

## Clan Donald Magazine No 12 (1991) Online

### Lieutenant-Colonel John MacDonell 1785 - 1812 By Emerson L. MacDonald

John MacDonell was born on the 19th of April, 1785 in Scotland and came to Canada with his family when he was seven years of age. They came to join relatives and friends who had settled in Glengarry County, that part of eastern Ontario named after their ancestral home in the Scottish Highlands. He was descended from Angus MacDonell of Greenfield, a grandson of Ranald, the 10th Chief of Glengarry, in Gaelic styled "Raonall MacDhomhaill Ghuirm". Angus MacDonell of Greenfield had one son named Alexander who brought his family to Canada in 1792. He was married to the daughter of Alasdair MacDonell of Aberchalder and the children of this marriage were Duncan, John (the subject of this article) and Donald. John did very well at school and in order to further his education he was sent to York (later called Toronto). He studied to become a lawyer and at the age of twenty-three he was called to the bar. He began to practice his new profession by opening a law office. An interest in politics earned him a seat in the legislature as the member for Glengarry and he was appointed attorney-general. He was a colonel of Militia and on the outbreak of the war in 1812 acted as military secretary and provincial aide-de-camp to General (later Sir) Isaac Brock. As attorney-general Lieutenant-Colonel John MacDonell filled the next highest civil position to Brock in Upper Canada and as military secretary and P.A.D.C. was next highest in importance, if not in rank to his Chief, in the field. At the time of his death he was engaged to be married to Miss Powell, daughter of the Chief Justice William Powell.

#### The Duel

Chief Justice William Powell had considerable influence and power and when he appointed MacDonell attorney-general he stated openly that "this gallant youth has been called to the high office of attorney-general at my special intercession with a view to relief from the doubtful characters sent from England." The appointment was made in November, 1811 and followed closely the announcement of MacDonell's engagement to marry the Chief Justice's daughter. When all of this became known a loud outcry of resentment by many of the town's leading lawyers was raised. In the spring assizes, one of the most prominent lawyers named William Warren Baldwin, of Spadina House which later gave its name to Spadina Avenue had a bitter exchange with MacDonell bringing to light the anger and envy felt regarding the appointment. MacDonell responded in such a way that Baldwin strongly objected to his remarks and considered himself insulted and offended. Baldwin demanded a public apology but MacDonell refused to apologize and Baldwin then challenged MacDonell to a duel, (which was the custom of the day). Friends of both men tried to calm and quell the situation without success. At 6 a.m. on the morning of April 3rd 1812 the two men met, with their seconds near Gibraltar Point on the Toronto Islands. After choosing the pistols and receiving instructions they stood back to back and on command proceeded to walk apart. On the second command they were to turn, take aim and fire. - however, MacDonell turned and stood facing Baldwin with both arms at his side. It is reported that MacDonell said that he had come to receive Baldwin's fire and was prepared to die but would not himself fire or shed blood over a senseless private quarrel. Hearing this, Baldwin, confused and somewhat chagrined aimed his pistol away from MacDonell and fired it high and wide in the air. This honorable way out without bloodshed was enough for Baldwin and he walked forward to shake MacDonell's hand. Thus ended a very tense moment, but not without lingering hard feelings over the incident.

#### The War

The United States of America declared war on Great Britain on the 18th June, 1812 at a time when Great Britain was at war with France and the united power of Europe under Napoleon. The President of the United States, James Madison's reason for declaring war was namely, that Britain exercised on the high seas the right to examine neutral vessels for deserters and contraband of war. Thinking it an opportune time for conquest he concentrated the invading forces on the Detroit, Niagara, St. Lawrence and Richelieu Rivers. The only regular force in Canada consisted of the 41st Regiment of Infantry and a few companies of veterans and artillery, about one thousand men above Montreal. There were some volunteer troops of cavalry, the York Militia and a party of Indian Warriors. General Brock proclaimed martial law and on 6th August, 1812 he left for the war's first major engagement at Detroit accompanied by two aides-de-camp, Lieut.-Col. John MacDonell and Major J.B. Glegg. The Canadian Artillery bombarded the fort for three days until the American General Hull capitulated on the 16th of August. Because of the successful defeat of the Americans at Detroit, General Brock was appointed to become a Knight of The Bath and MacDonell was to receive a special medal struck in his honor. Neither man lived long enough to receive these honors while still alive.

