GOD'S EXILES : A THEOLOGY FOR IMMIGRANTS

by David E. Weale

On a cold and blustry day in February, 1867, a cortage of about 350 sleighs made its way solemnly towards the cemetery at Orwell, Prince Edward Island in what was probably the largest funeral procession ever assembled in the Colony up until that time. The host of mourners had gathered to pay a final homage to the Reverend Donald McDonald, a Church of Scotland minister who had become something of a legend in his own time. McDonald had arrived on the Island in 1826, and shortly thereafter had begun a unique ministry which resulted in the formation of a large religious group which came to be known locally as "the McDonaldites". For a period of almost forty years McDonald was the vital centre of the movement which bore his name, and during that entire period his followers never knew any other minister. By the time of his death in 1867 this fellowship included approximately 5,000 adherants in more than a dozen congregations, and the stocky figure of McDonald had become a familiar sight in scores of communities across the Island. It was a career without parallel in the ecclesiastical history of British North America.

The life of this outstanding churchman, a native of Perthshire, and a graduate of St. Andrews University, may be regarded as a story of two parts. During the first period McDonald lived, studied and worked--apparently with little distinction--in his native Scotland; but then, in 1824, at the age of forty-two, he made a fresh beginning by emigrating to Cape Breton. During his years as a missionary-minister in the remote parts of the Highlands, living what must often have been a very lonely life, McDonald was alleged to have acquired the habit of "tarrying at the inn".[1] Indeed, there seems little doubt that his

relationship with the bottle and glass eventually interfered with his work and reputation as a minister, and that these circumstances were at least partially responsible for his emigration to British North America. Whether or not, as one source indicates,[2] he was actually dismissed, or whether, according to another,[3] he departed of his own free will and received an honourable discharge, is impossible to determine. Whichever the case might have been, by the end of 1824 he had taken up residence in Cape Breton and had begun a ministry at Malagawatch in the Loch Bras d'Or area among the Scottish settlers who had moved into that vicinity during the previous decades.

Unfortunately, McDonald's behaviour in Cape Breton did little to allay the stories and suspicions regarding his past delinquencies. While there is no record of his work at Malagawatch, an oral tradition has it that his intemperance remained a problem, and that his bouts of heavy drinking were a scandal to the Presbyterians in that area. McDonald's habit of drinking with the Roman Catholic Scots from the Isle of Barra who lived nearby was especially irksome to his own people.[4]

After two years McDonald removed himself to Prince Edward Island--a rather dubious haven for a man with a drinking problem--and the evidence suggests that by this point in time his personal life, as well as his career as a minister, were both in a shambles. As this forlorn individual set sail across the Strait for the Island the prospects for his future must have seemed rather dim, and it must have appeared highly unlikely to those who knew of his going--or even to McDonald himself--that very soon there was to be a dramatic and momentous change in his life.

After his arrival on the Island McDonald attempted an itinerant ministry among the members of the Scottish Kirk who had settled in the Colony, but he was unable to give his complete attention to his task. He was a troubled man, and the principal cause of his distress seems to have been a deep concern over the state of his own spiritual condition. According to Murdock Lamont, an earlier biographer, McDonald's anxiety in this regard had become so severe by early 1828 that he had discontinued preaching.[5] A person who knew him at the time recalled:

> While staying at my father's house he often followed us to the wood-field where we worked in the spring of '28. We would in curiousity watch him, sitting on a hillock reading his Bible, acting as if the reading of it caused him trouble, then with a perplexed look, retiring out of sight.[6]

Finally, after much affliction and despair, McDonald did find the relief he so fervently sought. He was staying at the home of one of his parishoners when he was released from this spiritual captivity. "One day", he related, "being at my wits end I retired to my bedroom and there fell on my knees but I had no utterance in prayer, my head seemed as dry as a piece of cork. But thanks be to God I was relieved. My bonds were burst asunder. My soul was brought out of prison. Old things were passed away and all things were become new".[7]

Along with the overwhelming sense of joy and peace he experienced, and the personal assurance of salvation and election, there was also associated with McDonald's conversion a compelling sense of having been commissioned by God for a special task. Two days after his conversion he was lying awake in bed in the morning when he heard a voice uttering loudly and distinctly, "The time is come!"[8] At first he was alarmed and

troubled by the pronouncement, apparently believing that it signified that his end was near. Later, however, he looked back on this incident as the divine announcement of the beginning of his new work. Following this McDonald's preaching and ministry quickly became more efficacious. Having so recently experienced both the depths of despair and the elation of salvation, he now proclaimed the gospel as a man who knew whereof he spoke.

