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# Crosscurrents of Colonial Presbyterianism

## *A Rival Presbytery in Nova Scotia*

When the Burgher Presbytery of Truro was formed in 1786 young James MacGregor attended its meeting but refused to join. He had come to Nova Scotia as an unsalaried missionary of the Anti-burgher Synod in response to a petition from Pictou township and for him the divisions that separated Presbyterians in Scotland seemed just as valid in this frontier colony. Time and experience would change MacGregor's opinions, and that experience arose from his life-long insistence on carrying the gospel message wherever people were in spiritual want. Over the years MacGregor made all Nova Scotia and, eventually, the whole Maritime region his parish.

Like any newcomer to Nova Scotia in that day, MacGregor was impressed by the natural beauty of his chosen field, but not by the primitive conditions in which its inhabitants lived. The road from Truro to Pictou was only a blazed trail through the forest, and he was shocked to discover that Pictou consisted of about forty huts scattered through the woods. "Nothing but necessity kept me there; For it I durst not think of encountering the dangerous road to Halifax again, and there was no vessel in Pictou to take me away and even had there been one, I had no money to pay my passage home."<sup>1</sup> MacGregor preached his first sermons, in English and Gaelic, in a barn, and immediately after the blessing the local doctor invited the men to the nearest grog shop. At his next station the audience had to be warned against the

sinfulness of their “singing and whistling, and laughing and bawling” as they approached the service. Although almost all these settlers possessed a Bible in English, some could not read. “There was no school in the place,” MacGregor reported, and “many of the Highlanders were perfectly indifferent about education....”<sup>22</sup>

English Bibles may have been common among the early Scottish settlers of Nova Scotia but Gaelic Bibles were not, and twenty years after his arrival in the Maritimes MacGregor noted that Bibles were still a rarity in neighbouring New Brunswick. When he learned in 1807 that the British and Foreign Bible Society was distributing Gaelic Bibles among the Highlanders of Scotland, MacGregor advised them of the crying need in the Maritimes. After noting the large number of Gaelic-speaking people in Nova Scotia, Cape Breton, and Prince Edward Island, most of whom could not understand English, he added, “*We have but three or four full copies of the Bible and a few odd volumes, yet we have plenty of Psalters, Catechisms, and some religious tracts.*”<sup>23</sup> His offer to act as an agent for the Society was readily accepted and five hundred Bibles and Testaments in Gaelic were allocated for Nova Scotia and Canada in the next year. MacGregor soon became more than a simple agent — about 1809 he organized an auxiliary of the Bible Society which in its first year raised £25 to purchase Bibles and an additional £50 as a free contribution to the general work of the parent Society. This local branch seems to have met only once — thereafter he acted as its secretary, treasurer, distributing agent, salesman and collector. In a word, James MacGregor was the local Bible Society!

All these energetic undertakings were still not the sum of MacGregor’s contribution to the British and Foreign Bible Society. The Society drew on his acknowledged ability as a Gaelic scholar to revise and correct its publications in that language. At the same time the praiseworthy efforts of the Society to send the Gospel to all the world could not escape the climate of denominational rivalry that pervaded colonial life. When Charles Inglis, first Anglican bishop of Nova Scotia, warned his flock to support only the work of his own church’s Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, MacGregor replied in a public address, “We ask — what real occasion does the circulation of the pure word of God....afford for differences of opinion, controversy, strife, or bitterness.”<sup>24</sup>

Despite discouragement and the fact that he worked the first fifteen months “without receiving a shilling,” MacGregor extended his “apostolic exertions” on foot (which, because of the holes, stumps and fallen trees on the trails, was faster travelling than by horse) along the whole north shore of Nova Scotia. In 1791 he undertook a six-week tour of Prince Edward Island where the spiritual destitution of the inhabitants moved him to plead their case with his synod. A



John Bethune

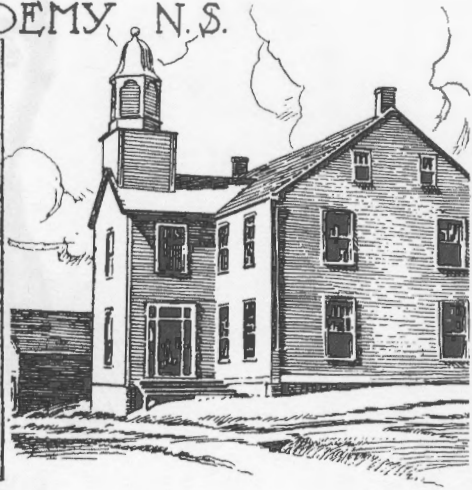


William Smart (young)



Alexander Spark

PICTOU ACADEMY N.S.



Thomas McCulloch

year later the Anti-burgher synod replied that it “could find no one willing” to go the colony. That same winter MacGregor made a forty-mile trek on snowshoes to visit the Presbyterians at Stewiacke. Weather, rude roads, and indifference were not his only difficulties — superstitious Highlanders complained to him about ghosts, fairies, and witches that took milk from their cows.

In 1794 MacGregor made another visit to Prince Edward Island, but his years of solitary labour were almost at an end. The following year the Anti-burgher synod sent John Brown and Duncan Ross to Nova Scotia. When the bewigged and stylishly dressed Ross jokingly asked if MacGregor’s holey coat betokened a beggerman, the pioneer missionary retorted, “When you are as long in the woods as I have been, you will have holes in your coat too.”<sup>55</sup> The three men formed themselves into the Associate Presbytery of Nova Scotia, more popularly called the Presbytery of Pictou. A few years later two more ministers arrived to work in Nova Scotia, but there was still no clergyman for New Brunswick, nor for Prince Edward Island that had petitioned for one in 1792.

