

On Getting the Sack: Bishop Alexander Macdonald's Departure from Victoria

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The story of the premature departure of Bishop Alexander MacDonald (1858-1941) from the Bishop's seat in Victoria in 1923 is an intriguing one. For the present the narrative will remain incomplete until the documents currently in Roman archives become more available to scholars. However, important elements of the story have already been pieced together particularly V.J. McNally.¹

This paper addresses some of the issues raised in McNally's account, particularly his contention that the Bishop's ineptitude in administration combined with his failure to consult was the sole reason for his premature dismissal from his office. Several other possible explanations for his dismissal will be suggested, each of which will need further investigation. I will precede the discussion of these issues by some reflections on the general situation faced by the Bishop when he was appointed to Victoria, involving as it did a move from the Atlantic to the west coast of Canada.

A striking problem was the one of loneliness. MacDonald came from a Celtic background, having been steeped from birth in the Celtic language, which was his mother tongue until he reached school age. Throughout his life he retained a lively interest in his first language, often turning to it in his correspondence. His loneliness was not only for the language and the people of the east, but it also for the landscape of the east:

From natal soil forced far to roam

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How keen and poignant is the smart
The very tendrils of the heart
Are twined about the things of home.²

This theme of loneliness surfaces frequently in the recollections of those who heard of the reasons for his early retirement. Several religious from the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Anne, who ran the St. Anne's School for Girls, recalled that the Bishop was very lonesome when he came to Victoria.³ One member of the congregation remembered being told in connection with the Bishop's resignation that "he wanted to go back east."⁴

The new Bishop of Victoria, although a widely-published author on theological themes as well as on popular piety, literary criticism and travel, was ill-prepared for the situation that faced him when he arrived in Victoria in May 1909. His nineteen years as a professor and Vice-Rector at St. Francis Xavier University, along with his several years in parish work at St. Andrew's Parish in the Diocese of Antigonish, made up the experience that he brought west. His life in the east was framed within a Roman Catholic environment; he had very little occasion to interact with Christians of other denominations. By comparison, the Diocese of Victoria represented a diaspora situation for the Roman cleric. He was to spend his years as Bishop in what has been described as an "unecumenical age."⁵

Against this background it is interesting to note that subsequent commentaries on the Bishop's tenure in Victoria have signalled his contribution towards understanding between Catholics and other Christians. Sr. Patrick S.S.A. recalled that he was particularly friendly with non-Catholics, and that he had "a spirit to break down prejudice."⁶ The Bishop is said to have intervened at one point to marry the daughter of a prominent non-Catholic. The parish priest had refused to officiate at a mixed marriage, so "the bishop went to the Doctor's house and married them."⁷ An interesting recollection is contained in a letter to the *Victoria Times* in 1965, where a certain W.G. Wilson recalls comments made by Bishop MacDonald when he attended a reception at the First United Church in Victoria on the occasion of Rev. Wilson's induction. The Bishop ". . . spoke at length and amongst other things said that no doubt many people would be surprised to learn that he had spoken in a Protestant church, but he had long believed that the divisions should be between Christians and non-Christians and not between Christians and Christians."

According to Rev. Wilson this remark was picked up by the *Toronto*

Globe “then considered the most influential paper in Canada” in a lead editorial; it “had many and varied repercussions, and may have sown some seeds which have been very slow in germinating.”⁸

The range of the Bishop’s interests beyond the narrow confines of his Catholic diocese was noted after his death in 1941. *The Daily Colonist* described him in an editorial as a “kindly personality and perhaps the most erudite who ever occupied the Episcopal See of Victoria and spread his benign influence over so many who heard him so often.” It goes on to describe the late Bishop as a person whose interests were “catholic in a wide interpretation of that word, for he concerned himself with many matters dealing with human welfare.”⁹

