

Grace Tomkinson

A SCOTTISH DOMINIE IN EARLY NOVA SCOTIA

IT WAS SEED-TIME in Nova Scotia when the two young men set out. If the sunshine had a slight chill in it the sky would be a deep blue and the air spicy with the fragrance of new buds on the spruce and fir trees. They had a choice of two ways of travelling, on foot or on horseback. Horses were still a curiosity in the Province, but they had been able, for this special occasion, to commandeered the only two in the East River fit for the journey.

There was no road across country to Halifax in 1796, only a narrow path through the woods where the trees had been cut down and rolled to one side. The ground was often so soft that the horses might sink to their knees in mud and water, and the path was seldom wide enough for two to ride abreast. But the light-hearted travellers were not complaining. And they may have reminded each other that a few years earlier they would have found only a blazed trail.

It was hardly an ideal way to bring home a bride, but since the prospective groom lived in Pictou County and the girl of his choice in Halifax, what could he do? Since she seemed willing to undertake the hazardous wedding trip, everyone was satisfied. The only drawback was that the young man could hardly have known what the young lady thought about anything. He had never laid eyes on her. His courtship, like that of Miles Standish, had to be carried out through an intermediary. Fortunately his had a happier ending.

Even writing to her had not been easy. He was a scholarly young man, a graduate of the University of Edinburgh and accustomed to expressing himself on paper in both English and Gaelic. But letters then were not so easily dispatched. There was no regular postal service until 1801. The usual method of sending mail was by messenger. That had its problems. In those days, we are told, it was considered no great harm to open a letter while it was en route. With settlers so few and far between, any kind of contact with another human being was eagerly seized on, and personal privacy was not highly

valued. It seemed only proper to show an interest in another's welfare and to find out what he had to say.

Since the whole countryside took a particular interest in this man and had been concerned for some time about finding him a suitable wife, he had reason to try to keep his intentions secret, at least until he had been accepted. This was not his first attempt to get married. The girl he had fancied before he left Scotland had been understandingly reluctant to face the hardships of an ocean voyage and life in a country "accounted so barren, cold and dreary that there was no living in it with comfort". After she had declined to join him he tried again. He wrote a friend at home for help in regard to another Scottish lassie and got an encouraging and characteristically shrewd reply: "If you can get her to come I will put her in the hands of a captain who will send her safe to Halifax, and if such a thing should be I will get her passage part paid if I can."

The girl's father promptly put a damper on this plan. He wrote quite kindly but firmly "Although it has been the fashion for years that British ladies take sail for the East Indies to be married and even to seek husbands, yet this piece of modern female fashion Anny does not choose to imitate as judging it not quite becoming to her sex." All this overseas correspondence took time, and the young man was busy. After Anny turned him down he seems to have given up the idea of matrimony for a while.

A clergyman, even today, lives more or less in a goldfish bowl. In the case of an idolized young minister in a parish covering a good part of the North Shore of the Province, the curiosity of his flock concerning all his doings was excusable. The Reverend James McGregor had been sent out to them by the Synod of Scotland in response to an urgent petition signed by five Presbyterian settlers in Pictou. They had promised to pay him eighty pounds a year, half in sterling, half in produce, to build him a house and barn, and to give him a glebe lot of land. Two years had passed before a qualified candidate could be found with courage to accept such a challenge. James McGregor spent sleepless nights before deciding to take the step. The marvel is that he did it at all. But he was no ordinary man.

We happen to know more about him than we do of most of our great pioneer figures because of his memoirs. These were incorporated into a remarkable biography of him published in 1859 by his gifted grandson, the Reverend George Patterson, author of *A History of Pictou County* (1877).

When he finally reached Halifax after a weary voyage of over five

weeks on the brig *Lily*, the young minister learned that he had yet to travel a hundred miles through the woods. The petition had mentioned "the township of Pictou", and at the end of his journey overland he looked in vain for some sign of the town. All he could see was one or two small cabins, very little cleared land, and the forest reaching to the water's edge. There was no way of reaching his widely scattered families except by tramping over a "blaze" or paddling a canoe.

This was only thirteen years after the *Hector* had landed the first contingent of Highlanders there, and they had managed to achieve few of the comforts of civilization. Money was rarely seen. Wheat and maple sugar were the principal currency. There was no grist mill, and wheat and oats were ground by hand. Little schooners came round in summer selling a few necessities, but there were no shops. The soil had to be cultivated mainly with a hoe. Ploughs were of little use when so many roots of the big trees were still in the ground. Furniture and even dishes were homemade, of wood, which was one of the materials in plentiful supply.

