

Bishop Farrell of Hamilton as a Participant in the Political Life of his Day

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An account of the ecclesiastical career of John Farrell, first Bishop of Hamilton, has already appeared in the *Annual Report* of this Association.¹ The purpose of the present paper, however, is not to retell the story of Bishop Farrell's establishment of the diocese of Hamilton, but rather to situate the Bishop in the general political background of mid-nineteenth century Ontario history. The hope is that this approach will afford some insight into the condition of the Catholic Church in Upper Canada at the time, as well as a more comprehensive picture of the political situation in the province.

On Pentecost Sunday, May 11, 1856, the Rt. Rev. John Farrell was consecrated first Bishop of Hamilton. Officiating at the ceremony, the first of its kind to take place in Kingston, Ontario, was the Rt. Rev. Patrick Phelan, Coadjutor Bishop of Kingston, assisted by Bishops Charbonnel of Toronto and Guigues of Ottawa.

The man elevated to head the newly established diocese of Hamilton was by any standards an imposing figure. Standing six feet four inches in height, the thirty-five year old Irish born ecclesiastic was described in appearance, perhaps more accurately than was often the case with the florid nineteenth century journalistic style, as "the ideal Melchisedech or High Priest of God."² Born in Armagh on June 2, 1820, John Farrell had emigrated to Canada with his whole family in 1832. His father, James, settled in Kingston, and here young John soon found himself acting as sanctuary boy to the Rt. Rev. Alexander Macdonell, first Catholic Bishop of Upper Canada. Under Macdonell's direction, Farrell entered the Sulpician seminary in Montreal, where he completed his classical studies and his training in theology. He was ordained on October 5, 1845, at the Collège de l'Assomption, by Macdonell's successor, Bishop Remigius Gaulin, and became assistant priest at Kingston. In May of the following year, he was appointed resident priest at l'Original. In October, 1847, Father Farrell was recalled to Kingston, this time to serve on the teaching staff at Regiopolis College, which had been opened the previous year by the Very Rev. Angus MacDonell, Vicar General of the Kingston diocese, under a charter granted in 1837. In 1853, Farrell became resident priest at Peterborough; he remained there until raised to the episcopate three years later,

¹ Thomas F. BATTLE, "The Right Reverend John Farrell, D.D., First Bishop of Hamilton," in *Can. Cath. Hist. Assoc'n Report*, 1942, pp. 39-45.

² *The Catholic Register*, Jan. 10, 1895.

One of the most pressing problems requiring Farrell's attention as newly appointed bishop among the Catholics of Upper Canada was that of Catholic schools. Anyone familiar with Franklin A. Walker's *Education and Politics in Upper Canada*, is aware of the close link between the Catholic school problem and the political history of Upper Canada at this time.

Like his fellow Ontario bishops, Farrell did not hesitate to act directly on the matter, even in its extension into the political arena. His stand on the school question, therefore, provides an insight into the political history of Upper Canada at this period.

The acknowledged leader of the Catholic agitation in the 1850's in favour of an improved status for Catholic schools in Upper Canada was Bishop Charbonnel of Toronto. As early as 1854, while still a priest in the Kingston diocese, Farrell was expressing support for Charbonnel in the latter's efforts in the school contest, and airing views on the political possibilities for improvement. Farrell was convinced at that time, and consistently as later events proved, that the only hope for justice to Upper Canadian Catholics on the question lay in support for their position from the other province in Canada. For Farrell, the political fate of Upper Canadian Catholics lay with the parliamentarians of Lower Canada, and improvements could be expected only if the right kind of representatives were elected in Quebec:

... With regard to our schools, I am afraid that all the influence which the Catholics of Upper Canada can at the present time bring to bear upon the enactments of a Parliament amalgamated of Protestants and bad Catholics will be of very little use. Bishop Phelan has called lately for petitions from the different missions. But, I fear they will reach their destination too late to be of much use.

