

The Macdonell Family in the West

by

THE REV. VINCENT JENSEN, S.J., MA.

This paper is concerned with the highlights in the careers of two English-speaking Catholic pioneers in the North-West, from a family which left its mark on the history of the church in Canada. To sort out the Macdonells who settled in the North-West or who were engaged in the fur-trade, whether with the Hudson's Bay or North-West Company, is a difficult and rather tortuous business.¹ Our concern is with two brothers, John and Miles, sons of Spanish John Macdonell, staunch Jacobite and Catholic, United Empire Loyalist and pioneer frontiersman of Glengarry. John, the elder of the two spent some twenty-two years with the North-West Company, holding positions of importance at various posts in the North-West, before selling out his interests in the company and settling at Pointe Fortune along the Ottawa River where he kept a store and ran boats to Montreal. The younger, Miles, was the first governor of Assiniboia, Selkirk's settlement, and had a meteoric, troublesome and controversial career in the West. He was, I think, not an altogether happy choice for governor and certainly the hopes and dreams he had for the Red River Settlement were far from realized in his day and for many a day to come. He had his moments of glory but they were few indeed, and while his contribution to the history of the West was noteworthy, his personal returns were slight. Neither of the two men received their just due from contemporaries and for that matter even among modern historians. Miles in particular has not had a good press.

The Macdonells were a close-knit family and, fortunately for the historian, carried on a considerable correspondence with one another. They were, too, in constant contact with men such as the Earl of Selkirk, Sir Alexander Mackenzie, the McGillvays, McTavishes and others who did so much to explore, exploit and develop the North-West. The patriarch of the

¹ Of the Macdonells prominent in the West at this time, there were, for instance, Alexander – opponent of Miles at Red River and a Nor'Wester; Alexander – sheriff under Semple, later the 5th. Governor of Assiniboia, known as the 'Grasshopper Governor'; Aeneas – a clerk in the N. W. Company, killed in 1809; Allan – who took a prominent part in the Selkirk troubles. There was also an Alexander McDonell who was Selkirk's agent at Baldoon and three John McDonalds who played conspicuous roles in the fur trade. For brief biographies of most of these cf. Wallace (ed.) *Documents Relating to the North West Company*; Champlain Society Publications XXII, Appendix A, pp. 463-466.

family was that strangely forgotten figure known by the nickname of Spanish John. Father Morice, in an article in the *Canadian Historical Review*, rescued him from undeserved oblivion.² Since he was the heart and soul of the Macdonell family, the bond uniting them, and since his character and career had great influence on the lives of his sons, it is worth recapitulating briefly the story of his life.

Spanish John was born at Crowlin, in Scotland, in 1728. At the age of twelve he went to Rome and began his studies at the Scots College, but three years later, hearing that Charles Stuart, the Pretender, had fled to France and was laying claim to the throne of his ancestors, John decided to fight for the cause of Bonnie Prince Charlie. He enlisted in the Spanish Army, then allied with France against Great Britain and Austria. After participating in several campaigns, winning distinction on the battle field and being seriously wounded, he was elevated to the rank of Lieutenant Commander at the age of eighteen. He was entrusted with the task of acting as confidential messenger from the Duke of York to his brother and was given 1500 pounds sterling in gold to carry to the Pretender. Unfortunately he was robbed of 1000 guineas on the way and when he landed in Scotland he found that the day he had set sail from Dunkirk was the day of the battle of Culloden which sounded the death knell of the Pretender's cause. He found, too, that many of his relatives and clansmen had been killed in that engagement. He succeeded in delivering his messages and the remainder of the money to Prince Charles Stuart. Though it is doubtful if he helped the latter to escape, there is no doubt of his sentiments. "To the eternal glory of my countrymen," he wrote in his autobiography towards the close of his life, "they despised the alluring reward of 30,000 pounds sterling and, though vanquished in battle, saved him from his inveterate enemies." Spanish John accepted the inevitable without overt complaint and was, as far as can be ascertained a faithful subject of the Hanoverians. He abandoned his military career, settled down and married a girl whose father had been killed at Culloden and whose name was likewise Macdonell. He lived, as he wrote in his memoirs, "a most happy life for a number of years on his property." But though he had beaten his sword into a ploughshare, he was not too satisfied with the exchange. "At last," he confessed, "my disposition, given rather to roving, induced me to leave my native country and come to this great continent of America." He emigrated in 1773 and settled in the Mohawk Valley, but during the American War of Independence he was a Tory and fought for Great Britain. He finally settled as a United Empire Loyalist some time in the year 1782

