

John Bethune
- by Rev. James MacKenzie

For he was a good man, and full
of the Holy Ghost and of faith;
and much people was added unto
the Lord : Acts 11:24

This could surely be said
of John Bethune, Ontario's pion-
eer Presbyterian preacher. He
was born on the misty Isle of
Skye in 1751, and raised in the
Parish of Sleat under the minis-
try of John MacPherson, of whom
it is rightly written, "He was
distinguished above all his
contemporaries in the Highlands as a
Happy the lad with such a pastor, and
a lad! John MacPherson and his son,
looked upon Bethune almost as a son and
him into the Kingdom and service of God
the importance of learning and truth,
their example and continue his education



REV. JOHN BETHUNE.

He returned home from his studies to find the people of Skye
planning almost en-masse to leave their lovely island and settle in
North Carolina. Their chief and his yes-men had lost all touch with
their people, and couldn't care less. Their clansmen had become to
them but a source of revenue, and for this they had raised their
rents until rent exceeded income. With callous indifference the
poor were starved-out; forced to leave their homes, and the homes
of their fathers for generations beyond memory, and set sail for
new homes in a new land. "The best of the inhabitants (of Skye),"
wrote the celebrated Flora MacDonald on the twelfth of August,
1772, "are making ready to follow their friends to America while
they have anything to bring there; and among the rest we are to go,
especially as we cannot promise ourselves but poverty and oppress-
ion. We have hardly what will pay our creditors, which we are to
let them have and begin the world anew in a othere corner of it."

In May of 1771 it was reported that "two-thousand emigrants
are preparing for their departure from the Island of Skye . . .
they are all of the estate of Sir Alexander MacDonald (of Sleat)
who may chance to be a proprietor without tenants."

Nor was it only the unskilled and poor who were planning to
leave the island. Among the two-thousand were "a parochial
preacher" and a "thoroughbred surgeon." The parochial preacher
was John Bethune.

This group requested a grant of forty-thousand acres on which
to establish a colony, but the powers-that-were turned them down
because they considered it unwise to encourage the emigration of
"persons of substance and ability." Nevertheless, they were all
in North Carolina by 1774.

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John Bethune came over as early as 1773 as a licentiate of the Church of Scotland. Here, on McLendon's Creek in what is now Moore County, he settled with his mother, Christian, and his maternal grandparents, Donald Campbell of Scalpay, and Donald's wife, Katherine. Three decades earlier, old Donald had saved the Bonnie Prince from capture; but now he was a man of eighty summers, and the burden of support thus fell upon the shoulders of his young grandson.

Only a few short years remained before the outbreak of the American War of Independence, but John Bethune spent them ministering to the Highland Scots all around him in their native Gaelic tongue, and he organized the present-day Mount Carmel Presbyterian Church near Ellerbe. The good people of this congregation still honor the memory of their first pastor.

A letter he had written to a friend on the mainland just prior to his departure came to the attention of the Gaelic bard of Kintail, John MacRae (Iain MacMurchaidh), who was inspired by news of the good hunting and fishing to be found in the New World to write a song, "Thainig litir bho Iain Peutan" (There came a letter from John Bethune) :

There came a letter from John Bethune
Which has given joy to one who has not seen it.
A few of my country people about to depart to a land
of plenty,
Where we can find every kind of the most delightful
hunting that could be seen,

We shall find deer, buck and doe,
With permission to take as many as we want . . .
We shall get salmon and whitefish,
And gray fish if it will please us better . . .

Let us go and charter a ship.
Let us depart, all of us,
For small is my esteem for a man of no courage.

This song persuaded an entire shipload of MacRaes, with a few MacKenzies thrown in for luck, to come over and fish for salmon in McLendon's Creek. Some of these remained in North Carolina, and their descendants still occupy the land on which they settled. Others, United Empire Loyalists, later took up land in Glengarry, and their descendants still live there. The MacRaes who live in these two places are cousins, and share a common heritage.

Early in 1776, North Carolina Highlanders loyal to the King formed a regiment and started out for the coast "to join Governor Martin to get Arms and to Act under him until we had the opportunity of joining the Army at Boston." John Bethune went along as their Chaplain. Alas, they never made it! They were intercepted at Moore's Creek by Americans who got there first, set up a defensive position on the opposite side of the stream, removed the planks from the bridge, and greased the two log beams that remained. Bethune and other officers were taken prisoner, and sent to Philadelphia for confinement.