Soon after the arrival of Ross and Brown, James MacGregor took time off to get married — apparently he had been too busy for courting since bride and groom met for the first time at their wedding. When some of his Highland flock complained that the ceremony had been performed by license without the reading of banns, MacGregor puckishly promised never to repeat the offence. Married bliss was not, however, allowed to interfere with his missionary travels. In 1799 he visited Cape Breton and Miramichi and having seen at first hand their need for ministers, he convinced the presbytery to address a forceful appeal for help to the General Associate Synod in Scotland. “The country in general peoples fast....Places that were not capable to maintain the gospel a few years ago, are now able; places that are not now able, will be soon.” Ten years earlier Amherst had asked the synod for help; seven years earlier the Presbyterians of Prince Edward Island had made a similar request; even before the presbytery had been formed, Cape Breton had requested a minister. “Surely it is not such a hardship for ministers to go to the nearest parts of America, not beyond our own dominions, to a civilized country, ... as it is to go on a long voyage (to the Pacific Ocean, for example) ...”<sup>56</sup>

The synod’s response was still slow and feeble. In 1802 Alexander Dick arrived as the fourth ministerial member of the presbytery. The following year Thomas McCulloch was designated for Prince Edward Island, but arriving late in the sailing season he was settled at Pictou instead. More petitions from remote parts still reached presbytery and in 1805 MacGregor answered one from New Brunswick by undertaking his longest journey to

date — a trip up the Saint John valley on horseback as far as Sheffield. Highlanders on the Nashwaak gave him £7 which he presented to a poor widow who had lost her only cow. Again in 1805 MacGregor returned to Prince Edward Island but before that year was out the Rev. Peter Gordon arrived to take up that long neglected charge. Although Gordon died just four years later two more ministers were recruited who more than filled the gap in the presbytery.

The Napoleonic wars and more especially the War of 1812 brought to the Maritime colonies unprecedented affluence, without the physical destruction by hostile forces that befell Upper Canada. Smuggling, the timber trade and the fisheries produced a new class of wealth that eroded many of the aristocratic tendencies that had characterized the post-Loyalist generation. The war was not, however, without its adverse effects on the region — immigration faltered and prosperity relaxed public and private morals in a way that deeply shocked men like MacGregor. Nevertheless, the physical progress of the colonies resulting from these war-time developments is reflected by two events in MacGregor's closing years. In 1822 he was presented with a carriage so that he could take advantage of the much improved roads of Nova Scotia. Three years later, after thirty-six years in his chosen field, his pastoral duties could be reduced to a single congregation because the supply of ministers was at last equal to the needs of the settlers.<sup>7</sup>

MacGregor's boundless missionary exertions for his church were matched in the educational field by the initiative and enthusiasm of his new colleague and neighbour, Thomas McCulloch, who had studied medicine, displayed an aptitude for Oriental languages and read constitutional law as a hobby. "Self-cultivation, not as a mere enjoyment, but as a duty, was a regulating principle in his life, and was enforced upon those who came under his influence as one of the great secrets of success."<sup>8</sup> Like his fellow clergymen in the colonies, McCulloch soon discovered that Nova Scotian Presbyterians, accustomed in Scotland to rely on state salaries for their ministers, were slow to pay their debts to colonial ministers. This fact may have been an additional spur to McCulloch's decision about 1804 to open a school in his home.

Before his first class met, however, McCulloch had become embroiled in a public controversy with Edmund Burke, future Roman Catholic bishop of Halifax. Robert Stanser, Anglican rector in Halifax, had attacked popery as part of his campaign against the incorporation of a college planned by Burke, and McCulloch rushed uninvited into the fray to defend Protestantism. His book, *Popery Condemned by Scripture and the Fathers*, appeared in 1808, and when Burke dared to respond in kind McCulloch added another weighty tome in 1810, *Popery Again Condemned*, which closed the controversy even

if it did not convert any Catholics. At least McCulloch's literary effusions had placed him in the public eye which gave considerable free publicity to his educational project. He had recognized soon after his arrival in Nova Scotia the retarded state of education and his small school, which soon acquired an enviable reputation for excellence, was the first step towards McCulloch's dream of a seminary to train a native ministry for the colonies.

The second step came in 1811 when a system of provincial grammar schools was created and McCulloch was made master of the one at Pictou; but the last stage in this progression towards a degree-granting institution and a theological seminary involved McCulloch, the presbytery, and indeed Maritime Presbyterianism generally, in a bitter religious and political controversy. King's College, founded in 1788 by Anglican Bishop Charles Inglis, had been expected to provide higher education to all Nova Scotians, yet the exclusivist Anglican regulations written into its charter in 1802 debarred eighty per cent of the population from its halls despite the public financial support that maintained the institution. McCulloch hoped to fill this need for nondenominational education by having his school at Pictou promoted to the status of a college. A group of friends had collected £1,000 over several years for this purpose and, encouraged by the Governor Sir John Sherbrooke, they applied to the provincial legislature for a charter in 1816. The Assembly raised no objections but the Anglican-dominated Council required that all trustees be either Presbyterians or Anglicans in hopes that the latter could prevent any damage to King's College. From this provision, accepted reluctantly by McCulloch as the price of getting a charter, stemmed serious difficulties in later years.<sup>9</sup>

### *Maritime Union and Scottish Challenge*

The chartering of Pictou Academy was a major reason behind the belated union of the Burgher and Anti-burgher presbyteries in the Maritimes. The older Presbytery of Truro had discussed with MacGregor, Brown, and Ross the possibility of forming a single ecclesiastical body soon after the arrival of the latter two ministers, but probably the attitude of MacGregor was decisive in preventing any union at that moment. Time, however, revealed the weakness of division in trying to cope with the problems of the church in an emerging colony. If the growth of the Anti-burgher Presbytery of Pictou had been lamentably slow, that of the Burgher presbytery was even slower. In MacGregor's opinion, the need for an academy such as McCulloch's to meet "the deficient supply of ministers from abroad" and the cost of such an undertaking "impressed upon the minds of any who might have hitherto held

back, the necessity of combined effort for its establishment and maintenance.” To a friend in Scotland, he explained, “We are here contemplating a union of all the Orthodox Presbyterian clergy in the Province, as the best plan for extending and perpetuating the church here, and especially a gospel ministry.”<sup>10</sup>

The initiative for union came from the Anti-burgher Presbytery of Pictou which by this time claimed almost half of all the Presbyterian ministers in the region. In its thirty years of life the Presbytery of Truro had barely recruited enough ministers to keep pace with its losses through death or retirement. Graham was now the only remaining original member among the six clergy on its roll. The Church of Scotland also had failed to expand significantly, largely because of a similar lack of concern on the part of the mother church in Scotland. Two years after Presbyterians at Shelburne had asked for a minister, the Kirk’s General Assembly expressed approval of the loyalty of the petitioners and encouraged them “to persevere in prosecuting their pious purpose” of building a church, but refused to send a minister.<sup>11</sup> By 1817 only four Presbyterian clergymen in the Maritimes, including the minister of St. Matthew’s, Halifax, could be identified with the Church of Scotland.