This was the discouraging picture that James McGregor found. He confesses: "Nothing but necessity kept me there for I durst not think of encountering the dangerous road to Halifax again and there was no vessel in Pictou to take me away and even if there had been one I had not the money to pay my passage home." But he was to stay forty-six years, to be honoured for his work with a doctorate from the University of Glasgow, and to leave the imprint of his character indelibly stamped on the whole area.

It must have caused a sensation on the North Shore when word got around that the long-awaited preacher had arrived. We can picture him emerging from the forest, a rather formidable figure in his dignified clerical clothes and his cocked hat. He had decided before leaving home to forgo the hat and he had given the guinea reserved for it to some charity. But a friend had refused to see him start for a foreign land without that essential finishing touch to a Scottish minister's costume, and he had presented him with the finest one he could buy.

Although his devout but impoverished congregation were properly impressed, they had been unable to find him a suitable place to live. The best he could do was to move in with a family which enjoyed the unusual luxury of two fireplaces. In spite of that advantage, he records that it was "still very inconvenient, for the heads of the family had to sit and sleep in

the same room." Many of the houses then were provided with "bed-closets" similar to those in Scotland.

It was two years before he had a room to himself, but it would have mattered more if he had ever had a chance to be at home. He seems to have spent most of his time visiting his enormous parish and sleeping wherever he happened to find himself. But in draughty cabins in winter, "with a plank or a heap of straw for a bed", he must sometimes have longed for those two fireplaces.

He had hardly had time to get his breath after he arrived before he was holding services in Squire Patterson's barn. Settlers came from everywhere on foot or in canoes, carrying their boots in their hands and putting them on before they went into the meeting. One thing that troubled him was their lack of respect for the Lord's Day. They arrived "whistling, bawling and laughing". Such frivolity was bad enough on a week-day. It was an unforgivable desecration of the Sabbath. But they were at least quiet during the sermon, which we may be sure was a lengthy one. All that summer he held meetings in the open air, and Providence, he notes, favoured them by never allowing them to be disturbed by a shower. When it turned cold and they had to move indoors, Providence seems to have been less considerate. Once when too many had crowded into a small cabin, the floor suddenly gave way and the whole congregation found itself in the cellar. Fortunately no one was injured and the meeting adjourned, undaunted, to the chilly barn.

Now on this Spring morning, after ten years in the country, he had two churches, built of logs, but unheated, with slabs laid on blocks of wood for seats. He still had no wife, no house or barn, and few worldly possessions of any sort. The salary he had been promised came in slowly and much of it in "produce" for which he had little use. There is a record of his having received such contributions as two brooms, twelve pounds of "ram mutton", a cake of maple sugar, and a Gaelic Bible. A good part of what money he got seems to have gone to places where he felt it was needed more. Fifty pounds bought freedom for some mulatto slaves brought into the province by settlers from "the older colonies", possibly Loyalists. He had rigid ideas of right and wrong, and slavery was one thing he refused to tolerate. A heated controversy with one of his brother ministers was aroused by his keeping slaves.

It seems strange that a man so highly respected should have had such trouble in finding a wife. Although there is no portrait of him in existence, we are told that he was "a tall, dark, fine-looking man of cheerful disposition".

But marriageable young women were at a premium in the country. There was said at one time to be "only one girl in all Pictou". There was obviously no one in the young minister's congregation fitted to become the mistress of a manse.

We may be sure that the whole of the North Shore had by this time got wind of the coming event and wished the young couple well. The go-between, Andrew Marshall, was justifiably proud of his part in the romance and "had it to tell to his dying day, with no small feeling of self-importance". The bride, Ann McKay, had been well brought up and given the best education the country could afford. That was not saying much, though Halifax had some obvious advantages over Pictou in the matter of schools. She was also an accomplished seamstress.

Halifax was the metropolis of the Province with a population of some three thousand people, largely soldiers and sailors. It had no great reputation for morality, and James McGregor was so shocked by what he found when he first landed there that he was thankful to leave it. One writer of the time says "The business of one half of the town is to sell rum and the other half to drink it."

The first stopping-place on the way from Pictou was Truro, where the two young men were "entertained most hospitably" by the Reverend Daniel Cock. This showed Christian forbearance on the host's part, for he was one of those severely castigated by James McGregor for keeping a slave. The two men had also had differences regarding points in their religious doctrines, which were then taken very seriously. The travellers went on from Truro to the mouth of the Shubenacadie River, where the preacher proceeded for ten miles by boat. His companion, Alex McKay, took the horses on by land. The next day being Sunday, word had gone round that Mr. McGregor would hold a service. The response must have been at least up to his expectations, since before daylight the house where he stayed was filled with people who had taken advantage of the tide to come up the river.

On Monday the two were off again on horseback. It was evening when they reached Halifax, with the wedding arranged for the next day. Instead of hurrying impatiently to meet his bride, the groom sent his best man, McKay, to inform her that he had arrived and had gone to an inn. She seems to have been a girl with some spirit, for she tossed her head and said "I suppose he thinks he *has* me!" His lack of interest must have taken some explaining.

