

ST RAPHAELS CHURCH
THE CRADLE OF CATHOLICISM
IN ONTARIO

by

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AN ADDRESS DELIVERED AT
THE COMMEMORATION OF THE
RUINS OF ST RAPHAELS CHURCH
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WE STAND TODAY at the site of the cradle of Catholicism in Ontario. There are earlier sites: Ste-Marie-among- the-Hurons, where the blood of the martyrs of 1649 stained the earth. And there was also the old French mission of Assumption at Sandwich. St Andrews West on the Raisin River holds priority of settlement by two years and has the oldest church building in Ontario. St Raphaels and St Andrews became parishes on the same day in 1802.

But it is not age or priority that we observe today. Rather we are here at the ruins of St Raphaels Church to commemorate and celebrate the importance of this church in the history of our province and our people.

FIRST DIOCESE SINCE THE REFORMATION

In 1826 a high level accord between Lord Bathurst, the Colonial Secretary, and Pope Leo XI, elevated Alexander Macdonell to titular Bishop of Regiopolis or Kingston. This "church and school in the wilderness" was not only the administrative centre of the first Catholic diocese in Ontario but was, in fact for a time, the administrative centre of first diocese of the Church of Rome to be erected in the farflung reaches of the British Empire since Henry the Eight established the Reformation in England. The heavy gold episcopal signet ring presented by George IV to Bishop Macdonell was later, in 1890, presented to the third Alexander Macdonell, first bishop of the new diocese of Alexandria is in the safekeeping of the bishop of Alexandria-Cornwall, Bishop Eugene Larocque.

That this should come to pass is grounded in the record of loyalty of the Highland Scots Catholics to the House of Hanover and in their support of the ideals of the British Empire. It is in this sense still fair to say that it was Scots who put the *great* in Great Britain.

Through the course of the Seven Years War in America and the taking of New France, their valour was legendary. From the Plains of Abraham to the revolution in America from which Providence saw fit to people our county, and from Vinegar Hill in the Irish rebellion of 1798 to Queenston Heights and Lundy's Lane in the war of 1812, the Glengarries fought "shoulder to shoulder" and returned to the green hills of Glengarry.

Let us not mistakenly soften our claim -- for five years St Raphaels under Bishop Macdonell was the administrative centre of the first Catholic diocese in the British Empire since the Reformation.

From empire to hamlet let us return to the beginning . . .

FOUNDING FAMILIES OF THE PARISH

When the first Father Alexander Macdonell (Scotus) led his 560 parishioners from Knoydart in the Rough Bounds of western Inverness-shire to St Raphaels in 1786 they were not alone. Further to the west along the great natural esker ridge -- an old Indian trail that connected them to St Andrew's West -- the Loyalist Catholic families of the disbanded King's Royal Regiment of New York had been settled two years earlier along the Raisin River some eight miles north of the Catholic church at St Regis, Quebec.

Their first place of worship at St Raphaels was a log building situated northeast of the present ruins and affectionately known as the Blue Chapel. Some founding families of the new settlement included early Clan Donald

families such as the Bankers, Potash, Ballevien, Sandfields, Greenfields, the Captains, Big Duncans, Sandy John Allans, Kenneth Angus Ranalds, Ranald Rories, Angus Bans, MacIndoe, MacIsaac, and Angus Tailors -- not to omit many others such as Angus the Widow Hughie Rory Tailor. Nicknames in Glengarry were a necessity, and not always flattering. At one time from Glen Roy to the Chapel sideroad there were five Angus MacDonalds: Angus Schenectady, Angus Danny Alex, Angus the Farmer, Angus Big Angus, and Angus the Chunk . . . a mailman's nightmare!

The families were descended from the old Highland lines of Greenfield, Aberchalder, Cullachie, Leek, Loup McAlisters, Gerenish, Lundie, Ardnabee, Inchlaggan, Sandaig, Scotus, and Crowlin. Also other families are represented by names such as MacDougall, MacMillan and Kennedy. Indeed some of the ancestors of the current pastor and vicar-general of the diocese, Msgr Donald Bernard McDougald, are buried here.

With the loss of Bonnie Prince Charlie's cause on the fields of Culloden, the loyalty of the Jacobite clansmen turned to the House of Hanover. By the time of the revolution in America 30 years later, Bishop Macdonell could well declare that through that war "the Catholic Highlanders had remained loyal to a man."