Fortunately, their imprisonment was not of long duration. October 17, 1776, the Continental Congress "resolved that prisoners from North Carolina be permitted to return to their families if the Convention of that State shall be of the opinion they may do so without danger to that or any of the United States, and in the meantime that bedding, blankets and other necessaries be furnished the gaoler by Mr. Mease."

To this the prisoners added their own plea and promise, in a letter to the North Carolina Convention dated two weeks later, October 31, 1776 :

Gentlemen; After a long separation of eight months from our Families and Friends, We the undersubscribers, Prisoners of War from North Carolina now in Philadelphia Prison, think ourselves Justifiable at this period in applying to your Honours for permission to return to our Families, which indulgence we will promise on the Faith and Honour of Gentlemen not to abuse, by interfering in the present disputes, or aiding or assisting your Enemies by word, writing, or action.

This request we have already laid before Congress who are willing to grant it providing they have your approbation.

Hoping therefore that you have no particular intention to distress us more than others you have treated with Indulgence, we flatter ourselves that your determinations will prove no obstruction to our Enlargement on the above terms; and we have transmitted to you the enclosed Copy of the Resolve of Congress in our favor, which if you countenance; it will meet with the warmest acknowledgements of Gent.

Your most obedt. & humble servts (sixteen names, including that of John Bethune),

This letter was accompanied by another, from William Hooper, North Carolina Delegate to the Continental Congress, who wrote in part, "their confinement, tho' accompanied with every circumstance of humanity which the publick security will admit of must however as the Winter advances become more irksome from a scarcity of cloathing an inconvenience which at this time it will be most difficult to beare."

Upon his release, Bethune made his way to Halifax, Nova Scotia, where he was made Chaplain to the First Batallion of The Royal Highland Emigrants, a unit made up primarily of Gaelic speaking Highlanders who had settled in that area. November 23, 1778, because he was "in some distress for want of money," and in order to "ease his difficulties," he was appointed Chaplain to the entire Regiment by Captain Alexander MacDonald, who described him as "a young man of very good character tho' a presbyterian."

During his years in Nove Scotia he met, and married on September 30, 1782, Veronica Wadden, a native of Switzerland, and daughter of a professor at the University of Geneva.

After the Peace, the Bethunes took up residence in Montreal, along with other United Empire Loyalists. "A man of noble countenance, dignified presence, and engaging manners, as well as of a chivalrous spirit, he soon attracted to himself his fellow countrymen resident in Montreal and vicinity. As a loyalist who had suffered for his king and his native land, he exercised great influence among the British portion of the citizens of all creeds." These rallied to him as their leader, and he drew them together to form the first Presbyterian congregation in the city, the St. Gabriel Street Church. Here he preached from March 12, 1786 until May 6, 1787, when he and his family moved to Upper Canada.

While he was in Montreal, about 1784 or 1785, his mother, Christian Bethune, passed away down in Moore County, North Carolina. Her minister son had not seen her since that day so long before he had marched away to war.

Lack of support is given as one reason for the Bethunes leaving Montreal. More basic to their decision was the lure of land, which was being granted to United Empire Loyalists in appreciation for their services during the War. As a Chaplain, ranking with a Captain, John was entitled to three-thousand acres. They settled at Williamstown, Glengarry County, and Bethune began his ministry to the Highlanders there, thus becoming the pioneer Presbyterian preacher in what is now Ontario. A faithful and zealous evangelist and pastor, he soon organized churches, not only at Williamstown, but also at Martintown, Summerstown, Cornwall and Lancaster.

Although for many years he suffered from a cough which "showed a weakness of the lungs," and which may have been brought on by his extended stay in Philadelphia, John Bethune was an untiring servant of his Lord and his people. On a gray mare famed in story, he rode many miles east to Coteau in Lower Canada, west to Cornwall, and crossed the St. Lawrence River in summer by boat and in winter on the ice to Dundee, Quebec. When he was at home on a Sunday the church bell was rung at eight o'clock, and again at ten and eleven, to remind his neighbors that it was the Sabbath Day. This custom is still observed at Williamstown.

The Bethunes never became encumbered much with this world's wealth, having had little more to live on than his half pay as a retired chaplain. Still, they managed to raise and launch a large family of six stalwart sons and three fine daughters, of whom any parents could be proud.