He could hardly have been a vain man, given to thinking much of his

appearance. A visiting preacher had once twitted him on the holes in his elbows. Other things were more important in the wilderness. But he had no intention of presenting himself to his future wife in his shabby backwoods clothes. He had sent orders ahead for a complete new outfit, and the tailor must have had to do some altering, for it was not until late the next day that the groom was able to appear at the bride's home appropriately dressed in a fine black suit.

She must have forgiven him, for after that everything seems to have gone smoothly. The ceremony was performed by a travelling Presbyterian missionary, the Reverend James Monroe, and the whole company was in high spirits, especially the groom. The next day was given over to receiving visits from the bride's friends, who no doubt wondered if they would ever see her again. Her husband had some shopping to do. He bought presents for all his new relatives and a fine side-saddle so that his wife could ride off in style.

They set out the next morning accompanied by a number of her friends. There was a good enough road for a carriage for some ten miles out of town. At that point they stopped, opened the baskets they had brought, and had a farewell picnic. Then the young couple said goodbye and rode away. The bride was mounted on the best man's horse while the owner prepared to trudge beside them on foot all the way.

There is every evidence that the groom was happy. He had been alone so long and the separation from his old friends and family had been complete. Letters were months, even a year apart, and his first one in the country had told him of his mother's death. Now he would never be alone again. We have, unfortunately, no record of his wife's feelings. Girls married early, so we may be sure that she was quite young, and her husband was a serious-minded man of thirty-five. She must have had misgivings about leaving her home in a settled community for life in the woods with a stranger. We also wonder how she felt about having her honeymoon turned into a missionary journey.

They spent that night at Gay's River where James McGregor preached and baptized children whose parents had been anxiously awaiting such a Heaven-sent opportunity. They travelled on, partly by boat, while he stopped to preach and baptize at other convenient points. When Sunday came, he held a service where the village of Maitland now stands. A large congregation came by canoe and over land.

When they finally reached Pictou, the groom had no place to take his

bride other than his bachelor quarters in the garret of Donald McKay's house where he had been lodging. He had his own fireplace there, and his bookshelves, but it would have been far from ideal, even if Mrs. McKay had not had periodic fits of insanity which made her actions "quite unpredictable". But it was not long before the preacher began to build a manse, the first frame house in the district. It would seem that he had chosen his wife well. We are told that "the union was one of great happiness". She not only bore him **seven** children but took such efficient charge of his domestic affairs that he "had nothing to do but study".

He apparently found plenty to do. Besides preparing his sermons and caring for the spiritual needs of his parishoners, he was greatly concerned with their everyday living. He became a farmer, partly to eke out his own income, and tried to demonstrate improved methods of farming to do away with the slovenly ones he saw practised. He was the first to import the new agricultural implements. When the Provincial Agricultural Society was formed his turnips took first prize. He was always ready to apply his well-trained mind to solving his people's problems, but he did draw the line when it came to prosecuting witches.

Not all the hysteria about witches in the old days was confined to New England. The superstitious Highlanders had brought some peculiar ideas with them. They complained regularly of being "grievously tormented" and took it for granted that one of their minister's duties was to take a firm hand with their enemies, the witches. He had been distressed when he came by the dearth of books in the country, but the ignorant settlers could not have read them if they had had them. As more immigrants arrived he interested himself in providing schools for the children. And before long he was deeply involved in the founding of the famous Pictou Academy.

It seems incredible now that that venerable institution should have encountered such opposition to being born and had such a struggle to keep alive. The idea was conceived in 1805, and James McGregor headed the list of subscriptions toward it, pledging twenty pounds "provided the Harbour Congregation pay me the sixteen pounds which they owe me." It was not until some years later that the project so dear to his heart got under way. He described it in a letter in 1822:

It is but a small college having as yet but two professors but they are able and excellent men for their profession, able to give a high degree of learning to their students and though the college be little we hope it will grow great. And it is already so expensive it is a wonder we have made out at all.

Financing it was not the only problem. It was founded by Presbyterians primarily to train ministers for the Presbyterian church. There was nothing unusual in that. Harvard and other early Colleges had grown out of the need for an educated clergy. King's College in Windsor, the only other institution of higher learning in the Province, had similar reasons for existing. But there appears to have been no great spirit of brotherly love, then, between the religious denominations. King's was not disposed to welcome the idea of a rival, especially one started by "those Pictou Dissenters". One of the statutes governing King's said "No member of the University shall frequent Romish mass or the meeting-houses of Presbyterians, Baptists or Methodists". Degrees were given only to those who would subscribe to the Thirty-nine Articles.

