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THE HIGHLAND SOCIETY OF CANADA

BY WILFRED CAMPBELL

AUTHOR OF "IAN OF THE ORCADES," "A BEAUTIFUL REBEL,"
"THE GREAT LAKES," ETC.

DOWN on the shores of the St. Lawrence, where it widens into what is called Lake St. Francis, are the two old Loyalist and Highland Townships of Lancaster and Charlottenburg. These two townships comprise the whole south front of the historic County of Glengarry, famous in Canadian annals for its Scottish and Loyalist military settlements.

This is a region of an early colonial influence, where every other country home, could it speak, has a story to tell, and every old settled hamlet has been the birthplace or biding-place of some distinguished man or group of men. Here, in the dreamy Canadian summer afternoon, one can loiter down lilac-bordered garden lanes, or across the drowsy opens, by stream and field and note on every hand the signs of age in man's occupancy of the soil. The old moss-covered barns, and one-time hospitable stone chimneys, in roofs and gables, all speak rather of the effort and ideal of the past than of the energy of the present. Yet it is a delightful country to abide in, and pleasant and interesting to eye and soul, with rich soil and well-tilled fields of a people contented if not overly ambitious.

Here it was that in the early eighties of the eighteenth century, even before the founding of the Upper Province, came the first Loyalist and military settlers, over-flowing from the more seaward settlements and Montreal, where some of them were residing as refugees and veterans of the Scottish and Loyalist disbanded regiments. It was these intrepid colonists, who, daring to meet the privations of a forest-life, became the earliest pioneers of old Upper Canada.

The Grand Trunk Railway, the pioneer railroad of Eastern Canada, runs along the river front of this interesting old district, and the observing traveller will notice the general appearance of a long-settled community in the aspect of the villages and the country farms and houses, scattered along the line of travel. Leaving the train at Lancaster, an old frontier town, a drive of about eight miles along the picturesque river Raisin, through a finely cultivated countryside, brings us to Williamstown, one of the most ancient villages and settlements in what was once Upper Canada. Here is St. Andrew's, the oldest Presbyterian church in the Province, and said to have been the first place of Christian worship in Upper Canada. The parish was organised in 1787 by the Reverend John Bethune, a retired military chaplain of a Loyalist regiment, who came from Montreal, where he was minister of St. Gabriel's church, and founded this, the first Protestant religious mission. Bethune was a man of piety and ability, and he founded one of the most

distinguished Canadian families. Of his sons, one was the second Bishop of Toronto, succeeding Dr. Strachan, who was his schoolmaster at Williamstown; and another was Archdeacon of Montreal and the first Principal of McGill University. The present church, a quaint stone building, which is built on the site of the first one, dates from the 12th of September, 1812, a few weeks before the death of Brock.

Here also still stands on the river's bank, the old wooden building where Strachan, that other famous old Scottish divine, whose life has been written by Bishop Bethune, taught his grammar school. It is a low gray building, with rough clapboard walls, giving no present sign of its historic importance as the one-time hall of learning for Canadian youth.

Northward again, between these places in Glengarry is St. Raphael's, the pioneer place of Roman Catholic worship in the Province. Here settled Father, afterwards Bishop, Macdonell, who brought out the disbanded regiment of Glengarry Highlanders and settled them in this now historic spot.

This old county became noted for its group of military Highlanders, many of them chieftain-like gentlemen of the Macdonald and other clans, who attempted to re-create, in the wilds of Canada somewhat of that old Highland condition of life and society for which old Scotland is famous.

Farther along the River Raisin, which often seems like a large canal so even are its banks and so placid its waters, is Martinstown, another small social centre of bygone days.

From there we arrive at last after a drive of some miles, at McGillivray's Bridge, the old country-place of the McGillivrays, a family whose head is a clan chieftain in Scotland, and whose Canadian founder was a prominent public man.

