

BISHOP ALEXANDER MACDONELL
AND THE POLITICS OF
UPPER CANADA



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INTRODUCTION

Until 1963, when Gerald Craig published his study, Upper Canada: The Formative Years, 1791-1841, the Tories of Upper Canada had not received a very good press. Most historians of the period, writing in the Whig tradition, tended to cast them in the antagonistic role of obstructionists in the path of British North America's great constitutional achievement, Responsible Government. The Family Compact, as they became known pejoratively, was a tightly-knit, élitist group who entrenched themselves in power and ran the province to their own advantage.¹

Craig substantially revised this view by pointing out that the goals of the Compact--their grand design for Upper Canada--were not unacceptable to many of the people of the province.² The Tories did, after all, win as many elections as the Reformers. The opinion of Craig has been supplemented and extended by S.F. Wise in two particular areas; a careful examination of the intellectual content of Upper Canadian Toryism, and the nature of the political system in which the Tory group

¹Examples of this interpretation are manifold. Some of the more well-known are Charles Lindsey, The Life and Times of Wm. Lyon Mackenzie, 2 vols., (Toronto, 1862); J.C. Dent, The Story of the Upper Canadian Rebellion, 2 vols., (Toronto, 1885); W.S. Wallace, The Family Compact, (Toronto, 1915); Stephen Leacock, Mackenzie, Baldwin, Lafontaine, Hincks, (Toronto, 1926); E.C. Guillet, The Lives and Times of the Patriots, (Toronto, 1938); S.D. Clark, Movements of Political Protest in Canada, (Toronto, 1949).

²See infra, Chapter III.

at the capital was buttressed and sustained by smaller élite groups in various centres in the province.³ It is within the context of the recent literature about Upper Canada and its conservative élite that the career of Alexander Macdonell, first Roman Catholic Bishop of the province, can best be evaluated.

Macdonell did not hold executive or administrative office in Upper Canada. He is, therefore, much less familiar than John Strachan or Egerton Ryerson, the two other leading churchmen of the period. It should be noted, as well, that it was only recently that the bulk of Macdonell's private papers was made available to researchers. There is now, however, ample evidence to suggest that the Bishop played a not insignificant role in moulding the polity and values of the province. This is especially true as it applies to the numerous Catholic inhabitants of Upper Canada, but his influence spread well beyond his own religious community.

Alexander Macdonell was never a member of the Family Compact in the full sense. Obviously, he could not concede the question of church establishment to Strachan and those of the Tory élite who supported the Archdeacon in his claims. On all other aspects, however, Macdonell shared the assumptions and cardinal tenets which underlay the Compact's conception of Upper Canada and its future. Thus, they were natural allies,

³See especially, S.F. Wise, "Upper Canada and the Conservative Tradition", Profiles of a Province, Ontario Historical Society, (Toronto, 1967); "Tory Factionalism: Kingston Elections and Upper Canadian Politics, 1820-1836", Ontario History, LVII (1965); and "God's Peculiar Peoples", in W.L. Morton (ed.), The Shield of Achilles, (Toronto, 1968).

both politically and socially. This alliance was expressed by Macdonell's consistent support of the executive government and the willingness of the government, in turn, to accommodate the Bishop in matters of patronage and financial aid to his church. By following Macdonell's career, then, it is possible to examine in some detail the general implications in the recent work of Professors Craig and Wise.

Bishop Macdonell has never been considered in this light, as a practising "associate member" of the Family Compact, using the leverage of his position to serve the interests of the Catholic population and the ideological thrust of the Tory leadership of Upper Canada. The secondary sources on Macdonell's life are disappointing. There is only one of any importance, H.J. Somers, The Life and Times of the Honourable and Right Reverend Alexander Macdonell, submitted as a doctoral dissertation to The Catholic University of America and published in 1931. Father (now Monsignor) Somers devoted his study to Macdonell as clergyman, the pioneer builder of the church in the wilderness of Upper Canada. Much of the emphasis was placed on physical accomplishments, such as the number of priests, churches and schools; and the context was that of the missionary church rather than the polity of Upper Canada. Somers' work is well documented for the time but much new material has become available in recent years. The result was a largely uncritical view of Macdonell with little detailed appreciation of the mechanics and the ideology of Upper Canadian politics. Somers' book, like his Bishop, was a pioneering venture.

CHAPTER I

YEARS OF PREPARATION

I

On November 1, 1804, a Highland priest named Alexander Macdonell arrived in York, the capital of Upper Canada, to present his letters of introduction to Lieutenant General Peter Hunter, then the Lieutenant Governor of the Province. Macdonell was forty-two years of age at the time; but ahead of him lay many eventful and fruitful years in this newly established British colony. He would encounter his share, and more, of frustration and disappointment. His zeal for his people and his vigorous conservatism would embroil him in the political life of the province. He would be pilloried and praised; but, in the end, could reflect with some satisfaction on his accomplishments.

If he took pride, as he did, in the fact that the Catholic religion became securely established in Upper Canada, and that his own position was akin to a patriarchal dignity, he was scarcely conscious that an aggressive illiberality had occasionally marked his career. His self-righteousness was his armour, shielding him from the slings and arrows of criticism. Yet it narrowed his range of alternatives, made him inflexible and dogmatic and, to a marked degree, authoritarian.¹ In his own view,

¹It will be indicated in this study that Macdonell was closed-minded in the classic sense, unable to make distinctions among opinions or ideas which were opposed to his own, and authority-oriented to an extreme. See Milton Rokeach, The Open and Closed Mind, (New York, 1960), Part 1.

however, Macdonell was steadfast in his devotion to Catholicism and Monarchy, and his success in Upper Canada sufficient testimony to the wisdom and efficacy of his commitment. His profound conservatism did not evolve as a result of his experiences in the Province, but was fully formed when he arrived. It was during his youth and early manhood that he developed those traits of character and predisposition that would distinguish his activities in maturity. It was in these formative years that his intellectual engagement with monarchical institutions, hierarchical social structure and advancement through the patronage system of the day was made.

II

Alexander Macdonell was born on July 17, 1762, near the shores of Loch Ness in Inverness-shire, Scotland.² His childhood and youth were passed among the Clan in Glengarry who had clung to their Catholicism despite the penal laws imposed by the British Parliament. Paradoxically, the young Macdonell apparently felt no conflict of loyalties. Clan Macdonell had supported Prince Charlie in 1745 and had suffered heavily.³

²The precise location of his birth is not clear. Different sources mention Glen Urquhart, Inchlaggan or Achnaheaglais all of which are, however, clustered close together. See W.J. Macdonell, Reminiscences of the Late Honourable and Right Reverend Alexander Macdonell, (Toronto, 1888), p. 5; J.A. Macdonell, Bishop Macdonell, (Alexandria, 1890), p. 3; Perkins Bull, From Macdonell to McGuigan, (Toronto, 1937), p. 370, n. 5.

³The Catholic clans were not, of course, the only ones to support the Jacobite cause, but their identification with the Stuart House drew upon them the heaviest penalties when combined with the penal laws against Roman Catholics.