. McDonough advised Bishop Macdonell that the Irish hated the door collection and many were not hearing Mass because of it. Elmsley claimed that all but a dozen paid the two pence at the door, all the pews were rented and the church's finances were in good order. McDonough argued that people were staying away and it was impossible to count those who could not be seen. But Elmsley remained adamant and no allowances were made, which prompted McDonough to declare:

Mr. Elmsley who seems like a Jew where money is in question, thinks yet to keep these revenues of the church in his bank for the purpose of speculation, although your regulation agrees to say that they should be laid in the strong box.²⁴

The conflict within the parish was centred on the power struggle between two individuals. John Elmsley, as lay vicar supported by his Wardens and the Bishop, demanded an enforced contribution from the people to place the parish on a sound economic basis. Father Patrick McDonough believed in Irish voluntarism and religious services unqualified by economics. Elmsley's methods caused dissension, but McDonough's would have bankrupted the parish. Naturally the Irish people followed McDonough.

Some Irish Catholics met outside the church to complain about the door collection and burial charges. McDonough issued free tickets to allow the poor to enter the church and embarrassed the Wardens, who tried to deny entry to the ticket-holders, by physically pushing the people past the Wardens and through the church doors. To stop the door collections, McDonough insisted that the collectors come in when Mass began, and threatened to lock the doors if they did not comply. He would not allow the Wardens and collectors to count the collection during Mass because it was disruptive

²³ ATA, Macdonell Papers, An authentic copy of the original sent to Bishop Macdonell, undated.

²⁴ ATA, Macdonell Papers, Elmsley to Bishop Macdonell, 18 January 1836; McDonough to Bishop Macdonell, 16 January 1836; 13 February 1836; and 14 February 1836.

to the service.²⁵

The newspapers reported the proceedings that occurred at St. Paul's. Elmsley admitted:

I can easily put up with the sneers and taunts of the profligate wretches who occasionally offer insolence to us on the threshold of the temple of God, I feel small annoyance at the newspapers' observation respecting the "two penny toll-gatherers at the door of the Cathedral church."²⁶

Donough told Elmsley that if he continued with his demands for money he would be despised by the congregation. It seems McDonough expressed the sentiment of the Irish, for they yelled at Elmsley: "Go back to your own church. What business have you to come here to make Catholics pay you their money?"²⁷ Elmsley believed that the congregation was under the control of McDonough:

I am confident (he will) at least have the effect of bringing a mob of hot-headed Irish-men about my ears. I feel myself quite unequal to the contest with these ruffians who at a word from the priest would put me in the Lake.²⁸

Elmsley resigned as Warden and advised Bishop Macdonell that the problems with St. Paul's Irish congregation would not be resolved until McDonough was removed as pastor. Convinced that Toronto as the commercial metropolis of the Province should set a good example, Elmsley again suggested that Toronto be denied the benefits of clergy until the people began to support their church in a responsible manner.²⁹ The Irish population reacted unfavourably to Elmsley's suggestion. Through the Wardens, they addressed a letter to Bishop Macdonell to inform him that McDonough was considered an efficient clergyman who satisfactorily met the needs of those committed to his spiritual care. With that support, Bishop

²⁵ ATA, Macdonell Papers, Elmsley to Bishop Macdonell, 23 February 1836, 11 March 1836, 28 March 1836, 7 April 1836, 11 April 1836; McDonough to Bishop Macdonell, 8 March 1836, 20 April 1836, 28 April 1836.

²⁶ ATA, Macdonell Papers, Elmsley to Bishop Macdonell, 28 March 1836.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ ATA, Macdonell Papers, 7 April 1836.

²⁹ ATA, Macdonell Papers, Elmsley to Bishop Macdonell, 6 February 1836; 2 April 1836.

Macdonell could not remove McDonough from Toronto.³⁰

McDonough was successful in extending the church franchise to include all pew holders, not just those contributing £ 5. However, he soon learned that undirected voluntarism among the Irish was not the way to run the church successfully. In the manner of Elmsley, McDonough complained to Bishop Macdonell that the committee in charge of the church was composed of irresponsible, unfit, irreligious Catholics. Some people gave notes for twelve months; others stated they would not pay a shilling. By successive repetition, the Wardens could hold office for twelve years to exclude those in the congregation who had the best interest of the church at heart. Caught in his own trap, he complained of his inability to fill the vacancies in the committee by responsible people with the absence of the £ 5 suffrage.