² *Canadian Historical Review*, June 1929, v. X, pp. 212-235; A Canadian Pioneer: Spanish John. Father Morice had in his possession the Macdonell Family papers which have since been returned. Quotations from the memoirs of Spanish John and from the letters of Bishop Macdonell are from this article or from the succeeding one published in *C.H.R.*, Sept. 1929, v. X, pp. 308-322.

along the banks of the river known in the Macdonell correspondence as the River aux Raisins, close to Cornwall, at a place that is now known as South Lancaster. He had the usual problems and difficulties of a pioneer settler in Upper Canada, which he met with his usual light-hearted buoyancy, but it seems true that his career as a farmer and colonist was not nearly as successful as had been his soldiering.

As his family scattered, Spanish John lived alone and independent, but kept in close touch with them all. There is one amusing incident in his later life that deserves recording. Apparently there was some gossip about his attentions to a widow who lived in the neighbourhood. His sons were quite worried, fearing that the old soldier – he was then 76 – living alone would be fair game for an attractive widow or as Miles called her “that cursed artful widow.” But Spanish John was made of sterner stuff, for he wrote in 1804 to John: “As to the report spread to my disadvantage concerning Donald McAlister relick, I thought, though your mentioned it to me, that you had heard of it long ago. It commenced at least five years ago, owing at first to my going frequently to her house to pass an idle hour... I thought it no harm to shew her some little attention to her more than to the vulgar of the place. But I assure you as to matrimony with her or any other, I shall change my mind before I can think of it.” Change his mind he did not, for he died still single, on Palm Sunday 1810. His last letter to John, then in the North-West reads: “I wish to God that you could soon be quitt of that Antichristian country and come to live among us... Longing very much for your presence and recommending you to the care of Almighty God.”

Spanish John had three sons and two daughters. Of the sons, William, the youngest, apparently lacked the ambition of his brothers and Spanish John sent him to Boston. He explained to John in 1796: “You know his indolence and easiness which induced me to send him among a people naturally aspiring, sharp and cunning. As he really did not seem to want both parts and sense I was very willing to have him in a place where his dormant spirits and parts must be roused. What the consequence may be I cannot determine.” The consequence turned out very well, for William was quite successful at the Customs Department in Boston. Leaving William at the counting table of The Hub and the two daughters to domestic bliss, let us turn our attention to the two older brothers.

John Macdonell was born in Scotland on November 30, 1768. He came to America with his father and after the American Revolution settled with the rest of the family near Cornwall. In 1788 he received a commission as ensign in the militia battalion of Cornwall and Osnabruck, but soon left the army and entered the service of the North-West Company as a commis or clerk. The practice of the company was for young men of ability to work up from clerk to chief trader to winter partner. John was certainly a clerk in the Upper Red River Department in 1793 and his name is to be found in 1797

in the Company documents as a winter partner with two shares. Promotion for him was rapid and he held positions of responsibility in the Company until his retirement.

All N.W. clerks were expected to keep a journal, a sort of diary of events, and John Macdonell's journal for the years 1793-96 has been published by Masson as being typical of life at the fur trading posts.³ It is, perhaps, not particularly interesting but a few extracts may serve to show the workings of the trade and some of the problems of the men on the front line of Canada's first big business.

Oct. 11 (1793) – arrived at the fort of the river Qui Appelle, called by Mr. Grant when he built it, Fort Espérance. About sixty lodges of Indians at the fort, chiefly Crees.

Oct. 15 – gave the Crees some credits – they were drunk and troublesome all night.

Oct. 19 – Seventeen warriors came from the banks of the Missouri for tobacco. They slept ten nights on the way and are emissaries from a party of Assinibouans who went to war upon the Scioux.

Oct. 20 – The warriors traded a few skins brought upon their backs, and went off ill-pleased with their reception. After dark, the dogs kept a constant barking which induced a belief that some of the warriors were lurking about the fort for an opportunity to steal. I took a sword and pistol and went to sleep in the store. Nothing took place...

Nov. 30 – St. Andrew's day. Hoisted a flag in honour of the titular saint of Scotland. A beautiful day...