The basis of union was their common Presbyterianism, leaving the question of church-state relations which divided Presbyterians in Scotland, as matters of mutual forbearance.<sup>12</sup> Union arrangements were actually completed in 1815 but the arrival of new men from Scotland who would not at first respect “forbearance” delayed action for another two years. The new body, calling itself the Synod of Nova Scotia, had twenty-nine congregations in three presbyteries. Of the nineteen ministers, fourteen came from the older secession presbyteries, three from the Church of Scotland and two from English Congregationalist backgrounds. Comingo, now ninety-four years old, remained separated as did Archibald Gray at the insistence of his congregation of St. Matthew’s. Two more Church of Scotland men who arrived during the year of union — one in Nova Scotia, the other in New Brunswick — also remained aloof from the new Synod.

Despite these exceptions the achievement of union in the Maritimes was a bold and imaginative step that reflected the growing sense of self-awareness among Maritime Presbyterians. It reflected also the belated recognition that those divisions that had rent the church’s fabric at home had no relevance to conditions in British North America. In fact, the creation of the independent and indigenous Synod of Nova Scotia was followed by a reunion of Burghers and Anti-burghers in Ireland in 1818 and of the same groups in Scotland just two years later. It is perhaps assuming too much to suggest as some have done that the Presbyterians of the Old World had learned a lesson and imitated their brethren in the New, but these early unions did strike a chord that was to



become the *leit motif* of the Presbyterian experience during the next hundred years.

At the time of union the four colonies of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Cape Breton (which was reunited to Nova Scotia in 1820) contained some 160,000 inhabitants. One-quarter of these were Presbyterians, although the proportion in Nova Scotia was perhaps as high as one third. Newfoundland as yet had no Presbyterian congregation or minister, although a few Presbyterians were settled in St. John's.<sup>13</sup> As yet Presbyterianism in the Maritimes had received virtually no financial aid from the government — by contrast the smaller Anglican church had been generously supported with public funds and endowed with public lands as the recognized state religion even before Charles Inglis became bishop in 1787. Pictou Academy might envy the largesse bestowed on its Anglican rival, King's College, but the Academy's reputation for scholastic excellence was unchallenged. It was the only institution of higher learning open to all denominations and an early fruit of the Presbyterian union was the creation of an associated theological seminary in 1820 to train a much-needed native ministry.

The real threat of competition for the Academy came not from King's but from a new institution at Halifax, created with public funds by the governor, Lord Dalhousie, and named in his honour. At the laying of the cornerstone of Dalhousie College in 1820 its patron announced, "Its doors are open to all who profess the Christian religion. It is particularly intended for those who are excluded from Windsor (King's) College."<sup>14</sup> Both Pictou Academy and Dalhousie College were, however, headed for unexpected trouble. In 1818 Lord Dalhousie had supported the request of the Academy's trustees for aid from the Legislature but the £1,000 originally promised was reduced by half the following year without any explanation. The reason for this change of heart may have been that the governor, a prominent lay member of the Church of Scotland, had second thoughts about supporting secessionists. Significantly the only Presbyterian appointed to the Board of Dalhousie College was Archibald Gray, Church of Scotland minister to the independent-minded congregation of St. Matthew's — all the other members were known opponents of the Academy. Lord Dalhousie seemed to expect that his college would displace both King's and Pictou, but his alienation of the Synod of Nova Scotia resulted in a Presbyterian boycott of the institution at Halifax whose location was also distant from that geographical stronghold of Presbyterianism, the Pictou-Truro area. For lack of popular support, Dalhousie's college became a football for provincial politicians who managed to delay its actual opening until 1838.

Despite their numerical strength, Presbyterians, like dissenters from the

established Church of England, suffered certain disabilities in the Maritime colonies. King's College received £1750 annually from the public purse — Pictou Academy with twice as many students had no guarantee of receiving its small yearly grant. More galling because it touched every Presbyterian minister was the Anglican monopoly of performing marriages by licence. Some liberal-minded Anglican priests were willing to transfer licences to their Presbyterian brethren — a practice that was irregular if not illegal — but James MacGregor was threatened with a £100 fine for marrying a couple without publishing the banns. McCulloch led a long struggle for a law recognizing the rights of Presbyterians regarding marriages, only to have the statute disallowed by the Colonial Office on the grounds that licences were not used in Scotland and were “not favoured by the Church of England.”<sup>15</sup> This unsatisfactory situation continued in all the Maritime colonies until the wave of reform in the 1830s at last established the equality of all denominations before the law.

Except for this defeat regarding marriage rights, the early years of the Synod of Nova Scotia seemed to fulfill the high hopes of its founders. A Committee of Missions was given responsibility for raising funds and arranging ministerial tours of those areas “destitute of the ordinances of religion,” such as Cape Breton and New Brunswick. Pictou Academy was prospering, although the wearing of red gowns by students, after the fashion of Glasgow University, did not meet with universal approval.<sup>16</sup> The Academy's theological annex was producing much needed ministers despite the fact that classes were held only every other week; and within five years Synod had twenty-five ministers on its roll and a new presbytery of Prince Edward Island had been formed. On the whole the synod seemed to be well on its way to meeting its objective of uniting all Presbyterians in a single body for the promotion of Presbyterianism.

Because the vast majority of Presbyterians in the Maritimes had come from Scotland after the American Revolution, their church was characterized by ethnic exclusivism and remained untouched by such contemporary American Presbyterian influences as revivalism. The creation of a synod had done much to establish a sense of separate Presbyterian identity in the region, free from those quarrels which had split the church at home. These promising beginnings, however, were doomed to fade in the face of a new divisive force introduced from Scotland. A more militant and expansive spirit had begun to displace the long rule of the Moderates in the Kirk, and this was reflected in Nova Scotia by several confrontations between the tiny Church of Scotland group and the much larger Synod of Nova Scotia. In 1824 the Kirk challenged the right of the synod to ordain a minister in the East River Church whose use they shared. An attempt of the Kirk to stop the ordination by legal procedures aroused the

fighting spirit of antichurchstatism among old Anti-burghers. MacGregor advised the Kirk's lawyer to "Mind your own business and leave the affairs of the church alone."<sup>17</sup> The ordination service was actually disrupted by a handful of Kirkmen who marched out when their vocal protest was overridden by MacGregor.