I am of the opinion that the Catholics of Upper Canada will remain for years powerless unless some steps can be taken to induce the constituencies of Lower Canada to send to parliament men of sound principles instead of those miserable demagogues a thousand times more dangerous than Protestants to the cause of the Church. Whatever there fore can be done during the present session of parliament steps should be taken to effect the return of proper persons for Lower Canada at the next session ...³

Two other letters to Charbonnel, one the following summer and the other in February, 1856, show how active a part Farrell was willing to take in the political arena, at least where the issue of Catholic schools was at stake, and in what close contact he was with contemporary political events:

... With regard to our Member, I believe he is not wronged by public rumor. I understood from his own lips that he was the great agent in introducing into our Separate School bill the amendments of which we have so much reason to complain. We consider him here as a polished enemy of everything Catholic, and

³ Farrell to Charbonnel, Nov. 5, 1854, *Charbonnel Papers, Archives of the Archdiocese of Toronto* (hereafter designated as Arch. Tor.).

are determined to prevent him from being returned at the next election. However, as we are not able to choose a member such as it (*sic*) would be desirable, I consider, that the most prudent course for us to follow will be to manifest no great opposition to the Present member until the day of polling, as such opposition would only rally Mr. Langlois' friends the Orangemen to his standard. We may have an opportunity of turning the scales in favour of a man who will be more favourable to Catholic measures, especially as Protestants themselves appear to be disgusted with the amender of the Separate School bill (as he is pleased to style it) ...⁴

And later

... Were it not for the words of the wise man "nihil sub sole novum" and for what experience has taught us relative to the versatility of politicians, I should have been taken by surprise in finding Mr. Drummond in the ranks of our enemies. How to treat such people so as not to make them more dangerous, is the great difficulty. Some of those who pretend to be our friends in parliament appear to think that less public agitation on our part would afford them the means of doing more for us by exposing them to less opposition from Brown and co. Although this looks very like the wolves wishing to muzzle the dogs, it might be well to avoid newspaper and all public agitation for a short time and to endeavour to gain our point in a more indirect and covert manner. This is the course we endeavoured to follow in our late Peterborough election, and it has proved more effectual than any public display that we might have endeavoured to make. We require to establish a perfect understanding between the Clergy and people throughout the province so as to oppose the compact body of Catholic votes to every ministry that will not give us equal rights ...⁵

At this juncture, the bent of Farrell's thinking on the political course to be followed on the school question was clear: do what was possible to elect Upper Canadian members favourable to separate schools, but insofar as the likelihood of solid results from this approach seemed small, concentrate the Catholic political effort on electing members from Lower Canada who would support Catholic schools for Upper Canada. In other words, Farrell hoped to use Catholic support from Lower Canada to achieve changes in the school system of Upper Canada.

⁴ Farrell to Charbonnel, July 29, 1855, *Charbonnel Papers Arch. Tor.* The Separate School bill referred to by Farrell was the Taché Bill, passed on May 30, 1855. Originally hailed as the final settlement to the school problem insofar as it incorporated the major Catholic demands for their schools, it was so severely amended between its first and final reading that Catholics began to claim they had been wronged immediately after its passage. See F. A. WALKER, *Religion and Politics in Upper Canada*, pp. 163-80.

⁵ Farrell to Charbonnel, Feb. 24, 1856, *Charbonnel Papers, Arch. Tor.* Farrell's view that Catholic votes had been the determining factor in the Peterborough election was shared by the *Toronto Globe* and the *Toronto Mirror*; see the *Globe*, Jan. 24, 1856, and the *Mirror*, Jan. 25 and Feb. 1, 1856.

Bishop Farrell was not alone, of course, among the Catholic hierarchy of Upper Canada at the time in taking this stand. Indeed, it seems almost to have been the policy of all the Upper Canadian bishops, and one of its strongest expressions was Bishop Charbonnel's printed declaration in 1856 that the four Catholic cabinet members of the Macdonald-Cartier government were unworthy of absolution for their failure to implement efforts to remedy separate school legislation in Upper Canada.⁶

An excellent example of the close connection and, to many Protestant observers, actual confusion between the religious and political spheres of society is seen in a letter addressed to Bishop Farrell by the Rev. George Laufhuber, S.J., from Preston in January 1858. Laufhuber informed Farrell that in a by-election due shortly in Waterloo South, one of the candidates, Scott, supported the principle of separate schools while his opponent, Elliot, did not. Accordingly, Laufhuber tells his Bishop, he took pains to advise the Catholics in the riding, *in colloquiis privatis*, he notes carefully, to support Scott. Indeed, when he was informed that some Catholics in Kossuthville, near Preston, favoured Elliot, Laufhuber wrote them a short letter exhorting them to elect Scott.

