

The College of Bytown 1848 - 1856

by

JOHN B. O'REILLY, M.A.

Read by the Rev. Francis Corkery

In this year of Grace, 1948, the Pontifical University of Ottawa commemorates with befitting solemnity the first centenary of its history. In the retrospect of one hundred years no one can fail to realize that this seat of learning has contributed generously and wisely to the religious, cultural, and scientific development of two nations, Canada and the United States. Founded amid poverty and turmoil in 1848, the year of the Great Revolution, St. Joseph's College, Bytown, grew under the guiding hand of the founding fathers and their successors into Ottawa College with the rank of a civil university. The immortal Pope Leo XIII gave to the institution the greatest honor within his power, a pontifical charter which empowered the university to confer in the name of the Holy See academic degrees in every branch of Sacred Sciences. The history of the Pontifical University of Ottawa may be divided into four periods; the First College of Bytown 1848 to 1853; the Second College of Bytown 1853 to 1856; Ottawa College and the Pontifical University of Ottawa 1856 to the disastrous fire, December 2, 1903; Rebuilding and Expansion, 1904 to 1948. The title of this paper is the College of Bytown, 1848 to 1856. During this period the college occupied two buildings situated in Lower Town. Each of these buildings has its own particular history which is told in detail here for the first time. The second part of the story will be told at another time and in another place.

No Canadian bishop has left greater mark on the history of the entire Catholic Church than Msgr. Ignace Bourget of Montreal. With a Pauline solicitude for the welfare of all the churches he begged his friend Msgr. Patrick Phelan, Co-adjutor Bishop of Kingston, to confide the care of the parish of Bytown and its missions to the Oblate Fathers. With unlimited confidence in the Providence of God, he foretold that with the zeal and sacrifice of these heroic missionaries, Catholic institutions would soon arise in a rapidly expanding Bytown, churches and schools, a hospital and an orphanage and, most significant of all, a college, made possible in a few years time, with aid from France. Here is the first mention of the College of Bytown. It can be read in Msgr. Bourget's letter to Bishop Phelan, December 29, 1843. The date is significant for Father Pierre-Adrien Telmon, the first Oblate of Bytown, did not reach the future capital of Canada until January 25, 1844. No one will question Msgr. Bourget's judgment that Bytown,

situated in a central position between the two Canadas was an ideal location for a college. It had been said earlier in the editorial comment of the *Bytown Gazette*, January 16, 1840, when it expressed surprise that the new Scotch College, now Queen's University, should be placed in Kingston. "Being designed for the accommodation of both provinces," wrote the editor of the *Bytown Gazette* with reasonable logic, "this institution, (Queen's University) ought to have been placed in as central position as possible; so why not Bytown? In the Constitution of the Kirk there is already a sufficient spice of Republicanism, so why not place the seat of learning for educating her future ministers as remote as possible from the contagion of Democratic principles?"

The building of a Catholic college for the education of priests and laymen was a greatly different matter. Judged by worldly standards Msgr. Bourget's foresight was sheer folly. In the roaring forties, Bytown was a rambling military and lumber center into which hundreds of young men, French Canadians and Irish immigrants, flocked, annually seeking employment in the lumber camps. More often than not they waited for months before finding work. This enforced idleness led to dissipation. Brawls, street fights, and bloodshed were of such frequent occurrence that for the law-abiding citizens with an Old Testament turn of mind, Bytown and Babylon were synonymous. The feud between the Irish and French Catholics was so bitter that even the very stones cried out. The construction of the new parish church, now the Basilica of Ottawa, was halted and nothing could be done until peace was restored months later. This building was designed and founded by the pastor of Bytown, Father John Francis Cannon, a member of a great Quebec family whose distinguished sons have adorned the Canadian priesthood and judiciary. He was the grandson of an Irish settler, Edward Cannon, the architect and builder of the Anglican Cathedral, Quebec. The corner stone of the Bytown parish church was placed by Msgr. Charles-Auguste-Maire-Joseph, Comte de Forbin-Janson, Bishop of Nancy and Toul, October 25, 1841. When a year and a day had passed, Father Cannon had resigned, in despair, to take up a more congenial charge, the chaplaincy of Kingston penitentiary. His successor, Father Patrick Phelan, priest of St. Sulpice and Vicar-general of the diocese of Kingston, was installed October 26, 1842. Father Phelan was, like Father Cannon, an experienced bilingual pastor. He was the founder of the historic parish of St. Columban, in the rugged Laurentians, in whose hospitable rectory, presided over at this date by Father John Falvey, three bishops, Msgr. Bourget, Msgr. Prince, Co-adjutor Bishop of Montreal and later first Bishop of St. Hyacinthe, and Msgr. Guignes, first Bishop of Ottawa, planned the expansion of the church in Canada and mastered the English language.