Here resided in the early half of the nineteenth century the late Honourable John McGillivray, one of the leading men in his time in Upper Canada. He held many important county and provincial offices, and was raised to the Legislative Council of the Province in 1839 by Sir Charles Poulett Thompson. He married a daughter of Colonel Neil McLean, a noted military Loyalist, whose son became Chief Justice of Upper Canada. Mr. McGillivray's eldest son, Neil, succeeded to the chiefship of the clan, and inherited the family estates in Scotland, and another son, George, who was lately prominent in the county, being a public official, acquired the Canadian home at McGillivray Bridge. The house here, a fine sample of a Canadian country residence, stands by the river bank in a small park with well-kept grounds, and it commands a good view of the river and country beyond.

It was here, at this old Canadian home, that of a typical country gentleman, a class of home all too rare in Canada for the country's good, that the writer discovered the long-forgotten papers and record-books of the long defunct Highland Society of Canada.

Who is there living to-day who even remembers the existence of such an association? Yet between sixty and seventy years ago, in the early half of the nineteenth century, its membership included the leading men of Scottish blood in the two Provinces of Canada.

In a large rambling garret, under the pine-raftered roof of the old house, dimly lighted by small, dusty, gable windows, where I groped on a loose floor of scattered boards, in search of rare documents, I came suddenly on the old records, which had long been lost to the memory even of their custodians themselves. The place of hiding was a brass-nailed, hairskin-bound trunk that showed evidence of having made over-sea voyages in the early years of the last century. There, with old books and papers, mice-nibbled and dusty, reposed the minute books and papers which chronicled the doings of this dead association.

So long had they lain there, and so many decades of years with other and alien dreams and ideals had passed in between, that their existence and contents had utterly gone out of mind, as had the old-time spinning wheels and candle moulds and other obsolete necessities and practices and customs of a forgotten and vanished era.

It was interesting to the historian, the man with the true love for the voices of the past, on parchment or foolscap, to scan once more those musty bundles of the sayings and doings of a generation gone. Little after all to the material mind were these old papers. No great find; just a few leather-bound minute books of an old association and some dusty old letters and petitions transcribed in the fine old clerky hand of a period that could and did take pains to write well and correctly on honest foolscap in honest ink—the chronicles of scenes and actions, ideals and convictions of men now long mouldering beneath the turfs of the old Williamstown, St. Raphael's and other churchyards. And yet, what pictures of living men, what throbs of dead and gone patriotism are stirred anew by the perusal of those old mildewed pages.

There was the roll of membership, recalling a host of personages of a wide difference of vocation, religion and politics, and resident in all corners of the scattered colony; tickets and invitations to annual dinners, reviving pictures of old-time conviviality, long winded and deeply drunk toasts, continued into the wee hours, quite to early cock-crow; resolutions representing strong convictions on public and patriotic questions in a

turbulent and perilous period of our history; and, last but not least, addresses to the various Governors, with their replies, showing the prominence, prestige and dignity of the Society.

But the Highland Society of Canada was much more than all this. It was not a mere loose association of social conviviality and patriotic sentiment. It was a branch of the Highland Society of London, England; a serious and powerful organization, with aims and action connected with the welfare of Scotland, and having for its head a Prince of the Blood Royal.

The Canadian Branch had its inception at a meeting held at the residence of Angus Macdonell, near the church at St. Raphael's, on Tuesday, the 10th of November, 1818. This meeting was called under authority from the parent society, bearing the seal of that corporation and the signature of His Royal Highness the Duke of York as president. The objects of both the parent and daughter societies are stated in the commission as follows:

“The preserving the language, martial spirit, dress, music and antiquities of the ancient Caledonians; for rescuing from oblivion the valuable remains of Gaelic literature; for the establishment and support of Gaelic schools; for relieving distressed Highlanders at a distance from their native homes; and for promoting the improvement and general welfare of the northern parts of the Island of Great Britain.”

This purpose and aim of the parent society, established in London in 1778, was adopted by the Canadian Branch with slight variations to suit the country, as is seen in the printed rules of the society issued on the re-organisation in 1843, and taken from the original minutes of 1819. Thus the establishment of Gaelic schools was extended to “other parts of the British Empire,” and with the improvement and general welfare of the “northern parts of the Kingdom” was included that of the “Highland settlements of Canada.” It is interesting to note, here as elsewhere, that the “British Empire” was regarded as a well-established fact in those days and long before.