One of the recipients of this letter showed it to a Protestant supporter of Elliot, and the letter was subsequently printed in English and German and circulated among the Protestants of the district. Not unnaturally, Laufhuber was worried about the effect his letter would have on Catholic-Protestant relations, and he asked Farrell for advice. Laufhuber's own inclinations on the subject extended in the direction of requiring some kind of public penance from the Catholic who so imprudently let the incriminating letter fall into Protestant hands; he states that some Preston Catholics wanted the "offender" barred from the Preston mission.⁷

A subsequent letter from Laufhuber two weeks later, however, assured Farrell that the difficulty had disappeared. The "guilty" Catholic, condemned by his fellow-religionists, forsook the support of Elliot before the election, and Elliot himself made no use of Laufhuber's letter. When Scott triumphed at the polls, his Protestant supporters appeared to appreciate the Catholic priest's efforts on behalf of their candidate.⁸

A new element entered the political issue of separate schools for Ontario with the election to the legislature of the two Canadas of Thomas d'Arcy McGee. It should be understood, of course, in this connection that while separate schools was not the only political issue of the era, it was the "Catholic" political issue in Upper Canada insofar as it was the issue uppermost in the minds of the Catholic hierarchy at the time, and it was the issue on which they were interested in seeing political action taken. Consequently, it was not surprising that the hierarchy's judgment of

⁶ "Circular of the Bishop of Toronto on the School Question," undated, *Toronto Separate School Board Papers*. The four cabinet members, all from Lower Canada, were Drummond, L. Cauchon, G. Cartier and F. Lemieux; cf. Walker, *op. cit.*, pp. 200-2

⁷ Laufhuber to Farrell, Jan. 2, 1858, *Farrell Papers, Archives of the Diocese of Hamilton* (hereafter designated as *Arch. Ham.*).

⁸ Laufhuber to Farrell, Jan. 18, *Farrell Papers, Arch. Ham.*

a political party or individual politician derived largely from that party's or individual's attitude on separate schools.

Now Thomas d'Arcy McGee's political posture in 1859 did not exactly fit this preconceived mould. A forthright advocate himself of the principle of separate schools, McGee was nonetheless closely aligned on other political issues, namely that of representation by population, with George Brown, whose attitude on separate schools was clearly not formulated to win favour with Catholics.

The entry of McGee on the political stage did much to polarize Catholic political opinion in Upper Canada around two emerging opposite points of view. The attitude of a man like Bishop Farrell remained constant: he favoured continuing support for the Conservative coalition with its solid base in Lower Canada, and hence was unenthusiastic about McGee's alignment with George Brown, even though McGee explicitly favoured the principle of separate schools. Some elements in Upper Canada, however, and their numbers grew quickly as McGee's popularity spread among his Irish-Canadian confreres, began to show support for McGee and his policies. McGee's supporters in the western province saw in him not only a courageous defender of Catholic principles in such matters as Catholic schools, but also the kind of liberal politician who, by his willingness to appreciate and work with Protestant Reformers, had achieved a lessening of anti-Catholic bigotry.⁹

This marks a clear divergence on political grounds between the Upper Canadian Catholic hierarchy, as exemplified by Bishop Farrell, and what might be called the rank and file of Irish Catholics in the upper province, most of whom supported McGee. And even a pastoral letter, signed by all the Canadian Bishops of both Upper and Lower Canada, itself a thinly veiled direct attack on McGee's policies, was not sufficient to sway McGee's Irish Catholic supporters.¹⁰

Another facet of the political life of his day on which the position of Bishop Farrell of Hamilton is worth observing is his attitude to the political overtones of the Irish social and benevolent societies which had sprung up in the 1850's in nearly all regions of Canada and the United States. In the late 1850's and early 1860's, it became fashionable for the Irish in almost every city, town and hamlet in English North America to form some kind of club or society; and communities in Hamilton diocese showed no exception to the pattern. The Montreal *True Witness* of June 22, 1860, carries an account of the inaugural meeting of the St. Patrick's Benevolent Society of Hamilton;¹¹ and two years later the same paper notes the formation of the Hibernian Catholic Literary Association in Dundas.¹²

⁹ See letter of Very Rev. J. M. BRUYERE in *The Canadian Freeman*, Aug. 5, 1859.