When Father Phelan arrived in Bytown his parish numbered 2,362 souls. Six years later, when the college of Bytown was opened the Catholic

population was considerably more than double that. With the aid of his two assistants, Fathers Benoni-Joseph Leelaire and Hyppolite Moreau, Father Phelan restored peace and order. It was not his lot to do more for his impoverished and illiterate parishioners. Nominated on February 20, 1843, by Pope Gregory XVI, titular bishop of Carrha and co-adjutor to Msgr. Gaulin, Bishop of Kingston, who was mentally incapacitated, Msgr. Phelan was consecrated in the Cathedral of Montreal, August 20, 1843, by Msgr. Bourget, assisted by Msgr. Pierre-Flavien Turgeon, Coadjutor Bishop of Quebec and Msgr. Michael Power, Bishop of Toronto. His first episcopal duty was to provide a successor in Bytown. Msgr. Bourget, who was responsible for his promotion, prepared the way. He wrote to Msgr. Charles-Joseph-Eugene de Mazenod, Bishop of Marseilles and founder of the Oblates of Mary-Immaculate and to Father Jean-Baptiste Honorat, Superior of the Oblates in Canada and he obtained from both the permission to establish the order in Bytown. In spite of this, Bishop Phelan hesitated to give his final decision, None of the Oblates in Canada were of Irish birth; none of them knew English except Father Damase Dandurand, the first Canadian vocation to the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, who died April 21, 1921, at the age of 103, the oldest priest in the entire Catholic world. Life in Bytown and the missions among the lumberjacks and the Indians required priests of apostolic fortitude. Speaking with the vision of a prophet and with the wisdom of a saint, Msgr. Bourget won the consent of his confrere and in this he was not mistaken. Bishop Phelan had at last made up his mind to confide the care of the church in the Ottawa Valley to the Oblate Fathers.

On January 14, 1844, Msgr. Phelan wrote to Father Jean Baptiste Honorat, Superior of the Oblates in Canada to complete the arrangements for the reception and installation of Father Pierre-Adrien Telmon, O.M.L, the first Oblate to be sent to Bytown. He informed the Superior that he would be at L'Original for the Forty Hours which opened January 22, and he expressed the hope, if it were at all possible, that Father Telmon should join him there. In the rectory of L'Original Msgr. Phelan greeted his successor in the parish of Bytown with a warm and a cordial welcome. With the closing of Forty Hours they set out at once for Plantagenet, then a troubled centre, "pour remettre les choses qui ne vont pas bien," and arrived in Bytown in mid-winter, January 25, 1844. Msgr. Phelan remained with Father Telmon for several days before setting out for Kingston. In the quiet of the parish house they discussed parochial problems, the need of schools and the pitfalls of the Bytown ministry. Naturally, Father Telmon needed assistants in a parish of 3000 souls until such time as the Oblate Fathers could take complete charge. Two priests were at hand, Father Michael Byrne, who had been Bishop Phelan's curate since November 13, 1843, and Father Patrick McEvoy who was ordained by Bishop Phelan, February 11, 1844, a few days after Father Telmon's arrival. This was probably Bishop Phelan's first

ordination; it was certainly the first sacerdotal ordination in Ottawa.

If one should to-day seek a monument in our Nation's Capital reared to the memory of Father Pierre-Adrien Telmon, O.M.I., he will find it, not in bronze, but in flourishing ecclesiastical institutions. In a brief but exhausting pastorate of four years, he accomplished, where others failed, the distinctive tasks of his ministry, leaving an indelible mark on the character of the church in Ottawa. His trials were many; his consolations were few. With the arrival of a second Oblate father in Bytown, Damage Dandurand, May 10, 1844, Bishop Phelan transferred the two Irish curates to other missions in his far flung diocese of Kingston. Racial discord flared up at once. Bishop Phelair took a strong stand and he confirmed the appointment of the Oblate Fathers with canonical sanction, June 22, 1844. Peace was not restored until September 16, 1845, when Father Michael Malloy, the first Irish Oblate to come to Canada, arrived at last in this turbulent centre. The grey stone walls of the unfinished parish church stood as a perennial reminder of the indifference and poverty of Bytown Catholics. There was an urgent need for its completion, but as Father Telmon explained in his letter of October 20, 1844 to Mother Elizabeth Forbes McMullan, superior of the Grey Nuns of Montreal and grand-aunt of the late Archbishop Forbes of Ottawa, there was a more critical priority. There were no schools in the parish for French-Canadian children; the Irish had two or three, which in the judgment of the parents and the pastor were most unsatisfactory. In response to the requests of Father Telmon, and with the co-operation of Bishop Phelan and Bishop Bourget, the Grey Nuns came to Bytown February 20, 1845 to open a bilingual school for girls. Failing to obtain the Christian Brothers, Father Telmon wrote to Msgr. de Mazenod asking him to send a competent Oblate brother to teach the boys. He had reached the conviction that the only way to have a college was for the Oblate Fathers to conduct it themselves. In the past few years classical colleges had been opened in Chambly, L'Assomption, St. Therese and Kingston, so why not in Bytown? The objection raised in certain quarters that this was not the work of the Oblate Fathers was quickly scotched by the founder, Msgr. de Mazenod, when he insisted that his community must undertake every project which promotes the glory of God and the salvation of souls.