It was difficult to obtain any consensus in the parish for not only were there the rich and the poor, there was also a rising class of entrepreneurs who wanted recognition. McDonough could accomplish little, for the meetings were filled by individual Irish orators expounding at length over nothing. The three existing Wardens had removed the strong box and the priest's key from McDonough's house to distribute money to the poor as they thought proper. They denied any regulations, stating they were following the practices of Irish Catholics in New York where the priest had no say in the economics of the church. Disgusted with the actions of the Wardens, McDonough asked Bishop Gaulin to replace them without an election, and suggested suitable candidates to serve in rotation.³¹ The appointments were made but the old Wardens refused to give up their office, the keys, the strong box or the money, without a direct order from the Bishop. McDonough reacted in a violent manner, kicking the collection box out of their hands and spilling its contents into the aisles of the church. The congregation was divided. Many gave up their pews and accused McDonough of neglect of his priestly duties in the failure to say early Mass for the servants. As plans were underway for the creation of the Diocese of Toronto, one of the newly appointed Wardens, Maurice Scollard, resigned to give place to a neutral and acceptable candidate, Dr. Bradley.³²

Although McDonough retained the loyalty of the Irish laity, it was the Catholic Compact that brought about his expulsion. From the time of

³⁰ ATA, Macdonell Papers, Church Wardens to Bishop Macdonell, 20 April 1836.

³¹ ATA, Macdonell Papers, Memorandum, 12 December 1836; McDonough to Bishop Macdonell, 19 January 1837, 12 April 1837; McDonough to Bishop R. Gaulin, 3 January 1842.

³² ATA, Macdonell Papers, The Wardens to Bishop Gaulin, 9 January 1842; McDonough to Bishop Gaulin, 18 February 1842.

McDonough's arrival in Toronto, Bishop Macdonell and John Elmsley suspected him as a friend and confidant of William O'Grady and James King and he was asked to account for his activities with them. McDonough broke with James King and, in 1834, denounced him from the altar as a nonpracticing Catholic. That unforgivable slight was an embarrassment to James King's brother, Dr. John King, and the King in-laws – the Elmsleys, Sherwoods and Boultons. And in 1835 McDonough and his assistant, Father M.R. Mills, denounced Dr. King as an apostate Catholic who attended a Protestant church and paraded with the Free Masons in the city. They also pointed out that the Irish congregation disliked Elmsley and accused him of refusing to support the school for Irish children. John Elmsley's resignation as church Warden because of McDonough's stand on behalf of the Irish did not endear McDonough to the Catholic Compact families.³³

Following the Rebellion of 1837, Toronto's Catholic Compact families still retained wealth and influence. In 1839, *The Mirror* reiterated MacKenzie's charge of the Compact monopoly in politics, and observed its Catholic connections.³⁴ No doubt McDonough used that information in 1841 when he attacked Elmsley's brother-in-law, Henry Sherwood, who entered politics as a Tory candidate. At the time, McDonough's views gained wide journalistic comments:

The Roman Catholic priest addressed an inflammatory discourse to his flock, assembled for divine worship on this day, and accompanied, if not headed them from the Altar of prayer, to the hustings of party strife, and by recording his vote for Dunn and Buchanan, set the example to his fellow voters.³⁵

That final effrontery alienated Henry Sherwood's mother and other Compact members who ceased to attend to their religious duties because of their dislike of McDonough. In 1842 Father Edward Gordon was sent to Toronto to effect a reconciliation between the elite and their church. Having achieved some success, Father Gordon commented on the divisions in the congregation, refusing to accept Toronto as a parish because he "would be

³³ ATA, Macdonell Papers, McDonough to Bishop Macdonell, 5 November 1834, 25 January 1835, 18 April 1837; Bishop Macdonell to Dr. Downey, 4 May 1834; A. Macdonell, MPP, to Bishop Macdonell, 27 June 1834; Bishop Macdonell to Father W.P. MacDonald, 26 October 1840; McDonough to Bishop Gaulin, 26 October 1840; Father M.R. Mills to Bishop Gaulin, 24 March 1842.

³⁴ *The Mirror*, 22 February 1839.