1795 March 24 – *Le Grand Diable* arrived and made me a present of six buffalo robes and 10 wolves – gave him in return, a large keg and chief's clothing in compensation of his bringing and sending his band to trade here all winter and in recompense for his giving the fort a good name...

March 26 – *Le Grand Diable* went away after making me a tender of his wife's favours and seemed surprised and chagrined at my refusal, but the lady much more so, and I thought it prudent to make her some trifling presents to pacify her.⁴

So the Journal runs on with its tale of various tribes and Indians, of the barter and trade, of the journeys made, of canoes sent out, of chasing the buffalo. And it was a fiercely competitive trade, for John remarks "there were five different oppositions built here last winter, all working against one another."

In 1799 John was placed in charge of the Upper Red River Department and was there almost continuously until 1808. It was one of the most

³ Masson, *Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest*, Quebec, 1899, v. I, pp. 283-295.

⁴ Masson, *op. cit.*, I, 283-5; 293.

lucrative parts of the Norwesters' trade and a post of responsibility. His successor, McDonald of Garth wrote in his autobiography, "it was decided in council at Fort William that I should take charge of the Red River Department, my namesake, Big McDonnell retiring – a most powerful man who however did not command his men as he ought, an easy man of no exertion."⁵ However accurate McDonald of Garth was in his estimate of John Macdonnell's character, he had to admit that the Upper Red River 'had a set of the worst men in the employ' and that they took considerable handling. The fact remains, too, that the Athabaska Department to which John was transferred was at this time even more important to the Nor' Westers, because the Hudson's Bay Company was beginning to challenge seriously their claim to pre-eminence in that region. From his own men John received the nickname of Le Prêtre, "owing," says a contemporary, "to the rigid manner in which he made his men adhere to the various feasts of the Catholic Church – a proof of orthodoxy with which the majority of them would have gladly dispensed."⁶ He was in the Athabaska Department until his retirement and for the greater part of the time was in charge of the post on the English River. Perhaps the best proof of the amount of travelling he did in the West is the enumeration of the various places where his children were born. His oldest son was born at the post on the Souris River in 1798; two children at Fort Espérance in the Qu'Appelle Valley; one at the Lake St. Claire post in Athabasca; one at Isle à la Crosse and the last at Lesser Slave Lake in January 1812. His wife was Magdaleine Poitras, daughter of a trader at Qu'Appelle. He married her according to the custom of the country, but had his marriage ratified by a priest when he went East on rotation.

Holding two shares in the North-West Company and being a winter partner must have brought lucrative returns to John. Between the years 1787 and 1795 the North-West Company flourished to such an extent that a number of winter partners were able to retire in affluence, some to estates in Scotland, others to seignories in Lower Canada. During this period the Norwesters met with almost no opposition, but about 1797 rivalry of a formidable character developed from Canada and a bitter trade war was carried on with serious financial repercussions. Competition reduced the profits of the fur-trade to such an extent that both the North-West Company and the New North-West Company were losing money. The Indians were being debauched and important furbearing areas were showing signs of exhaustion. But in spite of all this, John Macdonnell is shown in the statement of the finances of the North-West Company for the year 1799 as having to

⁵ Masson, *op. cit.*, II, 35.

⁶ Ross Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, II, 325. London, 1831.

his credit 2736£ 13s. 4d.⁷ In 1804 the two companies were united and the decade which followed saw the North-West Company's greatest period of expansion and success. During that time the Company crushed with ruthless efficiency all competition from Canada. Free traders and interlopers were discouraged by means which, if not actually illegal, verged closely on illegality. The methods were quite unscrupulous and perhaps McDonald of Garth's estimate of John as an 'easy man of no exertion' may have been due to the fact that the methods of the Norwesters did not square easily with Macdonell's conscience. Willson Beckles, in his history of the Hudson's Bay Company, claims that John Macdonell was removed from his post 'because he was not inclined to set all principles of law and justice at defiance.'⁸ John retired from active service in 1812 and sold his shares in 1815. The rising bitterness of the conflict with the Hudson's Bay Company and the fact that his brother Miles was so closely involved must have influenced his decision to retire and sell his stock.