Against this backdrop of increasing denominational bitterness the shadow of Lord Dalhousie, who in 1820 had been promoted to governor of the two Canadas, Upper and Lower, fell once more across Presbyterianism in the Maritimes in 1825. In that year he became patron of a new organization, the Glasgow Colonial Society, a missionary enterprise "for promoting the moral and religious interests of the Scottish settlers in British North America." Apparently the Kirk of Scotland was awakening at last to the religious needs of the colonists, but its interest in their welfare came after years of neglect had forced British North American Presbyterians to organize their own synods with little outside help or encouragement. Thomas McCulloch protested that the missionaries from the Church of Scotland "patronize the very places for which the gospel has been provided." Their field of operation "turns out to be the very headquarters of Presbyterianism, belonging to the Presbyterian Church of Nova Scotia."<sup>18</sup> Thus the laudable aims of the Glasgow Colonial Society became instead a new source of division among those who had worked and sacrificed so long to achieve unity in terms that suited the colonial environment.

### *Retarded Growth in the Two Canadas*

By the end of the eighteenth century Lower Canada's best agricultural regions were already occupied and, because the language, religion, civil law, and landholding system of the colony were foreign to the British experience, most new settlers moved on to the vacant lands and more familiar political and social climate of Upper Canada. The pattern of Presbyterianism in Lower Canada was already firmly fixed — like the province's English-speaking minority of which it was a part, Presbyterianism was confined to urban areas, namely the governmental centre at Quebec and the commercial metropolis of Montreal. If the congregations of Spark in Quebec and Young in Montreal showed little signs of numerical growth, they made up in respectability what they might lack in numbers. This was particularly true of the St. Gabriel Street Church which in the heyday of the fur trade must have been one of the wealthiest congregations of any denomination at any period in Canadian history.

After the sudden departure of Young from St. Gabriel Street in 1802 that pulpit was supplied temporarily by Robert Forrest, a minister of the Associate

Synod in Scotland recently arrived from the United States. Word that an appointment to the church would soon be made reached John Strachan, tutor to the children of Richard Cartwright at Kingston, through some of Cartwright's business associates in Montreal. Strachan had studied theology at St. Andrews before coming to Canada in 1799, but he had never been licensed to preach and, indeed, did not belong to any church. His application for the Montreal post was rejected in favour of James Somerville, member of the Relief Presbytery of Glasgow who, like Strachan, had come to Canada as a private teacher and now was recommended by Spark. Strachan subsequently took orders in the Church of England which offered an assured salary to its missionaries, and rose to become the first Anglican bishop of Toronto and one of the most influential figures in the religious, educational, and political life of Upper Canada.<sup>19</sup>

The choice of Somerville, however, to be minister of St. Gabriel Street split that congregation into two "national" wings. The "Scotch" party accepted him and retained the church after a struggle — the "American" party withdrew to form a new congregation with Forrest as their minister. When Forrest returned to the United States a year later, the dissenting congregation obtained a settled minister in Robert Easton, another Associate Synod member who had come to North America with Forrest. The members of the new congregation, sarcastically described by their opponents as "tradesmen and mechanics,"<sup>20</sup> proceeded to build their own church, with forty per cent of the money being raised in the United States. Despite this American support, the session declared itself to be "in connection with the Associate Reformed Synod in Scotland, commonly called the Burgher Secession." "The connection was, however, only one of sympathy rather than a legal one"<sup>21</sup> — for all practical purposes the new "Presbyterian Church on St. Peter Street" was as independent of any external jurisdiction as St. Gabriel Street or Spark's church in Quebec.

This new congregation soon discovered that its legal status was at best doubtful. Clark Bentom, a Congregationalist minister in Quebec who had been refused the right to keep an official register of births, marriages and deaths, was sentenced to six months in prison in 1803 for usurping "the office of a Priest or Minister."<sup>22</sup> In delivering his judgement the Chief Justice intimated that only the churches of England and Rome were recognized by law but that a statute would soon be passed to resolve this confusion. A new registration bill was actually introduced in the Council by Bishop Jacob Mountain, the victim of libellous attacks by Bentom, only to be rejected by the Assembly on the grounds that the rights of the Church of Scotland had always been acknowledged in Lower Canada. Obviously the newly formed

congregation could not claim to belong to the Church of Scotland, but Easton took some small comfort in the fact that the legal status of Spark's and Somerville's congregations was equally dubious.<sup>23</sup>

Although St. Gabriel Street Church was popularly referred to in Montreal as the "Scotch Church," the new church on St. Peter Street strove to develop its own "Scotch" image. When Easton proposed to resign in 1822, his congregation resolved to call a Church of Scotland minister "and none else,"<sup>24</sup> which caused another schism as the sizable American minority among its members refused to be suppressed. They had contributed to the building of the church on the understanding that it would remain in the Secession fold. Now faced with a definite trend towards more conservative and Scottish connections, the Americans withdrew and established the American Presbyterian Church, while the majority at last settled on a name which reflected its growing traditionalism — St. Andrew's.

Except for these schisms the congregational life of the Presbyterian churches in Lower Canada was relatively uneventful. From 1803 to 1814 the Anglican congregation of Christ Church shared the St. Gabriel Street building because their own had been destroyed by fire. The internal operation of the "Scotch Church" was noteworthy only because it was controlled by a committee of wealthy pewholders rather than by its session. As the home church of Montreal's rich fur trading community, it occasionally witnessed the baptism of children of illicit unions between traders and western Indian women who were recorded in the church register as "mother unknown."<sup>25</sup> The same congregation acquired Henry Esson from the Church of Scotland in 1817 to be Somerville's assistant — the other two churches had no assistants and effectively no history during the remainder of the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

Although Upper Canada's population grew from fourteen thousand in 1791 to ninety thousand by 1812, Presbyterianism in that colony did not keep pace. This increase came almost exclusively from the neighbouring United States but many arrived from areas where Presbyterianism had never been strong. Moreover, most were frontier farmers with no firm church attachment and in their new home a large proportion were drawn to the Methodists by the zealous and mobile circuit riders who evangelized even the remotest settlements. Churches that were tied psychologically to the European habits of static parishes simply failed to meet this challenge of the religious void on the ever-advancing frontier of Upper Canada. The churches in Scotland, for example, showed so little interest in the religious welfare of their brethren overseas that Presbyterianism in Upper Canada survived only through the incredible self-sacrifice of a few pioneer ministers. The race to save souls —

and gain adherents — went almost by default to those organizations with flexible structures, the will to experiment, and an emotion-charged message.