³⁵ *The Mirror*, 2 April 1841.

at a loss to know how to manage or to direct such persons.”³⁶

After his resignation as church Warden, Elmsley did not involve himself directly in the management of affairs at St. Paul’s. However, he continued to communicate with Bishop Macdonell and, at the outbreak of Rebellion in 1837, informed him that:

All the Family Compact are doing remarkably well. The Governor says that they may say what they like about the Family Compact of Robinsons, Jones’, MacAuleys, Sherwoods, Jarvis’, et. et. et., but they are the salvation of the Country just now. That portion of it that are happily united to the true Church are blessed by the bounty of Providence with health and every blessing.³⁷

Sir Francis Bond Head had reappointed Elmsley to the Executive Council. His ideas for the establishment and backing of the joint-stock Farmers’ Bank and the Home District Mutual Fire Company received the support of the reformers. During the 1837 Rebellion, Elmsley was in the provincial marine and commanded one of the boats under the direction of Captain Andrew Drew, a position with which Elmsley was not satisfied. He demanded a rank equivalent to the lieutenant colonelcy he held in the Militia, which would have placed him above Drew. When ordered to proceed with fifty or sixty men to Lake Erie to assist Drew, Elmsley asked for a reconsideration of his rank. The request was refused and Elmsley resigned his commission, telling his men they were not bound by their oaths. As a result, Elmsley was branded a traitor. He demanded a court martial which also was refused, and in 1839 was suspended from the Executive Council, and later dismissed.³⁸

Although Elmsley continued in the Legislative Council until the Union, he concentrated on the pursuit of private enterprise as an outlet for his energy. He captained the steamer *Cobourg* in 1841, and in 1842 purchased the *Niagara* and continued as part-owner in that venture until 1844 when he sold his interest. Known as Captain J. Elmsley, he was co-president with Hugh Richardson of the Toronto Regatta in 1842. Later, in 1853, he joined the Toronto Boat Club which evolved into the Royal Canadian Yacht

³⁶ ATA, Macdonell Papers, McDonough to Bishop Gaulin, 15 January and 17 January 1842; Father E. Gordon to Bishop Gaulin, 16 March 1842.

³⁷ ATA, Macdonell Papers, Bishop Macdonell to Elmsley, 18 December 1837.

³⁸ ATA, Macdonell Papers, Bishop Macdonell to Elmsley, 18 December 1837.

Club.³⁹

In that period of renewed economic activity, it seems John Elmsley's personal relationship with his church and attitude towards his coreligionists also changed. No longer seeking preferment or any definitive leadership role in the church, he began to serve his fellow Catholics in Toronto. Contrary to McDonough's earlier accusations, Elmsley was concerned about the lack of education among the Irish Catholic poor, particularly their lack of knowledge of their faith. With the assistance of the Catholic Compact families and some of the emerging Irish elite, Elmsley organized a Christian Doctrine Society in 1840. The Society gained the interest of the Irish poor who travelled from the old core and Cabbagetown, from King, New, Lot, Duchess, Park, Market and Richmond Streets to attend the instructions at St. Paul's Church. The Irish represented a varied background – bakers, sadlers, shoemakers, tailors, innkeepers, painters, carpenters and labourers. Charging an entrance fee of 1 s. 3p. and 4s. 4p. per year, the Society, which taught adults and children, purchased books and catechisms, printed a prospectus of courses, supplied writing paper, and was able to install benches in a rented building.⁴⁰

With the establishment of the Diocese of Toronto in 1842, Elmsley was to become an important figure in its evolution, serving under three of its bishops and holding it together during its first disruptive term of interregnum. One of the undertakings of Bishop Michael Power, the first Bishop of the Diocese, was the building of St. Michael's Cathedral. It was Elmsley who organized the Catholic laity into voluntary groups to assist in the provision of supplies and labour to construct the edifice. When the structure was completed, Elmsley and his friend, S.G. Lynn, entrepreneur and fellow convert, along with four other Irish laymen, were responsible for the establishment of the Cathedral Loan Fund to handle the finances entailed. Following the untimely death of Power, Elmsley and Lynn guaranteed personally the debts of Bishop Power's estate and the Cathedral, allowing for its consecration because, under church law, a debt-ridden cathedral could not be consecrated.⁴¹

The plight of the Famine Irish immigrants who entered Toronto after 1847 had a tremendous effect on Elmsley's life. While the city hid in fear of the contagion they brought, Elmsley and a few priests from the Diocese accompanied Bishop Power into the fever sheds set up on Toronto's wharves. Bishop Power died as a result of that ministering, leaving the

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ ATA, Sundry Books and Records, Ledger A of the Christian Doctrine Society of St. Paul, Toronto, 1840-1841.