The material situation of the Church of Victoria was stable at the beginning of MacDonald’s tenure. McNally notes that “the Cathedral, the only financially viable parish in the Diocese, had a mortgage of \$40,000 when MacDonald resigned in 1923, although it had been clear of debt when MacDonald arrived in 1909.”¹⁰ McNally details the sequence of events that brought the diocese of Victoria to the brink of bankruptcy and led to the removal of the Bishop from his See. There are many fascinating details in this narrative: the most damning of the judgments issued against the bishop is that he was an incompetent administrator whose attempts to address the money problems of his diocese led him ever deeper into financial straits. He did not keep records of his transactions, left some of his bills unpaid and failed to seek and follow the counsel of those who might have been of assistance.¹¹

On the question of seeking financial advice, it is interesting that on several occasions throughout those years, the Bishop maintains that he did seek advice. He says this of his decision to purchase two properties in 1912. It was the intention that these properties would be used to relocate the Cathedral and the school to sites outside of the more valuable lands then occupied by the church in the City of Victoria. In a letter drafted in response to a Roman Congregation, he outlines that he did this on the strength of advice and certain faculties granted him by the Sacred Congregation.¹²

In 1912, when the plans to have the Christian Brothers come to Victoria to open a Boys’ School were being developed, an appeal for funds for the School met with some objections. Some thought that the Diocese should sell some property. MacDonald replied that, “. . . we are advised the time is not yet opportune.”¹³

It is instructive to note that although many of MacDonald's difficulties are traced to the unfortunate dealings in real estate, it was precisely such a course of action that was suggested to churches in 1911 at a Royal Provincial Tax Commission. Two of the commissioners thought that St. Andrew's Cathedral should be moved from its prominent downtown site, because this property was subject to a heavy tax burden. Although MacDonald objected at the time,¹⁴ he mortgaged church properties in order to acquire alternate sites for the Cathedral and the Boys' School in less heavily taxed areas.

The recollections of two individuals confirm, on the one hand, that the Bishop was seeking advice and, on the other hand, that he was a victim of that advice. Mrs. Marie Lillie, who was confirmed by the Bishop in 1916, had a very negative view of some of the advisers of the Bishop. "They unloaded a lot of property on Bishop MacDonald, the property on Burdett and Quadra, where Mount St. Mary's now stands." According to Mrs. Lillie, her father, who was a convert to catholicism, was very upset that prominent Catholic business people would lead the Bishop with such faulty advice.¹⁵ Jim Cumerford, who was the Bishop's altar server and whose aunt was housekeeper in the Bishop's residence, was more blunt in his assessment: his recollection was that "[the Bishop] was a sucker for real estate agents."¹⁶

The coming of the war and the decline in property values, combined with the rising property taxes on the Cathedral Church and declining numbers of Catholics in the diocese of Victoria, turned the mortgage he had negotiated into a crushing burden which he tried by a variety of means to pay out. He took a teaching position for a term in Washington, using his stipend to address diocesan debts. He used the proceeds of his writing for the same purpose. He went on begging tours in eastern Canada and the United States, especially in Toronto, New York and Boston, where he could count on a network of friends for support.¹⁷ As well, he dabbled in the stock market.

With respect to the Bishop's financial dealings, although he might be defended against the charge of being "a major land speculator" in a period of "speculation fever,"¹⁸ it is more difficult to defend his venture into the stock market. He defends his action as follows:

I am told that fault has been found with me for taking \$2,000 out the Cemetery Fund and investing it, \$1,000 in Carbondale Coal and

\$1,000 in Safety Signal, *for the Diocese* [emphasis his]. This is my answer. Our situation was financially desperate, hence the ill-starred and perhaps ill-advised venture in stocks. It is easy to be wise after the event.¹⁹

In spite of what seems to be a very hard lesson in the vagaries of the market, especially in the volatile sector of mining stocks, we find the Bishop back “in the market” again in 1922. In a letter to Archbishop MacNeil of Toronto, he expresses his “shame” at his “inability to return the money we owe or even pay interest on it,” and expresses full awareness that MacNeil’s generosity had put him “into difficulties . . . through charity to others.” In the next paragraph he describes his newest investment in a coal mine bought through his Victory Bonds and proceeds from his books. He seems to boast, “I was among the first to buy, and so became what is known as a ‘promoter.’”²⁰

Having failed to address the financial problems of the diocese through begging, borrowing, investing and, according to some, speculating in real estate, the Bishop found himself involved in a series of court proceedings with the City of Victoria that ended on 1 August 1921 with the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London finding in favour of the Bishop on the question of taxation of church lands.