During all these years John was the financial mainstay of the Macdonell family in Glengarry. His generosity was boundless and apparently advantage was frequently taken of it. His father warned him – while at the same time soliciting a donation from him – “Entre nous, I make bold to caution you, as I know the generosity of your disposition, that in case any private application be made to you for money, to be on your guard.” The donation was forthcoming, for there is a note from Father Roderick Macdonell “your collection for our parish church at [River aux Raisins] has been most gratefully received and acknowledged as well by the Parishiners as by their Pastor.” That same year (1802) John received another letter from a younger relative, asking for a loan of forty pounds ‘Hallifax’ and excusing himself for his boldness because of his knowledge of the great numbers John has obliged in this way. The letter was from Alexander Macdonell, Priest, and was from the man who was to be the first Bishop of Kingston and founder of the hierarchy in Upper Canada. Incidentally Father Alexander kept in close touch with John whom he called his ‘loving uncle’ and in 1811 wrote, thanking him for his contribution to his college: “I expect to get the church at Kingston entirely finished this year & I intend to allot a pew in front of the gallery for the use of the N.W. Co., to show my grateful sense of their liberal donation towards building it.” That is a rather far cry from the usual picture of the unscrupulous, unethical hard-headed business men of Montreal, but both sides of the picture are correct. Perhaps, being prudent Scotsmen, they

⁷ Wallace, (ed.), *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, 106. For further facts and figures about the extent of the fur trade in Canada, cf. Davidson, *The North West Company*, University of California Press, 1918. Appendices C, D, E, I, J, Q, S.

⁸ Willson Beckles, *The Great Company*, II, 118, London, 1900.

intended to provide for all contingencies and to make the best of both worlds.

John was the banker of the family. Miles, for example, writes to his brother: "I took my daughters from Montreal in January last and would have wished they had left the place sooner which my being at York prevented. They have ruined me in expenses; not me but you. Having been noticed by Genl. Drummond's Lady, Mrs. McGillvary and others, led them to considerable expense in dress to attend Balls, Bouts and Evening Parties given by those Ladies." Even Spanish John was not above hinting at his needs and telling of his difficulties. The result was that John had little to show in later years for his years of service in the North-West Company. Bishop Macdonell wrote to him in 1822 "Your observation that your family have made worse use of their property than their neighbours may be extended, I believe, to Catholics in general, who seem to possess less of the prudence of the serpent than any other class of people on earth. As to the gains of the N.W. Company, I am informed by those who have been in the Country since the first formation of that trade that few, very few, of the children and grandchildren of those who have acquired property in that trade have enjoyed much of it." The good Bishop's generalisation needs qualification, but it was certainly true of the Macdonell family.

When John retired from active service in the North-West Company, he organized a corps of Canadian Voyageurs to fight in the war of 1812. However on Oct. 23 of that year he was captured with thirty-five of his men at Michillimakinac and his career in the war was short. When exactly he settled at Pointe Fortune, not far from Vaudreuil, is uncertain, but he was certainly there by 1815 when he sold his interests in the North-West Company. At that time Miles was involved in unsatisfactory litigation with the company over the troubles at Red River. John naturally refused to testify against his old associates but Miles advised: 'Endeavour to get your money out of their hands as fast as possible. The devil will be to pay with the concern before long.' There was to be the devil to pay indeed, but with more than the concern. Miles and the colony were to suffer equally. John was to pass the last years of his life rather uneventfully with his family as a squire and small trader. Even the rebellion of 1837 left the quiet section of the Ottawa Valley relatively untroubled, although John, as head of the First Prescott Regiment followed with uneasiness the signs of public restlessness. He died at Pointe Fortune on April 17, 1850.

The name of Miles Macdonell is more familiar to students of the history of the West, although their interest is concentrated principally on the few years that he was governor of Assiniboia. He too was born in Scotland, at Inverness in 1769, and came out to America with his father and settled in the Glengarry region. At the age of 14 he enlisted in the army and in 1794 was gazetted a lieutenant in the Royal Canadian Volunteers and in 1796 a captain. In 1800 he ran for election as member for the County of Glengarry