As the nineteenth century dawned on the inland province of Upper Canada Presbyterianism was to be found there only on the banks of the Upper St. Lawrence, in the Bay of Quinte and Niagara regions. With settlement surging towards the rich lands in the western part of the colony, Bethune and Broeffle remained alone with little need of assistance. Robert McDowall's missionary endeavours, however, had been marked by such success that in 1806 he was appealing for help to the Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in America. "He is alone," said McDowall of his own situation. "The country is extensive. Many and pressing are the invitations which he frequently receives from distant parts to go and preach the Gospel to those who are destitute of it. He has several times gone to York [Toronto]...The country is settled about thirty-five miles north from York, through which settlement he has travelled several times and preached to the inhabitants who were very desirous to hear the Gospel." The same was true of the flourishing settlement at the west end of the Bay of Quinte and at Elizabethtown (Brockville) where "a very respectable congregation" had "given a call to two ministers, but were disappointed in their expectations."<sup>26</sup>

McDowall was concerned about the inroads being made by itinerant evangelists among Presbyterians. "The truth is, unless they have immediate assistance, they will be rent into so many sects that they will be unable to support a minister of any denomination." Already in 1800 McDowall had debated the merits of Calvinist doctrine with the Methodists at his church near Bath. So many people had come that the meeting was moved outdoors where McDowall mounted a wagon and discoursed "half of the day." The Methodist parson, Samuel Coate, followed, but he had spoken for only two hours "when the Presbyterian party, headed by their minister, left the ground refusing to hear the closing of the argument."<sup>27</sup> Coate, however, continued preaching until evening when the Methodists agreed that free will had triumphed over predestination. Such theological battles probably changed the beliefs of few people on either side, but it was good entertainment and may have been a factor in McDowall's appeal for assistance. In any case three Dutch Reformed ministers from the United States did visit the Brockville area in 1806 and organized a congregation there. In 1809 and 1810 their synod sent two travelling missionaries to Upper Canada, one of whom spent eighteen weeks touring the north shore of Lake Ontario and organized a congregation at York.<sup>28</sup>

Although the War of 1812 brought these mission visits from the United States to a sudden halt, the two-man mission teams from the Dutch Re-

formed Church reappeared in Upper Canada in 1817. Two years later, however, when eleven congregations were supposedly in existence, McDowall was still the only resident minister of that body. Recognizing its own inability to supply Upper Canada with ministers, the Dutch Reformed Church advised the Brockville congregation to petition the London Missionary Society for a settled pastor. This interdenominational society, founded in 1795 to promote missions in Africa, Asia and the South Seas, had sent a few missionaries to North America, including the difficult Clark Bentom of Quebec. The Society expected colonists to support such missionaries as soon as possible, so when William Smart of the Scottish Secession Church accepted the call to Brockville in 1811 he received only his passage money. Besides preaching at four places each Sabbath, Smart soon was covering a 1250-square-mile circuit during the week. On his first Sunday in Brockville Smart organized a Sunday School, probably the first such institution in Canada. The outbreak of war in 1812 interfered, however, with Smart's work, as it did with that of most Christian denominations in the colony. Attendance at his services dwindled to a half-dozen hearers after the men were called up for militia duty, and Smart himself experienced the hazards of war when a cannon ball passed over the neck of his horse on one occasion.<sup>29</sup>

At the end of the war a new settlement of discharged soldiers and immigrants, many of the Presbyterians, was formed at Perth and for a few months Smart made the forty-mile trip there on horse-back to conduct services. He was relieved of this chore by the arrival in 1817 of William Bell, minister of the Associate Presbytery of Edinburgh, who had decided to offer himself to these immigrants two years earlier before they left Scotland. After a stormy transatlantic crossing on a lice-ridden ship with foul water and worse food, Bell, his wife and six children traversed the rock-strewn, swampy road to their new home in Perth amidst swarms of mosquitoes. That home, Bell wrote, rented unfurnished for £20 a year, was "a log house, twenty feet by thirty feet, without partitions and having only a few split bass-wood planks for a floor." "William (Junior) fell through the floor into the cellar below, which was full of water, but he was got out with no further harm than a good ducking." Recalling the paved streets and fine houses of Edinburgh Bell noted in his diary, "We could not reasonably expect it to be merely a pleasure voyage...but we had the comfort of reflecting, if it was any comfort, that we were as well off as our neighbours, and we studied contentment."<sup>30</sup>

On the same ship with the Bells also had arrived the Rev. William Taylor, another Associate Presbytery clergyman, who took over the work of Bethune and Broeffle since both had died in 1815. Taylor and his family were "cooped

up in a log hut of one apartment, sixteen feet square.”<sup>31</sup> Apparently studying contentment did not comfort the Taylors for they found a permanent home with a New York State congregation in 1819. At approximately the same time as Bell and Taylor, Scottish-born William Jenkins came to Upper Canada from the Associate Reformed Church in New York State where he had been an Indian missionary for several years.<sup>32</sup> In 1816 he made a missionary tour from Peterborough to Newmarket. The following year in response to a petition from three townships north of York he bought a farm in Markham Township and organized two congregations and three preaching stations. For many years he was the only Presbyterian minister in a very large district. Like the other clergy of Secessionist background, Jenkins’ missionary impulse carried him into neighbouring areas and occasionally as far afield as the Grand River or the Bay of Quinte. It is not known what had become of the Dutch Reformed congregation in York (Toronto) but Jenkins preached only occasionally to Presbyterians in the tiny provincial capital.

After both Dunn and Young had abandoned so suddenly their pastorates at Niagara, the members of that Presbyterian congregation were more fortunate in their next choice of a minister. John Burns, a friend of Robert Easton and like him a member of the Associate Synod in Scotland, settled at Stamford in 1804 and two years later moved to Niagara where he remained until 1821, the year before his death. Three years before Burns’ arrival Daniel Ward Eastman, an American Associate Presbytery minister, had decided to emigrate to Upper Canada and after spending a short time at Stamford he built a home at Beaver Dams. By 1807 Eastman’s missionary zeal had carried him through every settlement from the mouth of the Niagara River to Hamilton Bay. When the Welshman, Lewis Williams, became St. Catharines’ first resident Presbyterian minister in 1808, Presbyterians of the Niagara Peninsula could boast that they enjoyed the services of four clergymen, half of all those in Upper Canada.