¹⁰ "Joint Letter of the Bishops of Upper and Lower Canada," undated, published in *The True Witness*, Feb. 18, 1859. Cf. A. P. Monahan, "A Politico-Religious Incident in the Career of Thomas D'Arcy McGee," in *Can. Cath. Hist. Assoc'n Report*, 1957, pp. 39-51.

¹¹ *The True Witness*, June 22, 1860.

¹² *The True Witness*, March 28, 1862.

Usually such groups were purely local in character and organization, and their purpose largely social and benevolent; and in this role they often served a real need among the poor Irish immigrants. But their very existence afforded the opportunity for agitation under the banner of Irish nationalism, and encouraged schemes for united action of whatever kind might be advocated by hot-eyed and silver-tongued organizers. Ideas advocating revolutionary activity by the immigrant Irish of North America were not rare at the time, and they found a natural sounding board in the Irish societies. Whether such a scheme had any reasonable chance of success seems to have been considered only minimally by its supporters.

The most active Irish nationalist revolutionary group in America was the Fenian Brotherhood, organized by a body of expatriate Irish in New York in 1857,¹³ and its policies affected to a greater or less degree many other Irish groups. During the American Civil War, this society, which had previously confined itself to gaining American support for Irish independence and to masterminding grandiose preparations for an uprising in Ireland, decided to take advantage of the strong Northern resentment of British sympathy for the Confederate States and organize a direct attack on British power by an invasion of Canada. While the Fenian movement itself was never numerically strong, what made its openly-avowed warlike ambitions alarming to Canada was the type of negative support shown it by the U.S. Federal authorities. Themselves more than a little occupied in the task of winning the Civil War, the Union government made little effort to limit the unlawful assemblies of American Fenians openly training for their much publicized invasion of the British colony to the north, or even to express an opposition to a scheme which in effect projected the invasion of a friendly country from American soil by armed American private citizens, illegally bearing arms and having no status other than that of an armed mob.

During the 1860's it was not surprising to see the Irish national movements in Canada become progressively more extreme and tainted with Fenianism. One such Irish nationalist society was the Hibernian Benevolent Society, which had been established in Toronto in 1859. This society replaced the St. Patrick's Society of Toronto, which dissolved that year under the dissension produced by the decision of its executive not to hold the regular March 17th parade, and attendant difficulties over support of and opposition to the policies of Thomas d'Arcy McGee. The avowed purpose of the Hibernians was charitable and protective, and on several occasions they did function as private guards and police against feared attack on Catholic persons and property.

In 1862, however, with the birth in New York of the violently nationalist Irish journal, the *Phoenix*, the Hibernian Benevolent Society came to be influenced by this paper's views. And when the shortlived *Phoenix* ceased publication a few months after it began, the Hibernians in Toronto decided to start their own paper. The *Irish Canadian* began publication in Toronto early in 1863 as an organ of Irish interests at home and abroad, and by the following year was regularly publishing material, considered by many to be highly seditious, in favour of an appeal to

¹³ Cf. C. P. STACEY, "Fenianism and the Rise of National Feeling at the Time of Confederation," in *Canadian Historical Review*, XII (1931), pp. 238-61.

physical force for the liberation of Ireland. Meanwhile, on March 17, 1863, Michael Murphy, president of the Hibernians, made a highly impassioned anti-British speech in Toronto, which he repeated in even stronger terms in 1864. Bishop Lynch, becoming alarmed at the identification of upper Canadian Catholicism with Irish nationalism, publicly repudiated these speeches on both occasions. A third speech by Murphy in November 1864 resulted in a minor riot in Toronto between Irish nationalist and Orange factions, and a renewal of anti-Catholic feeling in the city.¹⁴