in the Legislative Assembly of Upper Canada, but was defeated, 'being ousted,' says his father, 'by the presbyterian faction.' He owned a farm at Osnabruck and it was there, apparently, that he first met the Earl of Selkirk, in 1804. That year he writes of Selkirk's projects of settlement, the first of which had already been undertaken in Prince Edward Island, the second of which was being projected in Upper Canada near Lake St. Clair. Selkirk's plans caught his imagination and he kept in correspondence with the latter. At Selkirk's request he travelled through several cities in the United States seeking information of a confidential character. In 1807 he also submitted a plan to the war office for the organization of a corps of Highland Fencibles in the County of Glengarry – a plan which proved abortive. It was quite clear that the life of a farmer and colonist did not appeal to him. In fact he wrote to John: "Mere farming will hardly support my family in the manner I could wish. I have some thoughts of getting a few goods to retail." But the business he was soon engaged in was Selkirk's business. The attitude of his family was cautious, even suspicious. Father Alexander Macdonell wrote to John in June 1811: "I begin to entertain strong apprehensions that he will find himself much disappointed in the sanguine hope placed in his Lordship & that it would have been more to his interest & to his credit to have remained at home in Scothouse & mind his own affairs than to dance attendance to the Earl of Selkirk & reduce himself to the disagreeable dilemma of either falling out with his Lordship (the consequence of which would probably be the most complete disappointment of all his views, the loss of his time & of his trouble across the Atlantic Ocean, besides the loss that his own affairs have suffered by his absence): or of entering contrary to his own judgment & good sense into the fantastical scheme of his Lordship."

The 'fantastical scheme of his Lordship' was of course Selkirk's settlement on the Red River. The story of that settlement; the difficulties it encountered; the litigation and something like miniature civil war that it involved are well known to all here and need not be told again. But there are several interesting points with reference to the part played by Miles Macdonell that should be touched upon.

Miles was named governor with complete power. When he returned to Canada with the Selkirk settlers he had in his possession a copy of the deed specifying the grant made to Selkirk and the rights he was allowed to exercise in that extensive domain – for extensive it was – some 116,000 square miles of the richest land in Canada and in the northern parts of the modern States of North Dakota and Minnesota.⁹ At the same time Selkirk

⁹ Oliver, (ed.), *The Canadian North-West; Its Early Development and Legislative Records*; Canadian Archives' Publications, No. 9, 1914. Ottawa. v. 1, pp. 154-167 gives the text of the grant to Selkirk. Professor Martin in his *Selkirk's Work in Canada*, Oxford, 1916; Appendix B, pp. 201.215, publishes an

sent a letter of instruction outlining the general policy to be followed, method of procedure in procuring supplies from the Hudson Bay Company forts and in conducting the settlement. "It is of great importance," wrote Selkirk, "to introduce and keep up from the first habits of exact subordination and implicit obedience to command" – an idea which fitted in perfectly with Miles' own conception of his task.¹⁰ In another letter Selkirk told Miles "you are to receive a grant of 50,000 acres to yourself and your heirs. This grant must be subject to the general conditions imposed by the Company in their grant to me... but it shall not be burdened to any particular stipulations of settlement. Besides this particular grant you are to have an interest in a joint stock company to which I purpose to assign a large proportion of the territory granted to me, on condition of establishing a fund for its settlement; and on the formation of the company, shares shall be reserved to you, equivalent to a subscription of five hundred pounds sterling... You are also to receive a pecuniary salary at the rate of three hundred pounds a year, as long as you continue in the management of the colony."¹¹

With such glowing prospects in front of him, with a very imperfect acquaintance with the country to which he was coming, with little understanding of the resourcefulness of the Norwesters and even for that matter of the attitude of a good number of the Hudson's Bay officials, it is small wonder that Miles set out with high hopes from Scotland with the first group of Selkirk's settlers. "I am now going to settle a colony in the N.W. Country on the Red or Assiniboin River, which empties itself into Lake Winipic," he wrote with serene confidence on June 7, 1811. "My business to Ireland was to procure subscribers & encourage Emigration to that part, in which I had full success, particular in Connaught. My party this year consists of about 50 men, half Irish & half Highlanders. Three times that number with families are to be sent out next year & it is expected that the country will settle rapidly."¹² His enthusiasm, however, outran his judgment. Actually the group that came out with Macdonell was a rather motley collection. There was a priest with them – much to Miles' delight. It would be pleasant to record that the first priest to settle in the Red River Valley was an Irishman, but unfortunately Father Charles Bourke who came out with the band, had left his diocese without permission of his bishop. He was a rather erratic character and Miles in disgust wrote 'that man will never make a convert.' From Selkirk's letters it appears that Father Bourke spent the

emended text.

¹⁰ Instructions to Miles Macdonell, 1811. *Selkirk Papers*, I, 168-180. Published by Oliver, *op. cit.*, 1, 168-174.

¹¹ Selkirk to Macdonell, June 11, 1811. Oliver, *op. cit.*, I, 175.