### *Organizing “A Canadian Presbytery”*

Like their brethren in the Maritimes, Presbyterians of Upper and Lower Canada began to consider the advantages of organizing a presbytery soon after the end of the War of 1812-14. Unlike the presbyteries of Pictou and Truro, the abortive Presbytery of Montreal which Spark, Bethune and Young had formed in 1793 never functioned, probably because of the longer distances and greater difficulties of travel in the Canadas. One obvious motivation for a new attempt at organization was the strong anti-American



feeling that the war had produced in all the British North American colonies but especially in war-ravaged Upper Canada. Every aspect of life — political, social, economic, and religious — was affected by an increased emphasis on loyalty to Britain, and to a lesser extent loyalty to one's own province. Any evidence, real or imaginary, of American influence was condemned out of hand as incipient treason, and loyalism was used by certain parties as a bludgeon to beat all opponents. In the contest for the title of superloyalists the Church of England, personified in John Strachan, the politically motivated rector of York, had an advantage in its official position as the state religion. It also had a very genuine vested interest to protect in its monopoly of the Clergy Reserves lands and its preferred position in such matters as education and marriages.

Ten years after the formation of the first Presbytery of Montreal a second body using the same name had met as an *ad hoc* court in 1803 to ordain Somerville to St. Gabriel Street so that Somerville would not have to make the long voyage back to Scotland for the laying-on of hands. Apparently this second presbytery met only once. There was no subsequent demand for an ordination and the growing diversity of Presbyterian traditions represented by ministers in the Canadas — epitomized in the schismatic events at St. Gabriel Street — created another obstacle to co-operation. Four different churches were represented in Canada by ministers who had come from three different countries. Each man owed allegiance to some church outside of British North America, but in the nature of their circumstances each was free of any presbyterial supervision. Indeed the way in which most Canadian congregations had come into existence enhanced this sense of separatism. Congregations resembled the "gathered churches" of believers, in the tradition of Independency or Congregationalism — they came into existence before any higher church court and before ministers were available to them. Such was the case particularly in Upper Canada where local traditions of congregational self-government and self-sufficiency lasted in some cases for generations.

This development was of course largely the result of geography and a pattern of settlement which produced pockets of colonists isolated from each other by vast tracts of primeval forest. Ministers and congregations in the two Canadas were scattered over an area some six hundred miles long, where communications were difficult. The mails were slow, unreliable and costly — a letter from York to Niagara could cost a day's wages and be three days en route. Travel by horse over long distances on rough and lonely roads was exhausting and time-consuming; autumn and spring rains made the so-called highways impassible, so winter travel by sleigh was preferred from the point

of speed and comfort. Summer journeys could be made in sailboats on Lake Ontario, but the trip down the St. Lawrence rapids on flat-bottomed bateaux was highly dangerous and upriver excruciatingly slow. If internal travel was difficult, transatlantic journeys were almost impossible because of the cost and the short navigation season. A pioneer minister worked in spiritual as well as physical isolation, seldom encountering clergy of any denomination and rarely those of his own, usually without the benefit of books or educated company. The need for outside contacts was keenly felt, both at the human level and in terms of professional association. Conditions had not improved appreciably between the turn of the century and the end of the War of 1812, but the desirability of creating some ecclesiastical organization could no longer be ignored by Presbyterians in the Canadas.

The first step in this direction was taken in July, 1817, by Easton, Smart, Bell and Taylor, all of whom lived within a hundred miles of each other. These four men applied to the Associate Synod in Scotland for authority to organize a Canadian presbytery. The project had apparently been conceived when Bell and Taylor met Easton on their arrival in Montreal, for their petition had been forwarded to Scotland within a few weeks. Before any reply could be received, however, William Smart decided "to see if the different bodies of Presbyterian ministers could not be united and form a Canadian Presbytery."<sup>33</sup> Such a union would mean the inclusion of Spark and Somerville in Lower Canada, and McDowall, Jenkins, Collver, Burns, Eastman and Williams in the upper province. It would involve merging the traditions of a variety of Presbyterian churches — the Church of Scotland, two Scottish Secessionist bodies (Associate and Relief), and the Dutch Reformed and American Associate Presbyterian churches — not to mention three national backgrounds, Scotch, American and Welsh. William Bell was lukewarm to Smart's proposal, yet almost immediately the case for a Canadian presbytery was clinched by the need to ordain one Joseph Johnston, an Irishman who had just been called to a Presbyterian congregation in Cornwall.

Bell refused to participate in Johnston's ordination because no answer had come from Scotland, but the other three petitioners proceeded with the ceremony early in 1818, assuming for themselves the title "Presbytery of the Canadas." Before a scheduled second meeting of the new Presbytery was held two other licentiates requested ordination in Lower Canada and a third minister, Archibald Henderson, appeared bearing the Associate Synod's permission to form a presbytery. When Henderson discovered that an independent presbytery had already been formed he refused to join it although he had accepted a charge in Lower Canada. By the time the presbytery did hold its second meeting, in July, 1818, at Montreal, more difficulties had

arisen. Bell, who agreed to attend this time, recorded, "We soon learned that Mr. Easton had taken all the business of the Presbytery into his own hands and had acted with all the authority of a bishop."<sup>34</sup> In Bell's opinion the Cornwall meeting had acted irregularly and had failed to state its doctrinal standards. More than this, Easton had withheld from his colleagues the news of Synod's authorization of a presbytery. At Bell's insistence the doctrines, discipline and worship of the Church of Scotland were adopted as the Presbytery's own, but he agreed with the other members that the approval from the Associate Synod had come too late. An independent presbytery was now in his opinion, "the only [institution] adapted to the present state and future condition of Canada."<sup>35</sup>

By 1818 there were sixteen Presbyterian ministers in the two Canadas — Collver died that year — but of these only half belonged to the Presbytery — Spark, Somerville, Esson and Henderson had not joined, nor had any of those west of the Bay of Quinte responded to Smart's letters of invitation. There was, however, an interesting parallel between this organization of an indigenous presbytery for the Canadas in 1818 and the formation of the independent Presbytery of Nova Scotia exactly one year earlier. The Canadian Presbytery continued to be beset by clashes of personalities and a few of the more recent arrivals stayed only a year or so before seeking greener pastures in the United States. The third meeting of presbytery was held in the autumn of 1819, and Bell found he had company on the road as crowds of settlers were making their way to Brockville to view the entertaining spectacle of the public hanging of two criminals. At this meeting presbytery ordained one new minister and then proceeded to reorganize itself into a synod of three presbyteries — two for the eastern parts and the third for the York-Niagara region. The synod unfortunately proved to be no more effective than the original presbytery. Although five more ministers in Upper Canada and two in Lower were subsequently added to its roll, the Synod of the Canadas was dissolved in 1825 to be replaced by a separate presbytery for each province, with Cornwall being attached to the Lower Canadian body.