THE PARADE GROUNDS

Here on the parade grounds in front of the church where we are standing and directly east of us the future Bishop was declared chaplain of the second Glengarry Fencibles for the war of 1812.

At the taking of Ogdensburg under Colonel Red George Macdonell in the good company of the Protestant chaplain, the Rev John Bethune of Williamstown, the Bishop was heard to order that cowards and laggards

would suffer excommunication. It would appear that the warning was sufficient.

The Bishop had always declared that any young gentleman bearing the name Macdonell should be either a priest or a warrior.

The old military parade ground where, in 1812, the last use of the fire cross in the Highland world was seen and where the Glengarry militia departed for the uprisings of 1837 and '38 in Lower Canada, was taken into as part of the graveyard in 1890 to the great regret of the older parishioners of the time.

During Father Duncan Campbell's 1901 celebrations of the completion of the church interior, a 100-year old member of the congregation, Mrs. Donald McDonell of 28-5 Lochiel (formerly of the 7th of Lancaster) was said to have recalled from her childhood the mass for the fallen men of Queenston Heights. She remembered particularly the great grief of the Bishop in announcing the terrible news of the death of the dashing young Glengarry hero, Lt-Col. John Greenfield Macdonell, Attorney-General for Upper Canada and Brock's aide-de-camp. He lies at rest in the Brock monument with his general, far from the rest of his family here on the green slopes of St Raphaels.

At the request of the Bishop his name John was given to a newborn boy of the parish -- the future premier of Ontario, John Sandfield MacDonald. In Stan Roger's ballad "Macdonell on the Heights" he says, "not one in 10,000 knows his name." A sentiment which, in Glengarry, could well be turned to say "not one in 10,000 will forget his name."

The Battle of Waterloo in 1815 eliminated the threat of the little tyrant Napoleon. The British Empire and her people assumed first place among the nations of the world.

The tried and true loyalty of the men of the first Glengarry Fencibles in the Irish Rebellion of 1798 and the towering inspiration of Macdonell, the warrior priest, in the war of 1812 were undoubtedly factors in favour of the start of quarrying for the church of St Raphael's that winter.

By sleighs in the winter and stoneboats in the summer, the cut rock was taken from lot 8 in the 8th (the Potash Macdonald's) and, to the west of the church, the farm now owned by Marc Brunet.

CONSTRUCTION OF THE CHURCH

Father Alex requested of his Montreal correspondant the Rev Candide-Michel LeSaulnier, plans for a church seating 1000 persons to replace their first house of worship known as the "Blue Chapel."

The church was to see 2000 gather in 1837 in the worst snowstorm of the winter to observe the 50th anniversary of the Bishop's ordination to the priesthood.

The mason/contractor was none other than the Bishop's cousin, Archibald Fraser, who was brought out from Edinburgh and whose reputation was later secured by many important large public buildings in Ontario and Quebec. Locally, in addition to St Raphaels, he was architect for some additions to Col Alexander Fraser's estate at nearby Fraserfield.

In the original account ledgers we note the disbursement of funds for cut stone to Buchanan MacMillan -- incidentally the nephew to the famous King's Printer in London of the same name.

In 1821 money was sent to Montreal for a cross and the weathercock for the bell tower, the remains of which are on display here today.

In July 1816 a payment for 2732 bushels of lime for the church was made to one Chisholm and John McDonald of lot 11-1 Kenyon (at the north end of Brenahown.) In a letter to Rome written upon completion of the church, Bishop Macdonell states that his is a "church without equal in North America."

On his 1840 final voyage to Ireland and Scotland at the age of 80 the Bishop was obliged to ride outside the stagecoach in the rain and passed away days later at Dumfries of pneumonia. Twenty years later at the solemn ceremonial return of the Bishop's body from Scotland en route to Kingston, 3000 came to honour his memory. It is remembered that in lifting the casket a handle broke off and released the sweet smell of heather.

Later in the century the annual feast of Mount Carmel (known locally as "scapular devotion") would have as many as 2700 communicants and the parish was, according to an 1835 census, the largest in Ontario at 6000 worshippers.

FIRST INSTITUTION OF HIGHER LEARNING

The intent of our commemoration is clear. The plaque reads: "The cradle of Catholicism in Ontario" and for a time "the largest and most important parish."