¹² Miles Macdonell to Rev. Alexander Macdonell, cited by Morice, C.H.R., X, 311

greater part of his time hunting for precious stones. Since the settlers arrived very late at Hudson Bay, they could not make the journey to Red River that winter and in the spring Father Bourke decided it was his vocation to return to Ireland and encourage emigration. There is no doubt about his zeal for the settlement, but even to the lenient Miles and the tolerant Selkirk, there was equally no doubt about his unsuitability. Poor Father Bourke never saw the Red River and perhaps it is just as well

The outburst of violence affecting the Red River Settlement; its destruction and dispersal by the North-West Company; the seizure and counter seizure of provisions and furs and forts by the two companies is a familiar, if confusing story. The responsibility has been placed by some authors on the shoulders of Miles Macdonell and in particular on his pemmican embargo of 1814 which transformed the thinly veiled hostility between the North West Company and the Hudson Bay Company into open conflict and which culminated in the massacre of Seven Oaks forcing the eventual union of the two companies. To what extent can Miles, as Governor of Assiniboia, be held responsible for the bloodshed and violence?

From the outset I think it should be realized he was in an impossible position. "It is clear," Professor Martin writes "that Selkirk miscalculated completely the attitude and untried resources of the North-West Company."¹³ But he equally miscalculated the attitude of his own company. To him and to Miles the fur trade was a secondary, if necessary condition, but to their associates in the company it was not so. "Every gentleman in the service," wrote George Simpson, the great Governor of Rupert's Land in 1822, "was unfriendly to the colony."¹⁴ The Norwesters' attitude was succinctly expressed by Simon McGillivray in a letter to the North West Partners in 1812: "he (Selkirk) must be driven to abandon it (the colony) for his success would strike at the very existence of our trade."¹⁵ A successful colony at Red River would vindicate Selkirk's title to 116,000 square miles of territory through which ran the principal arteries of the Norwesters' trade and would cut the life line of their business. And to many fur traders of both companies fur-trade and settlement were incompatible. But the explanation of Miles' conduct in promulgating the pemmican embargo should, I think, be sought largely in the circumstances.

At first relations between Miles and the North-West Company had been friendly; in the eyes of a good number of Hudson Bay men they had been too

¹³ Martin, *Selkirk's Work in Canada*, p. 31.

¹⁴ Merk (ed.) *Fur Trade and Empire; George Simpson's Journals*. Harvard Historical Studies XXXI, p. 201. Cambridge, 1931.

¹⁵ Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 171, No. 1.

friendly, but they had steadily grown worse.¹⁶ Miles wrote of the treacherous conduct of even his own brother-in-law who was in charge of the North-West post at Red River. During the first winter the settlers had suffered severely from lack of provisions, while the Norwesters, with the half-breeds organized in their service, carried out enough pemmican from Selkirk's grant alone to supply all the North-West brigades to Athabaska. During the winter of 1813 the skilled Norwest hunters continued to run the buffalo and to prepare pemmican for their trading posts. The settlers, then at Fort Dear for the winter, without horses, eked out an existence by trading for buffalo. Moreover, new settlers were expected in increasing numbers and Selkirk himself was to arrive in the summer of 1814 with an unknown number of colonists. Miles' concern was for his colonists and he wrote to Auld, Hudson Bay superintendent at Fort York: "The N.W. company supply their distant trading posts with provisions procured in this district, whilst we to whom the soil belongs are obliged to go the expense of importing from Britain ... part of the subsistence of our people." He asked the advice of Auld about placing an embargo on provisions obtained in Selkirk's territory. Auld expressed himself strongly in favour of it and strangely enough told him "the bourgeois will bluster and strut and that will be all."¹⁷ Macdonell accordingly issued his proclamation on January 8, 1814 whereby "no persons shall take any Provisions, either of Flesh, Fish, Game or Vegetables procured or raised within the said Territory by water or land carriage for one twelvemonth from the date hereof."¹⁸

Legally and technically Macdonell's action was defensible, but it certainly was rash and in fact even the Hudson Bay traders rebelled against it. There was in the proclamation the proviso "save and except what may be judged necessary for the trading parties at present time within the territory to carry them to their respective destinations and who may on due application to me obtain a License for the same." To the Norwesters this was simply tyranny and a step to ruin them completely. They resorted to counter measures; Miles in his turn used force and the result was something like war. Confusion was made worse confounded by Auld who seemed to be playing his own game and apparently attempted to use Miles as his tool. In fact Professor Martin makes Auld the villain of the piece. Certainly the supervisor at Fort York had gone so far as to send one of Selkirk's confidential letters to Macdonell back to Selkirk unopened. Macdonell claimed in 1815: "Had I received it at the time it would have been a caution to me in my proceedings since; and perhaps would have prevented me from

¹⁶ cf. e.g. *Journal of Miles Macdonell*, Sept. 4, 1812, published by Oliver, *op. cit.* I, 184.