Of the ministers who entered Upper Canada in those five years Robert Boyd, an Irishman, became pastor of Prescott in 1821 and a life-long friend of his neighbour, William Smart. George Buchanan, a Scot who spoke Gaelic and English, settled about the same time in Beckwith Township near Perth. John Gemmell, another Scot and a medical doctor, became the Presbyterian preacher at Lanark, north of Perth, while John Harris arrived in York from Ireland around 1820 and established the first Presbyterian Church in the future city of Toronto. The last of these Upper Canadian figures, William King, another Irishman, organized a congregation near Burlington in 1824. Both of the new

ministers in Lower Canada were also Irish. All of these men served long pastorates and all were prominent in later Canadian Presbyterian history. It is equally noteworthy that the seven came from the Secession churches of either Scotland or Ireland.

American Presbyterian interest in the Canadas had not entirely disappeared. In response to the request of an American settler near Stamford for someone to baptize his family, two missionaries of the American Associate Synod made a tour of Upper Canada in 1822 from Niagara to Detroit, with a side trip to Toronto. They were disappointed to find that places recommended to their attention were not potential congregations but public houses. "The result of this first exploration of Canada was so discouraging that we hesitated a good deal in making out our report, whether to recommend the sending of any more missionaries to that country...."<sup>36</sup> but in the end their sense of mission won out and two years later the American Associate Synod began to organize congregations in the Niagara-Grand River region, thereby adding yet another dimension to the many faceted Presbyterianism of Upper Canada.

By 1825 a new Upper Canada was emerging — during the past decade the tide of immigration had shifted heavily from the United States to Great Britain, reinforcing the spirit of loyalism in the province. Postwar economic depression and deep social unrest throughout the British Isles was driving countless thousands of poorer people to the New World in search of opportunity. From Scotland for instance 525 sailed from Crinan on a single day in 1819, and 581 embarked from Dumfries during one week.<sup>37</sup> Although Presbyterianism had not yet managed to create an efficient organization in the Canadas, the number of ministers had increased sufficiently that the main centres of Presbyterian settlement were being adequately served. Just as Upper Canada had become more British since the War of 1812, so Presbyterianism in the colony was growing more obviously conservative and Scottish-oriented in its attitudes with each passing year.

### *A Demand for Co-establishment*

The brunt of the War of 1812 had fallen most heavily on the western part of Upper Canada. As the main gateway for the American invasion, the Niagara region suffered the heaviest damage. Opposing armies marched and countermarched through the peninsula during three years, damaging fields and orchards, burning and pillaging homes, shops and farms, laying waste to the most developed area of the colony. Churches and schools were converted into billets and hospitals so that congregations already reduced in

size by the mustering of the militiamen had difficulty in finding places to worship in the lulls between hostile actions. Several major battles were fought close to Eastman's manse and during the engagement at Beaver Dams in June, 1813, his family hid in the cellar while musket balls shattered windows and pitted the walls of their house. St. Andrew's Church at Niagara-on-the-Lake was destroyed in December of that year when retreating Americans burned the whole village except for one house. The Presbyterian church at Drummond Hill was completely ruined in the battle of Lundy's Lane which raged around the building and through its cemetery on 25 July, 1814.

Such incidents passed almost unrecorded in the general holocaust of the war, but the American burning of Niagara proved to have unexpected consequences which brought to Upper Canada that bugbear of Scottish Presbyterianism — the old controversy over the relations of church and state. In March, 1819, the Presbyterians of that town petitioned Lieutenant-Governor Sir Peregrine Maitland for financial aid. Their personal losses in the war made it difficult to rebuild their church or to pay "a preacher of respectability," preferably "one of the Established Church of Scotland."<sup>38</sup> Would His Excellency grant them £100 per year from the income of the Clergy Reserves or from any other available fund? Two years earlier certain land speculators in the Niagara region had attacked the Clergy Reserves in the provincial Assembly. They had claimed that these valuable unoccupied lands impeded economic development, were a temptation to land-hungry Americans, and constituted an endowment "beyond all precedent lavish."<sup>39</sup> Maitland's predecessor, Gore, had considered these resolutions so "obnoxious" that he immediately dissolved the Legislature. Now Maitland reacted adversely to this request from the Niagara Presbyterians in the mistaken belief that the endowments of his own Church of England were coveted by Britain's other established church.

Maitland referred the Presbyterian petition to the Colonial Office in London with the warning that the Clergy Reserves produced only £700 rental per year, that his legal advisers believed the Reserves belonged exclusively to the Church of England, and that the question of state support for churches was creating "lively feeling throughout the province."<sup>40</sup> The Colonial Office then referred the matter to its legal advisers who replied in turn that in their opinion the sections of the Constitutional Act of 1791 endowing "a Protestant Clergy" could refer to either established church, but not to any dissenting denomination.<sup>41</sup> The Colonial Secretary, Lord Bathurst, therefore ordered Maitland to reserve lands for the Church of Scotland in any parish where its members "may greatly predominate."<sup>42</sup> Encouraged by his counsellor, John Strachan, who had just managed to have the control of the Clergy Reserves

vested in an Anglican Clergy Corporation, that staunch Anglican, Maitland, kept this Colonial Office decision to aid the Church of Scotland so secret that its existence did not become generally known until 1840!

The Church of Scotland's supporters in the Canadas would not be easily deterred from their aim to gain state aid. Spark and Somerville each received £50 annually — Bell, Henderson and Taylor had also got government allowances — but most Anglican priests were paid £200 and the Bishop of Quebec received £3,300 each year as a public servant. Surely the Church of Scotland, Britain's second established church, should expect equal treatment in a British colony. In November, 1820, John Harkness (Spark's successor in Quebec), Somerville, and Esson and their elders sent a lengthy petition to Lord Bathurst stating their claims to co-establishment. As members of the established Church of Scotland, they had by their own exertions put their churches in a flourishing condition, but they could not "place their Clergymen on that footing of comfortable independence" that had been their right in Scotland. Without government aid they could not attract "gentlemen of suitable qualifications for the Ministerial office" to those "many populous Settlements" in the colonies where the people wanted the religious services of "their National Church" rather than "the Ministry of wandering and unqualified Preachers."<sup>43</sup> The situation of the Canadas was "in a political view...fraught with danger" because those preachers were often Americans who "disseminate political disaffection with religious fanaticism."