Like the others, that first "meeting house" at Williamstown was a plain, unpretentious log building, sans flying buttresses, grinning gargoyles and lofty steeple. Could you see it today, you would say, "But it just doesn't look like a church!" There was no organ or piano there, for the good people inside did not believe in using instrumental music in the worship of God. There were no hymnbooks. They didn't believe in hymns either. They sang only the Psalms of David,

which had long since been rendered in verse form and set to music. There was no carpet down the center aisle, if there was a center aisle, and no upholstered pulpit furniture. Neither were there pews as such, but only rough hewn planks resting on cedar blocks. But the Spirit and love of God were there, and this was enough for them.

During the week the building was used as a school.

It was Bethune who introduced to Ontario the Scottish custom of using Communion tokens. These were coins distributed by the Session to members deemed "worthy" to be served the Sacrament, and used as tickets of admission to the Lord's Supper Service. One of the old Bethune tokens dating back to 1794 may still be seen in the collection of the United Theological College in Montreal.

On one occasion a dispute arose between pastor and people, and it was decided to submit the matter to Bishop Alexander MacDonnell, their respected Roman Catholic neighbor at nearby St. Raphael's. After hearing both sides the good man ruled as he probably intended to all along, in favor of his Protestant counterpart, and lectured the Presbyterian congregation on the duty of respect and obedience in the Lord they owed to their ecclesiastical superior. Fortunately, the members of the congregation were good sports. They received the admonition with becoming humility, and the breach was healed.

'Lord Selkirk stopped by at the manse Sunday, January 22, 1804. In his diary he describes Bethune as "a worthy character by all accounts - & of so much influence with the people that his Son in law, Wilkinson, tho' English, is expected to be a candidate for the county."

The patriotic concerns of his youth returned to occupy John Bethune again at the other end of his life. He and Bishop MacDonnell were with Red George MacDonnell when he crossed the ice to capture Ogdensburg, New York during the War of 1812. Again, his name is second on the list of the loyal addresses presented to Lt. General Sir Gordon Drummond, President of the Province of Upper Canada on the twenty-first of December, 1814. Only the name of Bishop MacDonnell preceded his.

Up until the very end of his long and useful career; Bethune managed to stay busy in the business of his Lord. A letter from him to Mr. James Reid of St. Amand, Lower Canada, dated at Williamstown, 20th April, 1814, deals with the problems of raising funds to pay for "the meeting house at McMartin's Mills." This letter was in response to a letter from Reid, to whom the money was owed, and who had written requesting payment. Bethune assured him that his letter was "without loss of time laid before the Trustees; and on your account, as well as on that of the congregation, I am happy to inform you that the money is now in a fair way of being speedily paid."

Another letter, dated at Williamstown, September 16, 1815 reveals his declining health and his continuing concern for

his people :

To the members of the Presbyterian Congregation at Williamstown, and of the other congregations connected with them in Glengarry -

To my dear Friends and Brethren: -

My state of health is so precarious, and I am so advanced in life, that I cannot reasonably promise to myself many more days, let the event of my present indisposition be ever so favourable.

For several years past I have had many anxious thoughts about the destitute state in which you must be left when it should please God to call me away, but I forebore saying anything on the subject, under the impression that my declining years and growing infirmities would necessarily point out to yourselves the propriety of engaging a Minister, who might, in the first instance, be an assistant and do such parts of the duty as were above my strength, and who, to diminish as much as possible his expense to the congregation, might extend his service further than the present limits, and finally succeed to the whole charge.

But in this expectation I have been disappointed. There is to this hour no more thought of providing a Minister than there was twenty years ago, and there is as great an apathy respecting this essential measure as if it were certain I should outlive the whole congregation. In this state of things I consider it a duty I owe you to lift up my feeble voice in this manner, and warn you of the pernicious consequences to yourselves, and your families, of your lukewarmness in this serious business. After my decease you will have recourse to a priest of the Church of Rome to baptize your children, nay, some will have marriage solemnized by him, though at the expense of changing their religion, rather than be disappointed or be at the trouble of employing the English Clergyman at Cornwall.

In this state of destitution, the Catholic Church will make a plentiful harvest from amongst you. You cannot be ignorant of the arts and circumventions of that church on all occasions to make Proselytes. You must therefore be sensible that their arts will be exerted to the utmost, when such favorable circumstances as I have mentioned combine to give them effect.