In the autumn of 1847, on a day early in October, Father Telmon received at his new rectory, 365 Sussex Street, which still stands close by the south east corner of Sussex and St. Andrew Streets, a message of historic moment. It came as a joy as he looked out toward Nepean Point with the empty fever sheds and the temporary hospital built under his direction by an Oblate brother, which had housed the Irish immigrants stricken by typhus in the amazing summer of forty-seven. On June 25, 1847, Pope Pius IX created out of extensive mission territory the new diocese of Bytown; on July 9, the same year, he nominated the first Bishop, Msgr. Joseph-Eugene-Bruno

Guignes, who still retained his office of Superior of the Oblates in Canada. With this appointment the building of the college was assured. Msgr. Guignes was consecrated in Bytown, July 30, 1848 by Msgr. Gaulin, whose health was temporarily restored, assisted by Bishops Bourget and Phelan. The scene of the ceremony was the parish church which had been opened and dedicated almost two years previously on the Feast of the Assumption, August 15, 1846. White from the mason's hand it was the architectural creation of Bishop Phelan and Father Telmon, who wisely abandoned Father Cannon's plans for he had inherited no talent in this field from his distinguished grandfather. At three o'clock on Sunday afternoon, July 30, 1848, the day of his consecration, Bishop Guignes took possession of his diocese, making the parish church his Cathedral. Two days later he issued his first pastoral in which he announced the appointment of Father Damase Dandurand, O.M.L., as his Vicar General and pastor of Bytown. With the departure of Father Telmon for the mission fields of Pittsburg and Texas, Map. Guignes hastened to construct the College of Bytown, foretold by Msgr. Bourget and planned by Father Telmon.

Msrg. Guignes came from Longneuf to his episcopal city with one fixed idea – to build as expeditiously as possible a classical college for the boys of Bytown. From Father Telmon's letters he was gravely aware of this imperative need and of the handicaps under which it would be built. Nevertheless he had made up his mind. As Bishop of Bytown it was his first responsibility; as superior of the Oblates in Canada he could provide a teaching staff. Before leaving Saint Columban he wrote to Bishop Bourget to say that he had learned from Father Telmon that it was impossible to rent a suitable building in Bytown and that with the loan of \$200 and lumber donated by the local dealers it would be possible to build a college similar to that at L'Assomption. He asked the resourceful Bishop of Montreal to find someone to advance the money. Three days after his consecration Msgr. Guignes wrote again to Bishop Bourget asking him to send the college rules followed at L'Assomption and Joliette. This letter had scarcely reached Montreal when the first sod was turned on August 10, 1848. The site faced Church Street,, now Guignes Avenue. It was the land occupied to-day by the sacristy of the Basilica of Ottawa. Eight days later the Bishop published the prospectus, of the College of Bytown in English in *The Packet*, August 18, 1848. In it he admonished the parents of prospective boarders to enroll their sons at once, "lest they should not be admitted for want of room. "All communications to be made (post-paid)" so runs the prospectus, "to the Reverend Mr. Dandurand, priest O.M.L. or to any other priest at the Cathedral. The college will be opened on the 27th of September next." The work of the building, supervised by Father Dandurand, was rushed at top speed. By the opening date set by the Bishop the class rooms were ready. Early in October it was finished and the boarders went into residence; only

two months had passed since the turning of the first sod.