Word of McDonald's conversion and of his impassioned eloquence soon spread, and by 1829 a great revival was in progress. In 1830 a Baptist lay preacher, Sam McCully, visited the Island and related that there was "extraordinary excitement" among many of the followers of McDonald, especially among those who spoke the Gaelic language. He reported:

> This man [McDonald] professes to have recently experienced a change of heart and now preaches in a very alarming manner. Great numbers attend his preaching; and the effects produced on many are unusual. They are seized with convulsive effects, and their bodies and limbs are distorted in a wonderful manner.[9]

These physical manifestations of piety which became a routinized part of McDonald's ministry were referred to as "the works".

It is impossible to estimate with any precision how many persons came under McDonald's influence during this frontier-revival, but as the word spread from one community to the next a climate of anticipation was created and soon wherever he preached--whether in a schoolhouse, a kitchen, a barn, or in the open air--large expectant crowds gathered to hear him. By 1830 approximately 300 persons had experienced "the works",[10] and it is likely that several hundred more might have been

affected in this way before the revival ended. And since those who actually experienced a spectacular conversion experience were only a small percentage of those who attended the meetings, it is probably safe to estimate that several thousand persons were influenced by the revival. The population of the entire Island at the time was approximately 30,000.

For the most part the revival took place in the central part of the Island and was confined almost exclusively to those communities which had been recently settled--or were just then in the process of being settled--by Gaelic-speaking Highlanders. Though time does not permit a careful examination of the socio-economic condition of McDonald's converts, it is evident that as recent immigrants to the Island they were all in the midst of the difficult and traumatic experience of adapting to their new environment. Having been uprooted so recently from their homeland they were in a very real sense refugees or exiles, and were involved in the arduous process of attempting to make some sense of their new, and in many ways baffling, situation. Moreover, like most of the settlers on Prince Edward Island, McDonald's followers were tenants on land owned by absentee landlords, a fact which might well have exacerbated their sense of hardship and oppression.

As a result of the revival the touch of God, and a feeling of great assurance, had been wondrously experienced in many lives, but as the ecstasy subsided McDonald was confronted with the necessity of providing both an organization and a theology which would secure his many new followers within a stable ongoing fellowship. It was an enormous challenge, but McDonald proved equal to it. Like John Wesley, he was

as effective an administrator as he was a revivalist. He carefully organized his followers into congregations and then hand-picked a number of elders in each community who were to provide leadership during the long periods of his absence. Then, in a manner which manifested a great sensitivity to the peculiar needs of his followers as immigrants, he fashioned a comprehensive 'theology of exile' which enabled them to comprehend their situation within the broader framework of God's inviolable plan for the world. This 'theology of exile', as well as the other principal ingredients of McDonald's thought are to be found in his three published works: A Treatise on the Holy Ordinance of Baptism (Charlottetown, 1845), The Subjects of the Millennium (Charlottetown, 1849), and the Plan of Salvation (Charlottetown, 1874), as well as in several published versions of his hymns.

Central to McDonald's thought was his notion of the "plan". This concept was elaborated in a variety of ways, but essentially it was a deterministic view of life which stressed that throughout history the events of the world must always take place in strict accordance with, in McDonald's own words, "the beautiful order and harmony of the divine procedure".[11] The purpose of this grand design was, in McDonald's view, the eventual salvation of God's chosen people.

There is, of course, nothing very novel about this belief. Few Christians and no Calvinists would disagree with it. It was, however, in the identifying of these chosen people that McDonald became more original and inventive in his theology. He announced to his followers that according to the clear testimony of Scripture and the signs of the time they were among the actual descendants of the 'ten lost tribes' of

Israel. They were, he informed them, a part of that large band of refugees who had been scattered among the nations in the eighth century B.C., and who soon would be gathered in and reunited as the covenant people of Jehovah.

This ten-tribes idea, or "Anglo Israelism" as it is frequently termed, was not original with McDonald but was borrowed and adapted by him. The genesis of the theory is unknown, though the notion that the British people have Israelitish origins goes back at least as far as the popular Foxe's Book of Martyrs, compiled in the 16th century. The modern movement can be traced to Richard Brothers, a lay preacher, who claimed personal descent from King David. Prior to his death in 1824 Brothers published several works on the topic and attracted a number of ardent disciples. In his book, The Making of the English Working Class, historian E.P. Thompson notes sardonically that during the early 19th century " . . . the lost tribes of Israel were discovered in Birmingham and Wapping, and 'evidence' was found that 'the British Empire is the peculiar possession of Messiah, and his promised naval dominion.'"[12] Thompson also noted that Anglo-Israelism was quite common among the followers of Johnanna Southcott who were active in the early 1800s, and that one group of her followers was actually known as the "Christian Israelites".[13] While it is impossible to determine where McDonald picked up this teaching, or when exactly he began to disseminate it on Prince Edward Island, the evidence suggests that the events of the revival, particularly the spectacular spiritual exercises, were an important catalyst in the development of his own peculiar brand of the tribes theology.