Since the Church of England was the Established Church, its members, and the Bishop in particular, carried great weight with the Government, and the new Presbyterian College was the subject of long and bitter controversy and heated debates in the Legislature. Not all the prominent Anglicans opposed it. Among its vigorous champions was Judge Haliburton, the creator of Sam Slick. A graduate of King's himself, he is on record as speaking eloquently in favour of "this persecuted institution". The Academy finally succeeded in getting a modest annual grant from the Province, but only for a period of some twenty years. After that it was forced to give up the struggle and reverted to being a Grammar School. Presbyterian students then began to pursue their studies at the young Dalhousie College.

It continued to be known and highly respected as Pictou Academy. While its life as a College had been short, it left its mark on education and culture in Nova Scotia. And its influence, through its distinguished graduates, spread far beyond. It was always under the leadership of dedicated, scholarly men with Dr. Thomas McCullough at the head. They made a brave effort to conduct it with the traditional dignity of the ancient Scottish Universities which they had attended. In spite of a chronic shortage of funds, the students were required to wear gowns of red merino wool. It was a proud and colourful interlude in Pictou's history when brilliant young men like the future Sir William Dawson of McGill were to be seen about the town dressed in "the bright scarlet insignia of learning."

It might be only fair to note that the Anglicans did not always have a monopoly on exclusiveness. Stories of the days when my grandfather was a Methodist minister in Nova Scotia would suggest that to be anything less than a Presbyterian in Pictou County a century ago was to be slightly second-rate.

James McGregor was not interested only in his own Province. After his large parish began to be shared by other ministers, he had less need to be away from home. But he started then on the extensive missionary journeys which made him so widely known and beloved throughout the Maritimes. For over thirty years, in summer and winter, he travelled to isolated Scottish settlements. Wherever he heard of a little group of his countrymen without a church or minister, he set out in an open boat or through the woods to visit them. He made three tours through Prince Edward Island and two to various parts of Cape Breton. He travelled up the Miramichi more than once, the first time in 1797. During another journey to New Brunswick in 1805 he went up the Saint John River as far as the Nashwaak. Later he found his way to Scottish settlers in Charlotte County.

He must have had an iron constitution as well as real courage to undertake and endure the hardships of these expeditions. Often there were no roads or even a blazed trail. His journals relate some of the narrow escapes he had by land and sea, and give us vivid glimpses of the way our ancestors lived. He depended on pocket compasses and sometimes on the wisdom of his horse or on friendly Indians to guide him through the forest. He learned how to survive a night in the woods, even in winter, when he was hopelessly lost, and how to pick his way through treacherous swamps and even to cross creeks with a cake of ice as a raft.

Waterways were useful, but they presented a problem when he had to get to the other side. A bridge might prove to be more dangerous than none at all. Sometimes he found a birch-bark canoe left on the bank of a stream for the convenience of travellers, or a pair of homemade stilts. His horse, if he was riding, might be persuaded to swim across. The Prince Edward Island horses were noted for being good swimmers and could be towed behind a canoe for half a mile or more. He was enthusiastic about the great rivers, the Saint John and the Miramichi. He found the Saint John "extremely large and grand" but the tales of how it overflowed its banks in Spring, "making every house and barn an island", were rather alarming.

He dressed for the wilderness, wearing moccasins of untanned moosehide and "Indian leggins", a sort of overall made of blue cloth with a red stripe down each side and closely fitted about the ankles. In winter he had snowshoes, a gift from his Indian friends and "nicely ornamented". Ornamented or not, his appearance was a far cry from that of the dignified young man with the cocked hat who had landed in Pictou. But the homesick Scots

gave him a warm welcome everywhere and flocked to hear him preach. The backwoods people, however, were not used to listening to sermons even in Gaelic, and they had no idea of how to behave in a church service. Sometimes the only way he could keep his unruly audience quiet was by reading the Psalm very loudly and singing it, as loudly, himself.

When he died in 1830 his influence had reached so far that all three Provinces mourned. But he was still Dr. McGregor of Pictou. That county's reputation for sterling character and a profound respect for religion and education can be traced largely back to him. He was so greatly revered that one of his parishioners declared: "We thought he could raise the dead". A completely disinterested writer in the *Acadian Recorder* believed that it was because of him that "decency of conduct and peace and harmony among neighbors, with frugality and industry flourished in Pictou and made her the envy of the neighboring settlements." Dr. McGregor was one of our true giants on the earth, and his memory should not be allowed to fade.

The DALHOUSIE REVIEW records with deep regret the death on August 7, 1966, of Dr. D. C. Harvey, Archivist Emeritus of the Province of Nova Scotia. Dr. Harvey joined the Editorial Board in 1934, and his knowledge and judgment, especially in the fields of Maritime and general Canadian History, were always generously offered to the REVIEW and greatly valued by its successive Editors.