In the early morning, Wednesday, September 27, 1848, Msgr. Guignes in the presence of the staff, the students and their parents inaugurated the College of Bytown. The structure, eighty feet long, about twenty feet from the ground to the eaves, and approximately thirty feet wide presented a pleasant appearance. The first two floors, with their symmetrical windows, were uniform in style. The third floor, covered by a slanting roof with French dormer windows removed every vestige of a crude box-like style. The front door into which had been cut an aperture or a Judas was protected by a porch. A graceful steeple enhanced the character of the building. While nearly all the wood used in the construction was donated by the local lumber yards the entire costs were \$250; foundation, building materials and wages, \$200; painting and furniture, \$25; steeple and iron work, \$25. Having blessed the college, Msgr. Guignes celebrated the votive Mass in honor of St. Joseph, the Patron Saint of the college and the Patron Saint of Canada. In conformity to the wishes of Msgr. de Mazenod a statue of the Saint was set in a place of honor within the house. Before it Msgr. Guignes lit a lamp which, like the historical lamp of M^{lle} de Repentigny in the Ursuline Monastery, Quebec, has never been extinguished.

From the prospectus of the College of Bytown it is easy to reconstruct the daily life of this institution a century ago. "The regular course of instruction" wrote the bishop, "will embrace what is generally taught in other Colleges. Besides Latin and other classical studies, Book-keeping will form an essential part of this course. The study of the English and French Languages, which are indispensably necessary in all localities where these two Languages are equally spoken, will be likewise peculiarly insisted upon. To the College will be added an Elementary School for Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, Drawing, Geography, etc. The terms for Boarding are very economical. Three times during the day, one half hour will be allowed to the Students for taking their meals in respectable houses chosen *ad hoc*, and designated to the Parents, who may therein treat their Children according to their own desire. The rest of the time will be spent in the College precincts. The terms for Boarding at the College will be Four Pounds, payable yearly in advance. The *Externes* will pay Two Shillings and Six Pence per month. The Meals and Washing will be provided by the Parents, who, moreover, will furnish the Bed and Bedding; also, a Trunk, with lock and key." The Bishop's prospectus was a model of brevity combining a clarity of style with an abundance of capital letters. It closed on a modern note, announcing the opening of an "Evening and night school" in which "Besides Reading and Writing, will be taught English and French Grammar, Geography, Agriculture, *Linear and Wash-drawing*. This school to be open from six to nine, P.M." This evening and night school was conducted by two Oblate brothers, Louis Roux and Cyprien Triolle, who taught during the day in the

new parish elementary school for boys. Among their youngest pupils was John Thomas Duhamel, who was destined to succeed Msgr. Guignes in the See of Ottawa. Fifty-five students, of whom fifteen were boarders, were enrolled in the College.

When Msgr. Guignes published the prospectus of the College of Bytown, he announced that the frame building under construction was but “a temporary step towards the erection of a fixed and permanent stone building.” It was used for five years, from September 1848 to September 1853. A list -of superiors and of the members of the teaching staff of the first college of Bytown is conserved in the Archives of the Pontifical University of 'Ottawa. The names are few in number but each one has a place of distinction in the annals of the Archdiocese of Ottawa or in that broader theatre of life, the Congregation of the Oblate Fathers of Mary Immaculate. With the exception of the two Fathers Mignault, who were Canadians, the staff members were born in France or in Ireland. Three superiors, not four, presided over the destiny of the first college. Father Jean-Francois Allard, O.M.L, later a missionary bishop in South Africa, was never a superior, although his name has been erroneously included in the list. Father Charles-Edouard Chevalier, O.M.I., was the first superior, holding the office for one year from 1848 to 1849. When he was sent to open an Oblate mission in Buffalo, he was replaced by Father Napoleon Mignault, O.M.L, who was superior for two years, from 1849 to 1851. Having taught Latin as an Oblate scholastic during the first year of the College’s existence, he was a deacon and slot a priest when he was made superior. He was ordained in Bytown by Msgr. Guignes, a few weeks later, fn October, 1849. His brother, Arthur Mignault, a seminarian for the diocese of Bytown, taught French in the college from 1848 to 1851. Father Augustin Gaudet, an experienced Oblate missionary, served as the third and last superior in the first college building, from 1851 `to 1853.

Through the pages of Father Henri Morisseau’s published and unpublished biographical sketches of the teaching staff of the first college of Bytown one learns that Brother Claude-Amable Tisserand, O.M.I., taught *belles-lettres*, and Patrick McGoey, English, from 1848 to 1849. Father McGoey, born in Armagh, the primatial See of Ireland, March 2, 1817, was ordained for the diocese of Bytown, May 6, 1849, and he was appointed pastor of Plantagenet, June 10, the samè year. Three more priests of Irish ancestry, Thomas O’Boyle, O.M.L, William Corbett, O.M.I. and Joseph John Collins, a member of the diocesan clergy, taught in the first college. Father O’Boyle, born in the archdiocese of Tuam, County Mayo, Ireland, April 20, 1820, was for six years the pastor of South Gloucester, including the mission of Dawson, to-day Osgoode. When Msgr. Guignes erected Dawson into a separate parish, October, 1860, he appointed as the first pastor Father O’Boyle who served until his death six years later. The epitaph on his