⁴¹ *The Canadian Freeman*, 14 May 1863; *The Irish Canadian*, 6 March 1872.

Diocese without a bishop for a period of three years. John Elmsley, whom the early Irish disliked as a pompous, Tory squire and meddling convert, gained the respect and devotion of the Irish for his dedication to his church and to them. At the time of his death in 1863, *The Canadian Freeman* demonstrated the vast change in the man who had become the benefactor of the Irish poor in Toronto:

Amidst the ridicule of his former friends, some of whom abandoned him, he went about doing good. His care of the poor, of the widows and orphans of those who were swept away by fever, was incessant. With the tenderness and devotion of a Sister of Charity, he visited the fever sheds, regardless of contagion. He nursed and tended the sick; he consoled the dying; he buried the victims of the terrible scourge; he washed with his own hands the poor bereaved orphans whose condition would have excited disgust in the minds of those who lay claim to no ordinary share of humanity and benevolence.⁴²

Neither the city nor the church were prepared to deal with the influx of the socially deprived, nominally Catholic Famine Irish immigrants. Although the Church had established some charitable programmes in the past, the concern was laissez faire. Elmsley instituted a more direct approach. During the period of interregnum, he utilized the Offeratory Fund to aid the sick and starving immigrants and the widows and orphans. He removed from the fund and took up personally the burden of the cost of burial of the Sisters of Loretto, who had arrived in Toronto during the period of the Famine migration.⁴³ Elmsley interacted with city authorities on behalf of the Irish. He utilized his eminent position and from City Hall dispersed his own and the Church's funds in aid of the poor, thereby motivating the city to increase the amount of financial assistance.⁴⁴ Elmsley served the secular, social institutions in the city as a founder and member of the board of the House of Industry and selected the most destitute areas for his visitations. It was he who first saw the need for Catholic organizations to aid the Irish because of the proselytizing tactics employed in the secular ones.⁴⁵

In 1849 John Elmsley and his wife initiated Catholic women's social work through the formation of The Catholic Ladies of Toronto. The organization, under the leadership of the Compact elite and composed chiefly of middle class Irish women, was established to counteract the activity of the

⁴² *The Canadian Freeman*, 14 May 1863.

⁴³ ATA, Bishop Michael Power Papers, J. Elmsley to Father Carroll, 18 August 1849.

⁴⁴ ATA, Power Papers, Elmsley to Father Carroll, 29 October 1849.

⁴⁵ *The Canadian Freeman*, 14 May 1863.

secular Committee of the Widows and Orphans Funds which was giving Catholic children to Protestant families. The goal of The Catholic Ladies was to set up an orphans' home in which infants would be cared for until adopted and where servant girls could reside while waiting for positions in Catholic homes.⁴⁶ The Elmsleys obtained a property on Nelson Street and made an unsuccessful attempt to bring the Grey Nuns from Montreal to care for the orphans. In the interim the Church paid 6 shillings, 3 pence per month per child and twenty pounds a year for rent. Catholic butchers supplied meat free of charge and Elmsley obtained the fuel and vegetables for the orphanage. The Catholic Ladies supplied bedsteads, blankets, tables, stove, cooking utensils and clothing. The servant girls, under the direction of a matron, cared for the children while awaiting employment opportunities.⁴⁷

During Power's tenure, Elmsley became a proponent for separate Catholic education. As a member of the Public School Board, Elmsley began to realize Catholics would benefit more from independent institutions. In 1844 he had attempted to obtain two or three schools in Toronto, with the finances for them based upon an aggregate of Catholic population. The City refused because Toronto was considered a single unit. The Irish Catholics then petitioned the government to amend the Separate School Act, but to no avail. The Public School Board refused to pay a Catholic teacher with the excuse that he was not qualified by their standards; but the Irish population believed it was because of his religion.⁴⁸ After Power's death, Elmsley was instrumental in the purchase of a Baptist school house, on March Street in the Reserve, to be utilized as a Catholic school for girls.⁴⁹