All things considered, I do not blame the zeal of the communion. Did I believe that all religious denominations except my own shall finally be doomed, I would strain every nerve to rescue as many unfortunate wretches as I could, out of the fire, and place them in safety within the sacred sanctuary of my own church. This Tenet of excluding all except her own members from the happiness of a future life, by which she expects to bully others into her communion, is the most presumptuous and unchristian of all the religious principles of the Church of Rome.

People might venerate or worship images; they might pray for the interest of saints and angels with the great Redeemer of the world; take bread and wine for flesh and blood; and give a passport of oil and holy water to the departing, without exciting more than pity of other denominations; but when they presume to

hold the keys of Hell and Heaven, and to debar us from the eternal favor and mercy of God, because we do not practise the same absurdities, and believe the same contradictions, it rouses our indignation; and never can there be love and friendship in any civil society, so long as this detestable Tenet is believed by a great number of its members.

As you value your present and future happiness, avoid the snares of this arrogant communion, who, believing themselves the exclusive favorites of Heaven, must of course think themselves a superior order of Beings on earth. Love them personally, and do them all those good and kind offices which Christianity commands, and the state of society requires, but flee from their principles as from the fang of serpents. They administer a sweet poison to the soul; by holding out a cure for every vice and a pardon for every crime. To avoid the delusions of this communion there is no effectual measure under Providence, except having a Pastor to watch the fold who will not only prevent the Flock from straying, but do away with the pretence of employing a priest to baptise and marry.

Add to this the moral and religious instructions which will not only be kept alive among you, but inculcated with stronger effect and more permanent benefit the longer it is continued, and the keeping up the observance of every other ordinance to which you have been accustomed, and you must anticipate a vacancy of any length as a gloomy, uncomfortable period, irksome to your minds and dangerous to your morals. Bestir yourselves, therefore, to take measures of precaution, and let not a miserable parsimony persuade you to shrink back from the attainment of an object so essential to your well-being, in that state where money has neither value nor currency. You must allow that the blessings of Providence have prospered your industry, and that events calamitous to many others have been beneficial to you. No excuse can therefore be sustained from want of means. The only real want there can be is the want of will. In every community of any extent some will be poor and distressed, without any apparent faults of their own. Among you the number of such persons is small, and if it were greater, the more wealthy must, in every public business, fill up the deficiency, for under all good governments and salutary institutions the rich always pay for the poor, and they have reason to bless God that they are able to do it. Speaking of poverty, I would call to your attention a circumstance which in future arrangement must be considered.

In the congregation at Williamstown, all its members are charged a like to make up the Minister's salary, without regard to any difference of circumstances or ability to pay; the consequence is that some distressed people cannot gratify their own wishes, and the Minister loses the amount, there being no provision made for supplying the loss.

Casualties of fire and other calamities which call for public assistance affect the Minister's income in the same manner. You will say that in such cases the Minister is under the same obligation with other men to assist the unfortunate. True; but this donation, like that of every other person, ought to be voluntary; it should be just what he thinks proper; which in sinking so much of

his salary is not the case, and after a year or two he must allow the same deduction, the sufferer is not sensible perhaps that he has received anything from him unless something be given over and above, to relieve the present necessity.

In making provision for a Minister, you are not to forget that he will have no half pay, but I think it probable that the Provincial salary will be continued to him. From what I have observed of the danger of a long vacancy, I hope you will see the necessity of early exertion in so important a matter as I have been urging on your consideration. The article which many of you have signed and were better if you all had signed, points out distinctly what sort of character your Clergyman is expected to be. All that is necessary to add on that part of the subject is that a young and single man is most suitable, and that he may receive ordination from the Presbytery of Montreal, if not previously ordained at home, which is not probable.

In taking measures for procuring such a person, the other members of the Presbytery of Montreal, being low country gentlemen, can be of no further assistance than giving the sanction of their authority to such of your proceedings as may require the same. But there are private gentlemen in Lower Canada who are acquainted with Clergymen in Ross and Inverness-shire, and will gladly give you every assistance in their power, if you apply to them. But I must repeat that without timely and vigorous exertion on your part the matter will languish away in useless talk, a fault very common in all your public transactions. The cause of this absurdity is that in your public meetings no rules of order are ever laid down. Every person, therefore, speaks when he pleases, and a number of mouths are open at once, each striving to vociferate over the other for attention. Let this disgraceful practice be laid aside. Appoint a president and vice-president at your meetings, to observe order, and particularly to allow only one person to speak at a time, and then something will be done. In a very weak state of body I have thus given you my best advice, and imperfect as it is, I trust you will listen to it. Whether it shall be the last I shall be able to give is best known to Him who holds our destiny. It is given in the spirit of true sincerity, and of the purest regard for your everlasting interest. And that the God of all goodness and wisdom may guide and strengthen you, in conduction with effect and despatch, what so nearly affects your welfare, and finally receive you into the arms of His everlasting love, is the sincere prayer, my dear friends and brethren of your

Affectionate and faithful servant,

John Bethune

John Bethune understood his congregation, and he made very certain that they understood him!