monument is the parish cemetery at Osgoode records the fact that he died January 7, 1866, at the age of forty-six, remembered by his parishioners as the "Father of the Poor and Needy." Father Joseph John Collins, born in Edinburgh, Scotland, March 14, 1824, came to Canada as a seminarian for the diocese of Bytown where he taught in the College from September 1849 to June 1850. Following his ordination, June 23, 1854, he was appointed the first resident pastor of Saint Eugene, in East Hawkesbury township, which he left in 1864, to establish the parish at Pakenham. His successor was the young Abbe Joseph Thomas Dubamel who became his bishop ten years later. In December, 1866, Father Collins was appointed the third pastor of Saint Patrick's Parish, Ottawa, where he built the present church which bears little resemblance to the original plans designed by Messrs. Stent and Laver, the architects of the first Dominion Parliament buildings. This parish was erected in 1855 by Msgr. Guignes, who, through the influence of the first pastor, the Very Reverend Aeneas McDonnell Dawson, LL.D. (Queens) Litt. D. (Laval), F.R.S.C., dedicated it to St. Andrew, but somewhere in the turmoil of Bytown, the Patron Saint of Scotland was forced to cede to honor the Patron Saint of Ireland. Father William Corbett, O.M.I., born in Cork, Ireland, December 26, 1826, was ordained a priest in Bytown, March 25, 1850, at the age of twenty-four. This, brilliant young missionary taught Greek in the College for two years, from 1850 to 1852. Reduced by over work to the condition of an invalid, as was more than one of his predecessors, he died at the Indian Mission at Maniwaki, September 1, 1861. His name is the first in the Oblate Necrology for North America. In 1849, Father Augustin Burnet, O.M.I., a missionary of uncommon gifts, joined the staff. He had learned English with Msgr. Guignes in Father John Falvey's rectory at St. Columban. He was a brilliant preacher and a born teacher who, in the words of Father Henri Morisseau, O.M.I., taught the teachers of Bytown, Oblates and Grey Nuns, how to teach, the precursor of a normal school.

Shortly after his arrival in Bytown, Father Pierre-Adrien Telmon, O.M.I., moved from the house occupied by his predecessor, Bishop Phelan; into a new rectory, 414 Sussex Street, approximately where No. 6 Temporary Building now stands. When this proved inadequate, he rented on August 7, 1847, for three years, a substantial stone house, 365 Sussex Street, close by the south east corner of Sussex Street and St. Andrew Street. Here one comes face to face with the most historic building in the Archdiocese of Ottawa. The house, which still stands, was the first Bishop's House. It was the first Oblate Scholasticate and the first Diocesan Seminary where Father Damase Dandurand, O.M.L., was the first professor of philosophy and theology. It was the first residence of the professors of Bytown College and the centre and headquarters of the Oblate missionaries working in the lumber camps and the Indian settlements along the vast stretches of the Ottawa and the

Gatineau Rivers. On May 1, 1850, some weeks before the lease expired, Msgr. Guigues moved into his new house, a small and humble structure, built beside the Cathedral, on Saint Patrick Street at Sussex Street with the entrance, like that of the Cathedral, facing Sussex St. By the early summer of 1852, his beloved College had reached a turning point in its history. Under the Providence of God it had taken root and grown amid poverty and hardships. By an Act of Parliament, May 30, 1849, it was incorporated as the College of Bytown, the same day, that, by another Act of Parliament, the name of the University of King's College, Toronto, was changed to the University of Toronto. After four years the first college building, which had been built largely with green elm, was cold and drafty. The grounds were extremely small and the site was needed for the enlargement of the Cathedral. True to his promise to build in stone when the opportune time had come, Msgr. Guignes bought from the owner, Hugh Fraser, who had inherited the property from his father, Thomas Fraser, the historic stone house at 365 Sussex Street and the vacant land beside it at the north east corner of Sussex and Church (now Guigues) Streets, as a site for a permanent college. The building operations commenced at once, – it was the summer of 1852. By September, 1853, when the work was finished, the desks and furniture were moved from the temporary building. The historic house, 365 Sussex Street, served as an annex to the new stone structure. The first and only superior of this college was Father Henri-Joseph Tabaret, O.M.I. His assistant was Father Alexandre Soulerin. The names of the staff are lost. In September, 1856, Msgr. Guignes transferred the College to a new site on Sandy Hill, where the present Pontifical University of Ottawa now stands.