Another significant fact regarding this Association is that, though a Canadian branch, it still recognised its obligations to the welfare of the old land, and instead of contenting itself with work for Scotsmen in Canada, considered the scope of its work as embracing both the old world and the new. This Imperial spirit was one which at that day animated all the best of our people; and the parent and the daughter societies worked for the common good.

The commission from London was addressed to several gentlemen: the Honourable William McGillivray, Angus Shaw, Esq., the Reverend Alexander Macdonell (afterwards Bishop of Regiopolis), John Macdonald,

Esq., of Gart, and Henry McKenzie, Esq., "it being felt by these and others that the Highland settlements of Upper Canada offered a most favourable field for such an association."

The inauguration address of the chairman of the first meeting, Simon McGillivray, Esq., one of the Vice-Presidents of the London Society, is full of suggestions. He showed that the parent society, starting as a mere convivial club, and a place of Highland resort, grew into a great association of noblemen and gentlemen, ambitious to preserve all the best traditions, ideals, and characteristics of their race, together with the improvement of the Highlands. He further emphasised the fact that this was even more necessary in the Scottish settlements of the newer Empire of the West; so that it was possible and important to have a strong public association in Canada, acting with the mother society here and at home.

The first officers elected in 1818, according to the minute book, were: President, His Excellency Sir Peregrine Maitland, K.C.B.; Vice-Presidents, Reverend Alexander Macdonald, Honourable Colonel Neil McLean, Lieut.-Colonel Donald McDonell; Treasurer, Alexander Fraser, Esq.; Secretary, Archibald McLean, Esq.

The life-membership roll, from November 24th, 1818, to June 18th, 1824, included the names of Simon McGillivray, London; Honourable William McGillivray, Montreal; Archibald McLellan, of the North-West Company, and Henry McKenzie, of Montreal. So it will be seen that there were many famous old Northwesters in its ranks.

The society continued to flourish with a large general membership until about 1824, when it gradually declined, to be revived again two decades later, by re-organisation in December, 1842. During that period much had happened, both at home and in the outer parts of the Empire.

In Canada, the greatest changes had taken place; indeed, it had been one of the most crucial periods of the country's history. The rebellion of 1837 had come and gone, bringing about consequent results, among them the union of the two Provinces, in 1841. More significant even was the passing of old social and other influences. What was called the old Tory rule had passed, and out of the extreme conflicting factions more temperate parties had to arise in order to make the rule of the country possible. The fierce militant spirit that produced the rebellion had to soften down into what was called the Baldwin, or Constitutional Reform; and the old Tory party to re-arise under John A. Macdonald, as the Liberal-Conservative. It was a middle or transitional period, when the old association was revived by re-organisation in the last days of 1842.

The first report of the revival, dated at Cornwall the 23rd of January, 1843, showed by a highly respectable list of officers and directors that the society had taken on a new lease of life. Sir Charles Bagot was Chief, and the leading spirits including the President, John Macdonell, Esq., of Galt, comprised the most representative men of the historic old county, and many prominent Scotsmen in all parts of Upper and Lower Canada. Among these, were Sir Allan McNab, the last and greatest of the old Tory school; John Alexander Macdonald, a young Kingston lawyer, who was soon to be to the new Conservatives what McNab had been to the old; the second Bishop Macdonell, of Regiopolis, and Bishop Strachan, a man, who as a great educationalist, divine and statesman, had been and still was a paramount influence in the making of the whole country. The report of the 13th of July, 1843, says of the society that "Since its revival it has acquired a large accession to its members. Many of the most respectable and influential individuals in the Canadas have enrolled their names, and His Excellency the Governor-General has been graciously pleased to become its Chief."

The same report pays the following just tribute to the memory of the great Roman Catholic prelate, Bishop Macdonell:

"The society feels confident that the parent society will approve of its first act since its re-organisation, by which it has paid a tribute of respect to the memory of a man who presided over it for many years, who was a member of the parent society, and who was named in the commission under which this branch was formed, the late lamented Bishop Macdonell, who during the whole course of his valuable life exerted himself in Britain and in Canada to promote the interests and welfare of his countrymen."