Although it enjoyed a measure of tacit ecclesiastical approval in the diocese of Toronto, the Hibernian Benevolent Society from the beginning of its existence was proscribed by Bishop Farrell in the diocese of Hamilton. The Hibernians had been accused of Fenian sympathies in Toronto as early as 1862, although the charge was denied by many prominent Toronto Irish who were members of the organization.¹⁵ It was doubtless because of this suspicion, however, that they were unwelcome in Farrell's diocese even earlier. While Farrell was not antipathetic to Irish societies motivated by social and benevolent aims, he was strongly opposed to any political undercurrents in them. The activities of the Hibernian Society ultimately foundered on the opposition shown it by the Bishop of Hamilton.

In the summer of 1865, the Hibernians of Toronto scheduled a picnic excursion from that city to Niagara Falls, with a stopover in Hamilton to embark any Hamilton and area Irish who wished to join the party. On being informed of the proposed junket and the plan to solicit Hamilton Irish participation, Farrell took the occasion, on the Sunday preceding the picnic, to denounce the Hibernian Benevolent Society from his pulpit in Hamilton, and expressly forbid any members of his diocese to take part in the Society's excursion. The Bishop's ban was almost completely effective, to the annoyance of the organizers of the outing. And when the excursion train returned the few Hamilton participants to their home city and stopped there briefly, the president of the Hibernians delivered himself of some unflattering remarks on Bishop Farrell's prohibition:

... Mr. Murphy again alluded to the difficulties and embarrassments which had to be encountered by those who had taken part in the pleasures of the day – many of whom had come a distance of forty and fifty miles, while not a few were warned that, should they participate in the pleasures of the day, the displeasure of those high in ecclesiastical authority would be visited on their devoted head. Such interference in matters perfectly innocent and perfectly temporal, he (Mr. Murphy) was happy to say did not obtain in the diocese of Toronto; and be these Saxonized threats uttered by a Catholic Bishop or renegade and traitor, they would be sure ultimately to share the fate lately accorded to their twin sisters in Dublin. The Irish were always true and grateful, and never would they forget those who had loved Ireland and suffered for her wrongs. But though our race were faithful and grateful they also could treasure up a wrong; and he who basely deserts the old cause in its most trying necessity seldom fails to receive at their

¹⁴ A highly unfavourable account of the development of the Hibernian Benevolent Society in Toronto is found in *The Canadian Freeman*, Aug. 17, 1862.

¹⁵ Cf. Northgraves to Lynch, March 4, 1865, *Lynch Papers*, *Arch. Tor.*

hands the treatment bestowed on the Judases and Coulas of the past and present times ...¹⁶

The effects of Mr. Murphy's rhetorical fervour were not long in being felt by his organization. Bishop Lynch wrote an immediate apology to Farrell, and included a formal denunciation and ban on the Hibernians in the diocese of Toronto. Lynch also suggested that his letter be published in the local press, a suggestion to which Farrell agreed; the letter was printed first in the *Hamilton Spectator*, and later in other papers.¹⁷ Farrell expressed to Lynch the hope that such action taken immediately would in a few weeks make an end of the trouble.¹⁸

At about the same time, subsequent to the excursion incident and prior to Lynch's letter to Farrell, the Bishop of Hamilton had issued a pastoral letter publishing the recent papal encyclical on Modernism and the accompanying Syllabus of Errors. Commenting on the contents of the Syllabus, Farrell pointedly referred to its condemnation of secret societies, and specified the papal document as applying to organizations "such as certain societies which imprudent and irreligious men seek to introduce into this country, under the garb of love of Ireland and zeal for the House of God ... We deem it our sacred duty to warn all confessors not to administer the sacraments to members of societies calling themselves Fenians or Hibernians of Canada, but to treat them *as ipso facto* excommunicated..."¹⁹

Farrell's opposition to Fenianism, which he condemned explicitly in this 1865 pastoral, continued to be as strong as it was unequivocal. The following year, when the threat of a Fenian invasion of Canada from the United States was at its height, he spoke out strongly again:

Bishop Farrell of Hamilton, on Sunday, addressed his people in the Roman Catholic cathedral, on the subject of Fenianism, in a very decided and patriotic manner. The *Spectator* reported him to have spoken as follows: In the course of his remarks he made allusion to the fact, that the leaders of that treasonable organization styled Fenians, were not Roman Catholics, neither were any of their members, because they were discarded by the Church. He said further that it was the duty of all true members of the Church to support the British army in doing its duty in case of aggression. "The British constitution protects our interests, and we are bound to protect it"..."²⁰

A final brief item deserving mention regarding Bishop Farrell's position in the political life of his day is his attitude on Canadian confederation. The Bishop, in fact, had left Canada in the spring of 1867 in order to be in Rome for the

¹⁶ *The Canadian Freeman*, Aug. 3, 1865.

¹⁷ *The True Witness*, Aug. 15, 1865; cf. Lynch to Farrell, Aug. 5, 1865, *Lynch Papers*, Arch. Tor.

¹⁸ Farrell to Lynch, Aug. 15, 1865, *Lynch Papers*, Arch. Tor.

¹⁹ *The True Witness*, Sept. 1, 1865.

²⁰ *The Hamilton Spectator*, reprinted in *The True Witness*, March 23, 1866; cf. *The Canadian Freeman*, March 15, 1866.

celebration of the eighteenth centenary of the martyrdom of Sts. Peter and Paul, and was thus out of the country when confederation became a fact. Nevertheless, on his return from Europe, he expressed himself on this subject in a fashion bound to please not only the supporters of the confederation principle, but also those who favoured the contemporary alignment of political forces:

As many persons seem to wish to ascertain my views and sentiments with regard to our new government of Canada, and the course to be followed at the approaching election, allow me to state specifically for the information of those of my own diocese, that I most heartily endorse the views and advices already given by most of the Catholic Bishops during my late absence, especially those of your own good Bishop (Lynch – *ed.*), and which have already been made public through your columns. With them, I consider that the Confederation now being an established fact sanctioned by the Imperial Government, our duty as good Catholics and loyal subjects, is to receive it without any factious opposition. Let us rather endeavour to strengthen the hands of those to whose wisdom the destinies of this country are for the time being confided. If there ever was a time when the prejudice of party should be forgotten, it appears to be the present, when all should unite hand and heart for the completing of the work which has been so well commenced, and thereby rendering Canada a happy home for all classes of its present population and a most desirable haven of peace for the thousands of emigrants who year after year leave the ports of Europe to better their condition.²¹

The union government of Sir John A. Macdonald was completely successful in the first general election in the new dominion, held in early September, 1867. And the *Canadian Freeman*, which had obviously been pleased with the opportunity to publish Farrell's views as given above, took the opportunity of congratulating the Catholics of Canada, especially the Irish Catholics of Ontario, for having done their duty in the disastrous defeat of George Brown.²²

By way of conclusion to these rather loosely ordered remarks on the personality and actions of Bishop Farrell as they related to the political life of his day, perhaps one can do no better than quote from his obituary in the *Montreal Gazette*, reprinted in the *Montreal True Witness* of October 3, 1873:

A Good Man gone: The intelligence which comes from Hamilton of the death of Bishop Farrell will carry sorrow into many a Catholic home, where the late Prelate was known and esteemed. Few men have succeeded in acquiring so large and general a share of public respect. True to his church – an earnest and simpleminded Roman Catholic gentleman – his constant aim was to spread the spirit of peace and goodwill among all sections of the Christian community ... He was an Irishman, heart and soul, a lover of the dear old Emerald Isle, and an earnest sympathizer with every movement for its advantage. But he held in loathing and contempt the agitators who trade upon Irish patriotism and Irish generosity, and hence American Fenianism had in him an uncompromising foe.

²¹ *The Canadian Freeman*, Aug. 15, 1867.

²² *The Canadian Freeman*, Sept. 19, 1867

The death of such a man is a public calamity, and as the solemn requiem is chanted over his bier everyone who knew him will feel that in his death Canada has lost one of the most faithful and useful of her adopted sons.²³

²³ *The Montreal Gazette*, reprinted in *The True Witness*, Oct. 3, 1873.