¹⁷ For the role of Auld in this cf. Martin, *op. cit.*, pp. 75-76 seq.

¹⁸ Oliver, *op. cit.*, I, 185.

falling so much into errors.” The result of course was that an attack was made on the settlement and Miles gave himself up for the sake of the safety of the colonists. The Norwesters were exultant; “we have got the damned robber at last.” Crops were trampled down; Fort Douglas, the colony mill, the barns and stables were burned to the ground. A good number of settlers agreed to go to Upper Canada and sold their farm implements to the North-West Company. Only thirteen families refused the Company’s offer and made their way to the Jack River. “I am happy to inform you,” wrote Simon McGillvary, “that the colony has been all knocked on the head by the N.W. Co.” It was of course to be revived, but Miles was forced to go to Montreal where he spent weary years in fruitless litigation.¹⁹ He remained nominally the governor of the colony until 1816, but he reappeared at the settlement for only a short time. He was a ruined man and the premature death of Selkirk in 1820 meant the end of all his hopes and ambitions. He died a broken man at the home of his brother John on June 28, 1828.

There is one important contribution to the history of the church in the West which deserves recording. In the spring of 1816 while in Montreal he wrote an eloquent plea to Bishop Plessis. “You know Monseigneur, that there can be no stability in the government of states and kingdoms unless religion is made the corner stone. The leading motive of my first undertaking the management of that arduous, though laudable enterprise, was to have made the Catholic religion the prevailing faith of the establishment, should Divine Providence think me a worthy instrument to forward the design. The Earl of Selkirk’s liberal mind readily acquiesced in bringing out along with me the first year a priest from Ireland. Your Lordship already knows the unfortunate result of that first attempt. Our spiritual wants increase with our numbers; we have many Catholics from Scotland and Ireland, and besides those Canadians are always with us; we are to have a vast accession from here. There are hundreds of free Canadians wandering about our colony, who have families with Indian women, all of whom are in the most deplorable state from want of spiritual aid. A vast religious harvest might also be made among the natives around us... I have learned with great pleasure that you are sending two missionaries this year as far as Lac la Pluie. I shall be happy to afford a passage from here to these gentlemen as far as Red River, which is only six days journey from there, and should he remain permanently with us the concern shall furnish him a suitable conveyance once a year to meet

¹⁹ cf. *Papers Relating to the Red River Settlement*; printed by order of the House of Commons, 1819. cf. also Amos, *Trial in the Courts of Canada, relative to the Destruction the Earl of Selkirk’s Settlement on the Red River, with observations*. London, 1820.

his fellow labourers in the christian vineyard at Lac la Pluie.”²⁰ Lord Selkirk strongly seconded the plea and Father Tabeau was sent out to accompany Miles as far as Red River. Unfortunately he reached Rainy Lake just in time to hear the news about the massacre of Seven Oaks and thought it useless to go any further. But the very reason which deterred Father Tabeau from founding a permanent mission at Red River, drove Selkirk and the colonists to impress upon the Bishop the need of priests. A formal petition was drawn up and forwarded to Quebec. Bishop Plessis replied by sending two priests – Father Provencher and Father Dumoulin. Miles’ urgent request was at long last answered but the results of it he was not to see.

He had envisaged a flourishing prosperous colony on the banks of the Red River. In course of time that vision was to be realized, but only after suffering and privations such as few colonies in the British Empire had undergone. The price that Miles paid was the ruination of his own career.

Thus we have sketched briefly and certainly inadequately the high lights in the careers of these two pioneers. In spite of their faults and shortcomings they were men strong with the strength of their faith, and in spite of their mistakes they wrought better than they knew. They are worthy, I think, to be remembered as great Catholics and our ancestors in the Red River Valley.

²⁰ Printed in Morice, *History of the Catholic Church in Western Canada*, Toronto, 1910. V. I, pp. 89-90.