Bishop Armand Charbonnel arrived in 1850 to administer the Diocese of Toronto, no doubt appreciative of the ground work that had been laid by Elmsley. They were no strangers and similar in many ways. Both came from a privileged class and devoted their lives, albeit through different vocations, to the good of others, gaining the respect of those they served and the ridicule of those who observed. During the 1840s, when Elmsley established and stocked several libraries for the Irish, he evidently began to read *The Lives of the Saints* and the works of Alphonsus de Liguori. It seems he went through a period of reconversion or internalization of the truths of his religion. When in Montreal, Elmsley met Charbonnel who was serving as a priest, and they continued to communicate. Elmsley had

⁴⁶ Sisters of St. Joseph Archives, Toronto, Sisters' Book – Orphanage, 1850-1858.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *The Globe*, 3 September 1844; *The Toronto Mirror*, 24 March 1848.

⁴⁹ ATA, Power Papers, Memorandum – Power per J. Elmsley, 1 July 1848.

advised Charbonnel that he wished to devote his life to his Church and his efforts during the period of interregnum were commendable. In contemplating some form of religious life for himself and his wife, Elmsley decided he could effect the most good by remaining a businessman. In 1851 he bequeathed to Bishop Charbonnel and the Church fifty percent, his entire share, of a commercial undertaking with his brother-in-law, Samuel Sherwood, to be used to benefit the Irish poor of the city. A Great Lakes vessel was purchased from his wife's legacy on the death of her father, Levius Sherwood. Having conveyed his own personal wealth to his wife and children, Elmsley directed his nautical knowledge and business acumen to his new venture, the profits of which were to be channeled to the service of his Church.⁵⁰

When Charbonnel arrived Elmsley had first-hand knowledge of the problems facing the Bishop in the field of Irish education in the city. Elmsley and S.G. Lynn petitioned Charbonnel to direct his attention to the deplorable ignorance and depravity of his flock:

The elevation of these degraded people should be we venture to submit the earnest and unceasing object of Your Lordship's untiring efforts; and we conceive that in no way can Your Lordship better endeavour to attain this most desirable end than in extending to them the blessings, of a sound religious Education. The parents of the children inhabiting these places are in some cases altogether too poor to be able to pay for the schooling of their little ones, but in most cases they infinitely prefer the indulgence of their own sensual propensities to the instruction of their youth, and their large numbers of young persons, are annually thrown upon society steeped in all the mischievous consequences of idle and dissolute training.⁵¹

But in 1851 Protestants responded to Elmsley's attempts at invigorating Catholic education by combining to vote against Catholics on the School Board. And Catholics had little success because the Protestants were backed by the Orange Lodge, especially against John Elmsley. The need for a school in each ward, with an organization, became apparent.⁵² Since there were 15 public schools and Catholics numbered 25%, three schools were not an exorbitant demand. Regardless of poor finances, a school was erected in 1852 at St. Mary's on Bathurst Street, in the western part of the

⁵⁰ ATA, Bishop Armand Charbonnel Papers, J. Elmsley to Bishop Charbonnel, 3 January 1851.

⁵¹ ATA, Charbonnel Papers, J. Elmsley and S.G. Lynn to Bishop Charbonnel, 1850.

⁵² *The Toronto Mirror*, 10 January 1851; 23 July 1852.

city.⁵³ Convinced of the value of Catholic education, Elmsley often paid the teachers' salaries from his own resources. Charbonnel brought religious orders from France to assist in the advancement of education and other institutions; Elmsley gave land at Clover Hill to the Sisters of St. Joseph and also to the Basilian Fathers who established St. Michael's College for the education of priests to serve the people. But Elmsley provided example by personally teaching catechism to the Irish children in Toronto and at Hogg's Hollow, six miles distant.⁵⁴

Elmsley had been instrumental in pushing the Irish poor into the arms of the church as they gradually became aware that it was their only source of succour in an alien city. But he and Lynn also were disturbed by the haphazard attention paid to the conduct and services within the church. When Charbonnel arrived, they remarked upon the need for order: priests coming on time to say Mass – not at any hour they chose; choir members coming and going as they pleased, often disrupting the service with their chatter. From that period on, one can observe a growing devotional revolution in the Diocese which began under the auspices of Bishop Charbonnel and was continued under his successor, Bishop John Lynch.⁵⁵