Just a week later, September 23, 1815, he went to be with his Lord, Whom he had loved and served so long and so well, and the Montreal Gazette memorialized him as "a man remarkable for the agreeableness of his manners, but in no time deficient in that spirit which is requisite for the support of a Christian and a gentleman. He understood what was due to 'the powers that be,' without losing sight of the respect which was due to himself. He has left a widow and numerous family, but the place they hold in society will show that as a husband and father he must be remembered among those who have done their duty well."

Bethune kept complete records of births, baptisms, and weddings. While in Glengarry he baptized some 2,379 persons. During his entire ministry he baptized 2,576, some of these being Negro slaves. This is an almost unbelievable average of more than one each week!

Alas, there seems to be no record of his ordination, if, indeed, he ever was formally ordained. According to Scottish records, he emigrated as a licentiate. There is no record he was ordained while in Carolina, and it would have been impossible for him to have been ordained at that time in Nova Scotia or Quebec. Neither was there a presbytery in Ontario until many years after he settled there - years in which he kept busy organizing churches, and baptizing and marrying people all over the place. Never mind, presbytery or no presbytery, he was chosen and ordained of God, and this is of first importance.

He is buried in the churchyard at Williamstown. But he, being dead, yet speaketh. In later years a monument to his memory was erected by his six sons, Angus, Norman, John, James, Alexander and Donald. On one side they had inscribed, "Sacred to the memory of the Rev. Jno. Bethune, Pastor of the congregation of the Kirk of Scotland in Glengarry. He departed this life at Williamstown on the 23rd of September, 1815, in the 66th year of his life and the 44th of his ministry."

On the opposite side we read :

"That he was a faithful steward, the peace and happiness of his flock are the most certain proof.

That he was eminently endeared by those conciliating endearing qualities which united society in the closest bonds of unanimity and friendship, his numerous congregation, who shed the tribute of unfeigned sorrow over his grave, have borne the most honorable testimony.

That he was open, generous and sincere, those who participated in his friendship can afford the most satisfactory evidence.

That he was a kind and affectionate husband, a tender and indulgent parent, the love and unanimity of his numerous family furnish the most undeniable proof."

Source Materials :

The Archives of Ontario
77 Grenville Street, Queen's Park
Toronto, M7A 1G7, Ontario, Canada

Special thanks to Mr.
Hugh MacMillan in the
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North Carolina Department of Archives and History
Raleigh, North Carolina

Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae, by Hew Scott
Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh, 1928; Volume 7, pages 626-627

A History of the Scotch Presbyterian Church St. Gabriel Street,
Montreal; by Robert Campbell, M. A., pastor
Montreal, W. Drysdale and Sons, 1887.

I have placed a copy of this in N. C. Presbyterian Synod's Office
Another copy is at The Historical Foundation, Montreal
Contains a picture of Bethune.

Colonial Records of North Carolina
Published by the Department of Archives and History
Volume X, 600, 888-889
XI, 295

For John MacRae, see the article by the author of this sketch,
The Odyssey of John MacRae
State Magazine, Raleigh, N. C.
Volume 39, Number 13, December 1, 1971
Pages 8, 9, 10 and 32; contains list of references.

Colonists from Scotland :
Emigration to North America, 1707-1783
by Ian Charles Cargill Graham
Published for the American Historical Association
Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York 1956

Correspondence with some very gracious and helpful people in
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Mr. Keith McIntosh
Mrs. Edna MacMillan
Mrs. Elizabeth Blair (now of Toronto)

These dear people have gone out of their way to be of help,
copying page after page of historical material, sending me
clippings from time to time, and giving me additional leads.
Just about all the material about Bethune's Canadian ministry
in this paper comes from them, directly or indirectly. I only
wish I could repay them for all of their patience and encourage-
ment. Still, I feel that theirs was a labor of love, as is mine,
and the knowledge that this is being done to keep alive the
memory of John Bethune, God's choice servant, will be payment
enough.