To this we may add a not insignificant flourish: that here in St Raphaels was founded the first institution of higher learning in Ontario.

In 1826 from Europe came the new Rector of Iona college, a polished gentleman and scholar, Father William Peter Macdonald. In ten years the seminary produced some of the most efficient missionaries of the time, mainly, Father George Hay of nearby St Andrews, Father Michael Brennan of Belleville and Father Edward Gordon of Hamilton.

The work of the first school of 1818 was renewed by Father Duncan Campbell, pastor for 48 years, who brought the Sisters of the Holy Cross to Iona.

THE SETTLEMENT OF ONTARIO

We wish to touch on the considerable influence of the Bishop at St Raphaels on the civil affairs of Upper Canada. Owing, no doubt, to his identification with the conservative families of Ontario, his weighty effect has been neglected by historians. However, those who have worked in the church archives at Kingston with the large leatherbound letterbooks of his correspondence cannot fail to note the sending or receiving of letters great substance several times each week from influential persons of both home and abroad – the record of which reads like a text of living history.

From St Raphaels in the early days the Bishop personally saw to it that his people received deeds for the lands allotted them. All told, under his urging, 160,000 acres were thus registered, mostly to those in Glengarry and Stormont.

The patronage of the Bishop allowed the retired astronomer of the North West Company, David Thompson of Williamstown, to deal with the agents of the two seigniories nearest in Quebec and so to delineate in 1823 "the boundary between the two Canadas."

In Western Ontario the Canada Company under the direction of John Galt was causing the opening of those lands. According to John Galt's biographers the Bishop played a decisive role in inspiring Galt to begin the Canada Company. Galt in return reserved the highest hill in Guelph for the church which still dominates the centre of that city and in a letter to his friend he describes in fulsome detail the felling of the first tall tree to mark the spot.

In all, throughout the province there are 35 churches constructed under the authority of the Bishop.

Beyond furthering the cause of the faith, Bishop Macdonell was relentless in fostering vocations and education. In 1818 he and several partners of the North West Company formed the Highland Society of Canada which, apart from its affection for the music, garb and language of the ancient Caledonian and the poetry of Ossian, was to institute large prizes at the Williamstown Fair for the promotion of agriculture and animal husbandry.

In 1843 the reconstituted Society placed a plaque in the west altar of the church to the memory of the Bishop. Three hundred men on horseback led the parade along the King's Road beneath garlanded archways to the front of the church where two Protestant gentlemen, John McDonald of Garth and George Hopper MacGillivray, gave declamations that expressed not only their esteem for their old comrade but demonstrated the enduring harmony between the two faiths here in Glengarry.

The plaque to the Bishop was balanced on the east altar by the interment marker of Father John MacDonald (Loup) whose intricate consanguinity charts are the joy of local genealogists.

TESTAMENT OF A PEOPLE

In this matter of plaques, ours of today reads, "*the ruins left standing after the fire of 1970 serve as a testament . . .*"

It is a testament of *place*.

The Lord loves small places . . . be it a stable in Bethlehem or a hillside hamlet in Glengarry.

It is a testament of *faith* . . .
the faith of a congregation which changed the course of empire.

It is a testament of *stone walls* . . .
walls that speak in their silence.
Walls that from now shall never fall.

It is a testament of *light* . . .
the light of learning.
The light of the past on the present.

It is the testament of a *people*.
A people that came as the *thistle* of Scotland
have been graced by the *fleur-de-lis* of neighbouring Quebec and in turn by
the welcome arrival of Dutch and other Europeans.
Truly, we are now all come under the *maple leaf*.

There is a verse in Jeremiah which tells of the leaving of the children of Israel. It could well be the story of the St Raphaels settlers who departed their Highland glens only forty years after the defeat of the clans by the sword and musket at the Battle of Culloden.

The verse reads:

*"And those that are left of the sword
shall find grace in the wilderness.*

*"And their nobles shall be of themselves,
and their governor shall rise up from the midst of them.*

*"And ye shall be my people
and I shall be your God."*

On this historic spot we look out on Dundas Street, the old King's Road, the stagecoach highway connecting the two Canadas. Here on the hills of St Raphaels Bishop Macdonell and his congregation might well have dreamt of a great city. In its place, this church and school in the wilderness gave our nation, not a great city, but a great people. (

- *finis* -