This claim for assistance proportionate to that enjoyed by the "Sister Establishment" of England was based on two principles — the Church of Scotland was legally a national church, and politically it was a bulwark of "loyalty and patriotism." These petitioners had already asked the General Assembly to accept them as a Canadian branch of the Church of Scotland, a request they believed would be granted if only the government would make "adequate provision" for the "respectability of their Church in Canada." Their petition to Lord Bathurst was forwarded by Canada's new Governor General, none other than Lord Dalhousie, lay pillar of the Church of Scotland! In his accompanying letter Dalhousie advised Lord Bathurst that the Church of England had its assured income in Canada and the Church of Rome had the legal right to the tithe — "but the Scotch Presbyterian Church is in no way provided for," despite the fact that "the great proportion of the Emigrants who flock to this Country at present from Scotland and Ireland, is of the Presbyterian Church." Therefore the Governor General had no hesitation in recommending most earnestly this petition of his fellow Kirkmen in Canada to the serious attention of the home government.<sup>44</sup>

Unfortunately for Kirkmen in Canada the Moderates who controlled the

Church of Scotland showed little interest in their plight. Dr. Duncan Mearns, Moderator of the General Assembly, informed Esson in 1821 that a majority of the Assembly had refused to allow the Canadian application for membership to be discussed because they doubted that the General Assembly could make such a colonial connection and, even if it could, it would not because the government had not yet recognized the Church of Scotland in Canada. Mearns' advice was to organize first, then seek a formal incorporation with the mother church.<sup>45</sup> A committee of the General Assembly did, however, go so far as to support the Canadian petition for government aid.<sup>46</sup> Before the end of 1821 Bathurst informed Dalhousie that he too believed that support for Canadian Presbyterianism was "a most important political and moral duty," but of course the problem was the government's lack of money.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps some day the demand for land would bring in enough rent from the Clergy Reserves to provide for the Church of England and the Presbyterians (who were supposedly all of the Church of Scotland) but in the meantime would Dalhousie please report on the needs of the Church of Scotland in Canada and on possible resources in Canada and Scotland.

Encouraged by this official attitude, the friends of the Church of Scotland now began to exert political pressure in their cause. At the 1823 session of the Lower Canadian legislature they got a series of resolutions passed, claiming that the union of England and Scotland in 1707 had established the equality of their church and the Church of England, that the conquest of Canada had been a British, not an English victory, that if the Church of Scotland was not included under "Protestant Clergy" in the Constitutional Act, it should be provided for separately by the Crown. Similar resolutions were later passed by the Upper Canadian Assembly thanks to the efforts of William Morris, a prominent merchant at Perth, and a petition from Church of Scotland adherents in both the Canadas was sent to the home government early in 1823 praying for legal recognition and aid.<sup>48</sup>

By now the Church of England was fully alive to this threat against its monopoly possession of the Clergy Reserves' income. The aging Bishop Mountain protested to Lord Bathurst against any sharing of the Clergy Reserves and sent a lengthy circular letter to all his clergy in which he blamed Lord Dalbousie for encouraging the actions of Canadian Presbyterians.<sup>49</sup> From Upper Canada Strachan advised his bishop that the support of the colonial governments would be needed to resist these Presbyterian "pretensions."<sup>50</sup> Already Strachan's Clergy Corporation for Upper Canada had sent home a long counterpetition. The burden of its argument was simple — the Church of England was "by far" the largest religious body in Upper Canada and soon "the bulk of the inhabitants" would "conform," providing "no prospect of supporting their clergy be held

out to the various Protestant denominations.”<sup>51</sup> The Presbytery of the Canadas, Strachan claimed, had only six congregations and two of its six ministers were Americans. To prove this he appended an ecclesiastical chart of Upper Canada listing four Church of Scotland clergy, “some 10 or 12 Methodists” and 22 priests of the Church of England. Strachan of course was fully supported by Lieutenant-Governor Maitland who insisted that the Church of Scotland had no more right to the Clergy Reserves than other “denominations,” that aid should not be given to the Church of Scotland “as a church” but only to existing congregations that could prove they needed a preacher, and then never in such a way as to encourage the growth of the Church of Scotland.<sup>52</sup>

All these conflicting claims and counterclaims about size, loyalty and popularity of the respective establishments were sent by the Colonial Office to its legal advisers for evaluation. Meanwhile another committee of the General Assembly had asked for salaries of £50 or £100 for its colonial clergy, and suggested that the Church of Scotland needed a body of its own like the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, to promote its colonial interests.<sup>53</sup> Again in 1824 the lawyers’ opinion was that the Church of England had no legal right to monopolize the Clergy Reserves — “it is therefore a question simply and exclusively of a political nature.” To such pressures the Colonial Office responded in June 1825 with the announcement that colonial governors might aid established congregations who acknowledged “the jurisdiction of the Church of Scotland,” if funds were available.<sup>54</sup>

The Church of Scotland had apparently triumphed over the exclusivism of the Church of England in the Canadas — but in fact it won a partial victory at best. The principle of co-establishment had not been conceded, only the existing practice of limited support had been extended to all Church of Scotland ministers. Aid had been authorized, but not from the Clergy Reserves funds and without any guarantee that payments would be perpetual or even regular. It was some consolation for the Church of Scotland, however, that other Presbyterians in the Canadas would not share in its limited good fortune. The Kirk could never be accused of favouring religious equality, except for itself. By 1825 one lesson at least had been learned from this search for co-establishment — the political power of the Church of England could only be countered by similar influence. The Kirk must create its own version of the S.P.G. to promote its interests in the colonies, and the Church of Scotland in the colonies must be organized and supported from home. Such an organization, the Glasgow Colonial Society, was in fact created that same year with no less a personage than Lord Dalhousie, ardent Kirkman and Governor General of the Canadas, as its patron, but was a private body, with no direct connection to the Church.