In an account of the impending hearing before the Privy Council, the *Victoria Times* referred to it as the “famous suit”, which was considered the most important which the city fought for many years.²¹ The victory in the lawsuit was an important one for Roman Catholics and for other churches as well, but the Bishop was left to bear the financial burden on his own. According to the Bishop, “. . . the lawsuit was won by me single-handed, every penny of the money paid to lawyers and courts, in all \$15,950. having been personally begged by myself.”²²

Although the other major churches in Victoria stood to gain by the litigation pursued by MacDonald, they failed to share in the expenses involved. McNally offers the explanation that their refusal to help with the burden of the court victory stemmed from the general disapproval of the Bishop’s activity as “an incompetent land speculator.”²³

By 1923 MacDonald was no longer the Bishop of Victoria. After being summoned to Rome, he was faced with the choice of resigning or staying on in Rome to fight charges that he considered frivolous.²⁴ The exact circumstances of the resignation and the reasons remain unclear to

this day. At the time, the event was shrouded in silence by those who feared that publication of the reasons would lead to scandal within the Roman church.²⁵ It is significant that the July 1923 issue of *The Orphan's Friend* states that the resignation of the Bishop had been mentioned as a possibility. It addresses the reasons for the resignation in a tentative manner: "the immediate cause of it is not known as yet, but financial troubles and perhaps others of personal nature, no doubt led to it."²⁶

As documentation becomes more accessible, alternative explanations for the dismissal of the Bishop of Victoria will need to be researched. According to Sister Patrick S.S.A. the issue was the Bishop's views on marriage: "It was on marriage. He was called to Rome. There were things, which according to St. Thomas were grounds for annulment. The Bishop was for a widening of the grounds for annulment."²⁷ The same source said that the bishop had views on medical ethics which were at odds with the moral theology of the church, but which he maintained were in line with the thinking of Thomas Aquinas.²⁸ Another view was expressed by a cleric of the Victoria diocese, in whose parental home the Bishop was a regular guest. According to him, it was the Bishop's delaying of his quinquennial visit to Rome that got him into trouble.²⁹

As a preliminary conclusion we can agree with Vincent McNally that the financial problems in which the Bishop became involved were a major cause of his eventual dismissal. A satisfactory evaluation of the circumstances surrounding the Bishop's dismissal should be forthcoming with greater access to the documents in Rome, which will hopefully reveal both his accusers and the charges against him.

Bishop MacDonald, as Titular Bishop of Hebron, lived out his years at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, with regular visits to help out Archbishop MacNeil in Toronto. He died in 1943.

Endnotes

1. "Fighting City Hall: the church tax exemption battle between the city and the diocese of Victoria, 1896-1923," *Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society* 34, 2 (October 1992): 149-172.
2. Unpublished poem "Home, Sweet Home," in the Alexander MacDonald papers (hereafter AMDP) in the Beaton Institute Archives (hereafter BIA) at the University College of Cape Breton. MacDonald often turned his hand to poetry to express his longing for the east, particularly at Christmas time. In

1909 he wrote "Sounds of another Sea":

Breaks upon mine ear
The sound of another sea,
Linking far with near
Though far how near to me! (AMDP)