According to McDonald the lost Hebrews had been widely dispersed throughout the world and had been "blended together with the idolatrous nations."[14] He maintained, further, that this blending of the tribes among the heathen was so complete that it was impossible to identify them as a "visible, recognizable people, or class, or caste of people".[15] In other words, McDonald was not, strictly speaking, a believer in Anglo-Israelism, inasmuch as he did not identify the ten lost tribes with the Anglo-Saxons--or with any particular part of the British race. He did believe, however, that there were certain definite signs by which the true Israel might be discerned, and in his mind "the works" fell into that category. McDonald believed that these unusual demonstrations of the work of the Holy Spirit were evidence of God's vivification of his chosen people prior to the arrival of the blessed millennium.

An interesting allusion to this particular aspect of McDonald's theology appeared in a satirical poem which was printed in the Charlottetown Examiner in 1861. The writer of the poem, clearly no believer in the tribal theory, placed the following words in McDonald's mouth:

> I'm one of the missing ten tribes, mon,
> Who now in great numbers are found:
> They're known by a violent jerk mon,
> Which thrills from their top to the ground.
>
> Having proved myself one of the nation,
> Which God from the ancients did choose,
> I'm perfectly sure of salvation,
> Tho' I take an occasional boose.[16]

The "violent jerk" was obviously a reference to these "works" which were experienced by so many of McDonald's followers during the great revival, and which continued to be a feature of his ministry in succeeding years.

One of McDonald's favourite scripture passages was the striking description of the valley of the dry bones in the thirty-seventh chapter of Ezekiel. He believed that these dry bones, which the prophet depicted graphically as shaking and coming back to life, were an image of the ten lost tribes,[17] and that the "ingathering" of the ten tribes would, therefore, be " . . . distinguished by extraordinary, supernatural, and special dealings, and manifestations of divine favour and acceptance".[18]

Being such an important part of his thinking, it is not surprising that the doctrine of the lost tribes found its way into many of McDonald's hymns. One of them was entitled, "The Gathering of the Twelve Tribes", and included verses such as the following:

> Lift up, ye tribes, your heads on high,
> Redemption now is drawing nigh,
> Messiah comes, sing loud with glee,--
> Your scattered tribes shall gathered be.[19]

When McDonald's followers assembled for worship and joined together in the singing of this and other similar hymns, they apparently believed sincerely that they were a part of those tribes of whom they were singing and were doubtless greatly uplifted and reassured by the sense of election which was implied.

The willingness of the McDonaldites to assume this new identity

reveals a great deal about the feelings and self-image which they possessed. Because of their experience as immigrants and new settlers they had a profound sense of being a scattered and uprooted people, and were thus able to empathize readily with the plight of the outcast tribes. Moreover, the various ways in which McDonald and his followers conceptualized and articulated the saga of the ten lost tribes is very revealing, for in so doing they were projecting something of their own feelings and longings onto them. The very words and images which they chose must be regarded as important clues for discovering how the experience of emigration to the new world had affected them. In speaking and singing about the ten tribes they had discovered an appropriate means of expressing their own condition.

The attempt to relate this religious imagery to the everyday lives of the colonists is admittedly very slippery ground for the historian; and yet, viewed in this light the writings of McDonald and his hymn-composing elders would seem to indicate that in the period between the 1830s and 1860s there existed within the McDonaldite communities a lingering sense of exile and displacement.

In his hymn, "The Fall of Jerusalem", elder George Bears stated forcibly this feeling of estrangement:

> They are bow'd down and fallen, the ancient and honour'd;
> All, all have been into captivity led,
> Forsaken in exile, long, long do they wander,
> Forsaken as they that go down to the dead.[20]

The same despondent note was sounded in another of Bears' hymns, "The Call to the Supper":

Lovingly he calls his sheep,
To awaken them out of sleep,
See them on the mountains leap,
And by the running streams;
Long have they wander'd in exile and captivity,
The Shepherd is seeking the purchase of his pain
The Bridegroom is coming, etc.[21]

Another of the elders, Ewan Lamont, likewise explored the them of exile in his verse. His hymn, "On Zion", celebrated the imminent return of the city of beauty, the New Jerusalem, and proclaimed how those who were living in "woeful exile" would soon be gathered in:

From every land His hand them gathers,
Where all were scattered and peeled
Acknowledged of Jesus, free and happy;
Beneath his banner and shield.
The powers are quelled that held them captive,
Dispelled are darkness and gloom;
Tho' scattered afar, His call they answer,
They all, with gladness, come home.[22]

These passages, and scores of others like them, indicate that for many years McDonald's followers experienced a kind of provisional existence, without developing a very great feeling for Prince Edward Island as home--or as the centre of their lives. Rather, for some time they felt themselves to be, in Bears' phrase, a "long severed family",[23] or, as Ewan Lamont put it, "weary pilgrims so-journing".[24]

In adopting this ideology of the lost tribes, and in viewing themselves as the scattered sheep of Israel, McDonald and his people were able, first of all, to salvage a definite and meaningful sense of self-identification. They were able to transcent the confusion and anonymity of life in the colonies by believing that they were, in Lamont's words, "the good seed that were scattered".[25] Although they had wandered far

they were able to believe that they had retained their membership in God's special flock and, in Bears' words, there was considerable consolation in the knowledge that, "He [God] knows and names them all".[26]

Moreover, by identifying with the exiles McDonald's followers were able, not only to explain their distress in a meaningful and therapeutic fashion, but also to appropriate a sense of purposefulness and destiny in their lives. The imagery they employed conveyed the idea that they were only temporarily lost, and that soon they would be rescued from their dilemma. They were thus able to accept stalwartly their distressed position, and, at the same time, to regard it as a positive condition. As McDonald had taught them:

> . . . they [the Elect] are, even in their desolate condition among the nations, still in remembrance with their God, and therefore . . . they are still the covenanted people of God, and heirs according to the promise . . . He will come down and deliver them, as in the days of old, when their sighs and their cries, by reason of the hard bondage of Egyptian servitude, ascended to His ears, and he came down and delivered them.[27]

Thus, even in their scattered and uncertain condition, McDonald's people were able to possess the assurance that they were "still beloved as the seed of the blessed of the Lord".[28] Their sense of exile was thereby construed ingeniously as an important and eminently meaningful phase in their lives. It became possible for them--not only to endure their "Egyptian servitude"--but actually to rejoice in it, for surely the day of vindication and deliverence was near at hand!

As the years passed the settlers gradually became more comfortably established in the new land and their sense of exile gradually diminished

By the time of McDonald's death in 1867 a new generation of Island-born McDonaldites had arrived which was much less inclined to view itself as a dispersed remnant. But in the hymns which they still sang, and in the talk of the old people, there were many reminders of a time when it had meant something very special to be one of God's chosen people.

References

[1]Murdock Lamont, Rev. Donald McDonald Glimpses of his Life and Times (Charlottetown, 1902), p. 17.

[2]Donald MacLeod, Memoir of Norman MacLeod (Toronto, 1876) p. 157.

[3]Lamont, op. cit., p. 19.

[4]The person who provided this information, a resident of the area under discussion, wishes to remain anonymous. Perhaps only those who have themselves been raised in a rural area or small town can appreciate this reluctance to speak of matters affecting family and neighbours, though they occurred one hundred and fifty years ago.

[5]Lamont, op. cit., p. 34.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Ibid., pp. 37-8.

[8]Ibid., pp. 38-9.

[9]Cited in I. E. Bill, History of the Baptists (St. John, 1880), p. 665.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Donald McDonald, A Treatise on the Holy Ordinance of Baptism (Charlottetown, 1845), p. 84.

[12]E. P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (Middlesex, 1968), p. 420.

[13]Ibid., p. 879.

[14]Donald McDonald, The Subjects of the Millennium (Charlottetown, 1849), p. 104.

[15]Ibid., pp. 121-22.

[16]The Charlottetown Examiner, August 5, 1861.

[17]Donald McDonald, The Subjects of the Millennium, pp. 263-64.

[18]Ibid., p. 124.

[19]Donald McDonald and His Elders, Hymns for Practice (Charlottetown, 1910), p. 13.

[20]Donald McDonald and George Bears, Hymns for Practice (Charlottetown, 1880), p. 153.

[21]Donald McDonald and His Elders, Hymns for Practice, p. 209.

[22]Ibid., p. 149.

[23]Ibid., p. 210.

[24]Ibid., p. 143.

[25]Ibid., p. 266.

[26]Ibid., p. 185.

[27]Donald McDonald, Subjects of the Millennium, pp. 174-75.

[28]Donald McDonald, A Treatise on Baptism, p. 94.