The society in its scheme of organisation elected local vice-presidents at different centres, such as Quebec, Montreal, Kingston, Toronto, and Hamilton. The following letter is from that greatest of all Canadian statesman, afterwards Premier of Canada, and the dominant personality in its politics, during the greater part of the nineteenth century, but then mentioned in the minutes as "John A. Macdonald, Esq., Vice-President at Kingston." He says:

"It will give me great pleasure to be enrolled as a member of the Highland Society of Canada. My avocations are such as to prevent my doing justice in the capacity of a local Vice-President, and would recommend that some person with more leisure should be appointed to that office. If, however, the society should be unable to fill the office otherwise, I shall be proud to act in it, and perform the duties according to the best of my abilities."

Macdonald was then a hard-working young lawyer in Kingston. He commenced his political career the following year, when he was elected as member for that city. Sir Allan McNab, the old Tory baronet, of Dundurn,

and still active in politics, writes on the 12th of September, as Vice-President for Hamilton, appreciating the honour conferred upon him and suggesting the advisability of holding a meeting of the society at Kingston during the meeting of Parliament.

The Honourable and Right Reverend John Strachan, Bishop of Toronto, also accepts office as a Vice-President.

William Stewart, Vice-President at Bytown, writes from the Legislative Assembly at Kingston, suggesting that "the Honourable Thomas Mackay, of New Edinburgh, should be appointed as the other Vice-President at Bytown, in the room of my particular friend, the Chief of McNab, as that gentleman resides at a distance of upwards of seventy miles from that town." This is the Chief of McNab who founded the unfortunate McNab settlement up the Ottawa. There is a story that he and Sir Allan were registering at the same hotel, and the Chief signing as "The McNab," Sir Allan signed himself "The Other McNab."

An address was presented by the society to Sir Charles Metcalfe, at Cornwall, on the 2nd of September, 1843, as the Governor was on his way to Kingston. The address referred to His Excellency's "talents, experience, firmness and integrity to preside over the destinies of this Province, at a time when such qualifications are so eminently required"; and assured him in conclusion that one of the chief objects of the society was "to cherish in the minds of our countrymen, in this their adopted land, those sentiments of genuine and devoted loyalty, for which their ancestors have been so distinguished, and individually and collectively use our best exertions to support the Constitutional Government of this Province and to perpetuate our connection with the Mother Country."

Such, indeed, were the staunch ideals and purposes of this historic old society, which, during its existence not only kept in touch with the parent society in Britain, but also with the two strong Scottish societies in Halifax and St. John.

On the 18th of February, 1847, an address was presented to Lord Elgin, congratulating him on his appointment as Governor. It referred to his illustrious Scottish name and ancestry, and requested his acceptance of the Chiefship of the society. His Excellency, in reply, responded to the appeal and accepted the office of Chief. But about this date or a little later, the proceedings seem to close. Whether the desperate conditions, political and otherwise, which followed, destroyed the harmony of the association, or other causes were to blame, is not exactly known.

One reason for the Society's decline might have been its aristocratic tendencies and composition. Its leaders were chiefly Scottish country

gentlemen of Glengarry and elsewhere; and with the gradual passing of the well-to-do classes in Upper Canada who strove to maintain the traditions and customs of old world country life, and the drifting of their sons into the professions and business life of the towns and cities; such an institution would naturally, as it no doubt did, pass into oblivion. Then, the strain of a period like that of the burning of the Parliament Buildings in Montreal in 1849, when most of the members would be almost at war with their illustrious Chief, Lord Elgin, would about destroy its future possibilities.

Time brings about grave changes. The old order passes, but does it always give place to conditions as beneficial as those destroyed? It would have been a great blessing to Canada had her ruling, and wealthy classes, stayed in or gravitated to the country life. Men's minds are awakening more and more to the weaknesses of the so-called democracy, and the curse of the crowded city, where all are consumers and none producers.

May the day be not far distant when once more the great social gatherings of a Province, including the leaders in statecraft, church, intellect, and social supremacy, will be held, not in over-crowded and pauper-creating cities, but in little hamlets and country villages like St. Raphael's or historic Williamstown.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Highland Society of Canada*, by William Wilfred Campbell.]