At Charbonnel's invitation, the Sisters of St. Joseph arrived in Toronto in 1851 to take over the work of the orphanage started by Elmsley and his wife to prevent proselytism of Irish Catholic children.⁵⁶ Elmsley had maintained the orphanage but admitted in 1850 that the fervour of The Catholic Ladies had "somewhat abated."⁵⁷ In the same year, Elmsley, who had been a founder of the House of Industry, was appointed to its committee, believing it was an unbigoted institution that could serve the Catholic aged and infirm.⁵⁸ From the records of 1844, the Catholic population had supported that poor house by supplying funds and wood, but did not entrust the care of Catholic orphans to it.⁵⁹ As a member of the St. Vincent de Paul Society and a supporter of the St. Joseph's orphanage, Elmsley continued to work for the House of Industry. It seemed that there were more Catholic orphans than the Sisters could possibly care for, and Elmsley attempted to look after the interests of those delegated to the House of Industry.

But in 1853 *The Mirror* reported on the "criminal advantages taken of

⁵³ *The Toronto Mirror*, 24 September 1852.

⁵⁴ *The Canadian Freeman*, 14 May 1863.

⁵⁵ ATA, Charbonnel Papers, J. Elmsley and S.G. Lynn to Bishop Charbonnel, 1850.

⁵⁶ ATA, Power Papers, J. Elmsley to Father Parr, 27 October 1849.

⁵⁷ ATA, Charbonnel Papers, J. Elmsley to Father Carroll, 5 April 1850.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *The Toronto Mirror*, 6 December 1844; ATA, Power Papers, P. O'Dwyer to Bishop Power, 5 January 1844; E. McMahon to Bishop Power, 21 February 1843.

perverting the children of Catholics from the religion of their parents” by the House of Industry. It added that, in protest, the Catholic members of the Committee, including Elmsley, wished to remove the Catholic children from public support in the House of Industry and to place them under the care of the Sisters of St. Joseph to be supported through voluntary Irish contributions. But nothing was resolved.⁶⁰

The House of Industry was identified as a bigoted institution, hostile to everything Catholic. Irish Catholics lost their trust in the House of Industry. According to *The Mirror*, the Sisters of St. Joseph and Archdeacon Moloney were grossly insulted as they tried to attend to the religious needs of Catholic inmates. It accused “the well intended charity, designed for the relief of the indigent” as being “converted into an organized system of ‘soup’ proselytism.” In summary, *The Mirror* proclaimed:

... And that the managers, by their refusal to accede to the reasonable requests of their Catholic fellow citizens, clerical and lay, as expressed thro’ their representations at the Board, in respect to consigning the charge of the orphan children, belonging to the Catholic body, to the care of members of their own Church willing to assume the duty and responsibility of providing for them in all necessary respects, and in conformity with the rules and requirements of the Toronto House of Industry, have thereby forfeited the confidence of the Catholic members of the Board, and of their Catholic fellow-citizens generally.⁶¹

Having failed to sway the Committee of the House of Industry, Elmsley assisted Bishop Charbonnel and the Sisters of St. Joseph in the founding of the House of Providence which provided care to Catholic aged, infirm and orphaned.

Although George Manly Muir is credited as the founder of the St. Vincent de Paul Society in Toronto, John Elmsley was one of its initial members in 1850 and served it diligently. The St. Vincent de Paul Society, like the Sisters of St. Joseph, became one of the central elements in the rise of Catholic social action. Beginning with programmes of outdoor relief to feed and clothe the impoverished, the Society members visited the homes of the poor. As he had when he served the House of Industry, Elmsley once

⁶⁰ *The Toronto Mirror*, 21 January 1853.

⁶¹ ATA, Charbonnel Papers, Insert for *The Toronto Mirror*, January 1853.

again visited the worst areas of the city.⁶² Regardless of personal wealth and comfort, the members of the St. Vincent de Paul Society had to interact personally with the poor in their own environment; the delivery of charitable donations was a task that by rule could not be delegated to servants. And as was the case in urban centres of the United States where Catholic social workers acquainted with the human condition of poverty were not looked upon as social investigators but as representatives of the poor and workers,⁶³ Elmsley and men of his ilk were welcomed by the Famine immigrants. Furthermore, the Toronto St. Vincent de Paul Society had a prime example in its first patron, Bishop Charbonnel, who gave his family fortune to assist the poor in the Diocese and reduced his living standards to their level. In 1859 Charbonnel asked permission to accompany some of the members on their visits.⁶⁴ On entering one of the first homes on the list, Charbonnel met a poor widow with several children. A narrator related Charbonnel's words and action:

“God loves the poor, and your prayers, though you were in rags, will be more acceptable than those of many who flaunt up the centre aisle dressed in silk and satin. The Almighty does not require good clothes. Look at your Bishop's clothes. This is good (holding his cassock) but thanks to Merrick Brothers, whose gift it is.” Here he opened his purple cassock and showed that the rest of his garments were absolutely shabby through age and wear.⁶⁵

When Bishop Charbonnel established the Toronto Savings Bank, Elmsley was one of its directors. Both men were interested in establishing a depository to encourage the Irish towards means of self-help. The institution was to assist Irish immigrant families in providing an education for their children and protection in their old age, and to save money to build homes in the future. Charbonnel believed the Savings Bank would stimulate the formation of a housing or building society. A fixed amount from the profits of the Bank was to be reserved for Catholic charities in the city.⁶⁶

Charbonnel returned to France in 1860 and the Diocese was left to the control of Bishop J. Lynch. Lynch and Elmsley were concerned about the number of urchins who wandered the streets of Toronto. Under the auspices

⁶² ATA, Society of St. Vincent de Paul Papers, Council Register. As well see: Nicolson, “Irish Catholic Social Action.”

⁶³ S.B. Warner, *The Urban Wilderness* (New York, 1972), p. 176.

⁶⁴ Sisters of St. Joseph Archives, “A Great Charity Organization for Laymen,” (circa 1895), unsigned and undated manuscript.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ ATA, Charbonnel Papers, Abstract of Rules and Regulations of the Toronto Savings Bank; By-Laws and List of Directors of the Toronto Savings Bank.

of Lynch and Elmsley, Father Eugene O'Reilly began to construct a two-story building in Wildfield in the Gore of Toronto which was opened early in 1861. It is said that Father O'Reilly and John Elmsley gathered homeless waifs from the city and took them to Wildfield where they received an elementary education and learned farming techniques. It became known as the Boys' Industrial School of the Gore of Toronto in 1862, and John Elmsley served on its board until his death in 1863. The school was closed in 1869 because of financial difficulties and the boys were transferred to the new St. Nicholas Home in Toronto, under the auspices of the Sisters of St. Joseph.⁶⁷

Just before his death, John Elmsley assisted in the renewal of the Bona Mors Society. The purpose of that purgatorial society was to Christianize Irish funeral practices with their paganlike wakes, to provide for the burial of the poor and the members of the Society, and to reduce the Irish fixation on costly funeral trappings and the erection of large grave-monuments.⁶⁸

The Elmsleys had thought about endowing a hospital, and after her husband's death Mrs. Elmsley proposed buying the Upper Canada Building for that purpose. However, in 1871, when Bishop Lynch wanted her to purchase a site for a hospital, the Elmsley fortune had been depleted in the service of the Irish and the Church; all she could offer was the furnishing of a room.⁶⁹ It was not until 1892 that the Catholics gained the services of a hospital of their own – St. Michael's.

John Elmsley's life was full. Beginning as a pompous Tory squire, he joined the religion of his wife. His actions in that early period set him apart from the Irish laity. At mid-passage he seemed to undergo a second conversion and gave his life to the Church and the service of the Famine Irish immigrants. In that context, he along with Charbonnel were initiators of Catholic social action, a movement that flourished and exists in our own age.

⁶⁷ Brother Prudent MacDonald, "The Wildfield Story," *Toronto District Bulletin*, April 1977, pp. 12-13; Conversations with Brother Cyril, St. John's Training School, August 1979; ATA, Archbishop J. Lynch Papers, an Act to incorporate the Boys' Industrial School of the Gore of Toronto, 1862.

⁶⁸ Purgatorial Societies became common in Canada and the United States in the mid 1800s. Because Irish burial customs were a source of embarrassment to the Church, all of the aims of these societies were not made public. The rise and fall of a series of these societies in Toronto shows clearly the Church's attempt to ameliorate the problem in view of Irish tenacity to retain peasant customs. The various pastorals of the Bishops, the custom of the St. Vincent de Paul Society to attend wakes, and a considerable oral history bear this out. See: ATA, the Records of the Bona Mors Society; Bishop J. Lynch Papers, Pastoral, 2 April 1876.

⁶⁹ ATA, Lynch Papers, Mrs. J. Elmsley to Archbishop Lynch, 10 March 1871.