3. Sister Patrick S.S.A., interview by Charles MacDonald, 25 August 1982, Victoria.
4. "This is what we were told," Sr. Henley, S.S.A., interview by Charles MacDonald, 24 August 1982, Victoria.
5. "In that unecumenical age, no doubt some churches would have been happy to see the demise of Catholicism on Vancouver Island" (McNally, "Fighting City Hall," 163).
6. Interview by Charles MacDonald, 25 August 1982, Victoria.
7. The bride was Kitty Fraser, daughter of Dr. Fraser, who married Charlie Castle. This incident was recalled by Sr. Patrick S.S.A., interview by Charles MacDonald, 25 August 1982.
8. *Victoria Times*, 3 June 1965.
9. *The Daily Colonist*, 25 February 1941. At his death the then Bishop of Victoria, Most Rev. John C. Cody, underscored the contribution he made to the churches of British Columbia: "In British Columbian history his place is unique and honourable for he earned the undying gratitude of the Christians by his brilliant struggle to lift the burden of taxation from their churches, defraying, despite his own slender resources, the entire cost of the litigation . . ." (*The Daily Colonist*, 25 February 1941).
10. McNally, "Fighting City Hall," 163. In this respect the starting situation of MacDonald seems to have been considerably better than that of fellow Nova Scotian, Archbishop Neil MacNeil, who came to the Archdiocese of Vancouver in 1910. "He knew no one in Vancouver, and no one knew him. He had neither a church of his own, nor a house, nor the means of building either" (*The British Columbia Orphan's Friend*, Historical Number, 1847-1914, 156 [hereafter BCOF]).
11. McNally, "Fighting City Hall," 164-165.
12. The draft letter, dated 10 November 1920, is incomplete. For the most part it is written in Latin (BIA).

13. BCOF IX, 10 (October 1912).
14. McNally, "Fighting City Hall," 152-153.
15. Interview by Charles MacDonald, 25 August 1982, Victoria.
16. "The real estate people talked the Bishop into buying the Burdett property" (interview by Charles MacDonald, 24 August 1982).
17. Examples of the appeals that the Bishop made to potential benefactors are his "Statement" of 18 July 1918, addressed to the churches of eastern Canada, in which he recounts the development of the financial crisis in Victoria from its beginnings in 1911. An accounting of some of his other money-raising activities is found in a "Personal Statement," a collection of fragments relating to the financial problems of Victoria, especially with respect to the Bishop's own stewardship of the funds (BIA).
18. McNally, "Fighting City Hall," 158.
19. "Personal Statement," 15 September 1922. On 22 June 1935 he adds the following: "P.S. the money was safely buried. Carbondale and Safety Signal proved to be worthless stocks because the Great War combined with Single Tax killed things financially in the West."
20. BIA. MacDonald to Archbishop Neil MacNeil, 2 May 1922. The balance of the letter reads like a prospectus: "The coal is of excellent quality, and costs very little to mine. They anticipate large dividends next year, and even the last three months of this year, when the mine will be going full blast. The workmen, who are already engaged, are under contract to keep away from labour unions and to take some stock in the mine, which is an excellent feature. I am not without hopes that Providence will enable me to pay my debt out of the interest I have in this mine."
21. Victoria Times, 3 June 1921.
22. "Personal Statement," 2 (BIA).
23. McNally, "Fighting City Hall," 165.
24. MacDonald to Archbishop MacNeil, 1 July 1923 (BIA).
25. Father Anselm B. Wood in a letter to Archbishop MacNeil on 10 July 1923 reports the view of Monsignor LeTerme, who had been appointed Administrator after Bishop MacDonald's resignation. The concern is that Bishop MacDonald has stated his intention to return to Victoria to clear up some personal matters. This created some anxiety in Victoria, which Wood stated as follows: "If he were to return it would be impossible to keep the reasons

of his resignation secret, as we have managed to do up till now” (BIA).

26. BCOF XX, 7 (July 1923): 9.

27. Interview by Charles MacDonald, 25 August 1982.

28. Interview by Charles MacDonald, 25 August 1982.

29. Interview by Charles MacDonald, 24 August 1982.