#### The Battle

The second major engagement of the war occurred on the 13th October, 1812 when the invading forces crossed the Niagara River landing at Queenston, by means of thirteen boats. General Brock, who was at nearby Fort George with his Aide-de-camp, Lieut.-Col. John MacDonell was informed of the enemy landing and immediately mounted and rode unattended to join the detachment of about 90 soldiers defending the heights at the scene of the action. General Brock was followed by MacDonell with two flank companies of York Militia volunteers. When MacDonell arrived on the scene General Brock lay mortally wounded having received a

musket-ball in the breast. MacDonell led the charge up the hill against the enemy who had discovered a pathway up to the heights. He and Captain Williams fell wounded and the company fell back to await the arrival of reinforcements from Fort George commanded by General Sheaffe. Subsequently the enemy line was broken, some were driven over the precipice and 900 surrendered. It is reported that MacDonell was struck by a musket-ball and when he fell wounded was trampled into the ground by his horse. He suffered in pain another 24 hours and died the next day. The bodies of General Brock and MacDonell were later buried together at the site of the battle. An unknown author wrote these words of recognition: "The muse that gives her Brock to deathless fame Shall, in the wreath, entwine MacDonell's name."

### The Monument

After the war. in 1824 a tall, plain column. 135 feet high was erected at Queenston Heights over the graves of Brock and MacDonell. Their coffins had been placed side by side. Then. sixteen years later after the rebellion in Upper Canada in 1837 a follower of William Lyon Mackenzie named Benjamin Lett, an Irish rebel protested against the government by blowing-up the column with gunpowder on Good Friday. April 17th 1840. There was an enormous public outcry in disgust over this happening and it was resolved to build a new monument with funds provided by the militia veterans and Indian warriors of the Province. The new monument was formally dedicated on 13th October 1859. standing 190 feet in height from the ground to the top of the statue of General Brock surmounting the column.

Today, very few people know the name of that 7 year old boy who came from the Highlands of Scotland and was destined to make the supreme sacrifice in defence of Canada. There is no mention of him on the outside of the monument at Queenston. but when you visit ask to go inside and you will find a 9" x 20" brass plaque in a vault on the left hand side of the Tomb which reads:

"Beneath are deposited the mortal remains of Lieut. Colonel John MacDonell P.A. D.C. and Aide-de-camp to the lamented Major General Sir Isaac Brock. K.B. Who fell mortally wounded at the Battle of Queenston on the 13th October 1812 and died on the following day. His remains were removed and reinterred with due solemnity, on the 13th October 1853"

### Sources:

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Queenston : 1X12. b> Donald Jones. Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Vol. V. 1811 to 1820.

Niagara National Historic Parks Canada. - Mr B. Andres. General Works Manager.

# MacDonnell on the Heights

Composed by Stan Rogers | © Fogarty's Cove Music

Too thin the line that charged the Heights  
And scrambled in the clay  
Too thin the Eastern Township Scot  
Who showed them all the way  
And perhaps had you not fallen  
You might be what Brock became  
But not one in ten thousand knows your name

To say the name, MacDonnell  
It would bring no bugle call  
But the Redcoats stayed beside you  
When they saw the General fall  
Twas MacDonnell raised the banner then  
And set the Heights aflame  
But not one in ten thousand knows your name

You brought the field all standing  
With your courage and your luck  
But unknown to most, you're lying there  
Beside old General Brock  
So you know what it is to scale the Heights  
And fall just short of fame  
And have not one in ten thousand know your name

At Queenston now, the General on his tower stands alone  
And there's lichen on 'MacDonnell' carved upon that weathered stone  
In a corner of the monument to glory you could claim  
But not one in ten thousand knows your name