

# ALEXANDER MUNRO AND BOULARDERIE ACADEMY

By ANITA SIMPSON

IT is a small book, about five by seven inches. On the front inside cover a childish hand has scrawled a few figures; on the back inside cover is a detailed recipe for the preservation of leather. There is no inscription other than a small card on the first page. It says: "Register of Alexander Munro, Boularderie Academy". The dates in the register include the period from November, 1839 to March, 1841.

I was curious about the story contained in those precisely written pages. The process of finding that story involved rather scattered investigations. However, the patchwork quilt is now as complete as the records and living memory will allow. I should like to tell you the story of the "Boularderie Academy" and of the man who was its master for almost twenty years.

The settlement of the Island of Boularderie in Cape Breton proved a slow and difficult process. Early in the eighteenth century M. Poupet de la Boularderie was given a grant of the Island with the stipulation that he establish a settlement upon it. His task, uncompleted at his death, was assumed by his son, who met with better success. However, it was not until 1820 that the Scots "discovered" Boularderie and began to settle in any number. The first settler, Donald MacDonald from Gairlock, Rosshire, was alone for the first three years. However, in one decade, there were forty Scottish Presbyterian families within twenty miles. They settled on the south side. Numerous Roman Catholics settled on the north side.

Boularderie had many things to commend it. Farming was good, especially on the south side; there were fish in the Bras d'Or Lakes, by which the Island is surrounded; it was close to supply centers by water and land. However, the people were poor and the road to reasonable prosperity was a long and arduous one.

Among the earliest and most deeply felt needs was the desire for minister and teacher. The Island had only the services of an occasional itinerant missionary; schools were lacking entirely.

In Scotland, this problem of the religious and educational welfare of the Scots in foreign lands was a matter of deep concern. Various societies were established to remedy this situation. The Glasgow Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Lands was one of the most active. In 1836 the Ladies'

Association of this Society sent a minister to Boularderie. He was Rev. James Fraser, M. A. Mr. Fraser was followed shortly afterwards by a teacher, Hugh Munro.

Mr. Munro apparently taught in the church. At one point this school numbered over two hundred pupils. Unfortunately his career in Boularderie was short lived. He was offered a more lucrative position in Halifax, which he accepted. On his departure, Rev. Mr. Fraser wrote to the Society. "Mr. Munro's situation is now vacant, the most important of all indeed in Cape Breton; and we have no hope of its being filled up satisfactorily, except by your Society. I can give you no idea of the anxiety felt by this most valuable part of our settlement for a competent and diligent teacher. The appetite for education which seemed dead by starvation is revived. Not long ago I almost despaired of raising the people to a sense of their needs; now I cannot supply the demand".

The qualifications for a teacher were also suggested in Mr. Fraser's letter. "An industrious, efficient, steady, zealous person. . . . a man of good address, correct habits and capable of teaching Latin and Navigation. A man of this stamp would find himself very happy amongst a decent, kind, obliging people. . . . who would go beyond their means to make his situation comfortable".

This letter was written in February, 1839. By November of that same year, another school had opened at Boularderie. The new Schoolmaster was Alexander Munro. He had arrived in Halifax a short time before. Although he had been offered £200 per annum if he would remain and teach in Halifax, he had refused and continued to his destination in Boularderie. He was accompanied by his wife, Catherine.

The Ladies' Association had sent a very young teacher. He had been born in the parish of St. Cyrus, near Montrose, in the County of Kincardine a sparse twenty-five years before. His higher education had been completed at Marischall College, Aberdeen, and at the Glasgow Normal School.

Catherine Weir Munro was as youthful as her husband, having been born in the parish of Ardnamurchan in 1814. There is an interesting tale told of the wedding ceremony of her parents. They were married on top of a small steep hill called "Rest and Be Thankful". After the ceremony, Mrs. Weir asked the officiating clergyman for a wedding certificate. He jotted down this verse which he presented to the couple,

"Beneath this rock in stormy weather  
I've joined this loving pair together  
And only He who rules the thunder  
Can part this man and wife asunder."

It is strange to note the details which remain fixed in people's memories, while major occurrences pass unnoted. To several old folk, the mention of Alexander Munro conjured up this tale as the most immediate association.

Catherine was educated in a private school in Glasgow and was a trained teacher. Her accomplishments were typical of the early nineteenth century and included knowledge of French, music—she had a beautiful singing voice—needlework and cooking. She married Alexander Munro very shortly before coming to Canada.

The arrival of the new teacher and his wife must have evoked much excitement, not untinged with trepidation, both for the newcomers and the settlers. A few of Mr. Munro's impressions, and some tales of their early conditions, survive in letters which he sent to his sponsors, the Ladies' Association. In December, 1839, he wrote, "We have now taken up our abode and opened school here. I am sorry to say that there is neither dwelling or school house provided for us; the frame of the school house was erected six months ago as Mr. Fraser wrote to you but from the great poverty of the people I do not expect it to be finished unless help comes from some other quarter. . . . We live in one end of a smoky log hut, with a large family at the other end".

Of the people and their living conditions he later reminisced, "Their dwellings were log huts generally covered with bark, consisting in most cases of one apartment. The only bonnets in Boularderie were Mrs. Fraser's and Mrs. Munro's. The men dressed in blue homespun which had a flavor not unlike lavender. . . . The living was poor; very few had anything but potatoes which were plentiful; at Christmas all would try to have a little oatmeal. Most raised a little wheat, but it was kept for sacrament time. Yet all the poor living people were healthy".

Mr. Munro apparently assumed the added burden of physician in the community, for he wrote to the Ladies Association requesting medical supplies, having completely exhausted his own private stores in caring for those who were ill.

Mrs. Munro's immediate impression was very womanly and sympathetic. She wrote: "What I see the people most in want of is warm stout clothing; many of the girls come to

school with nothing but a frock on. . . . I think I shall like this place very much, though the people are very poor, and no society, still I feel quite happy and hope to be happy if we have a good dwelling house".

In his December letter, Mr. Munro said, "Mrs. Munro and I commenced teaching on the 20th of November. We have sixty scholars besides three teachers".

A skeleton history of the first year and half of the school's life is contained in that original school register, in which the entries were made by the fine precise, graceful hand of Mr. Munro himself. The register records the child's name and age, the name of the father, and the date of first registration at the school. By May, 1840, the school register numbered one hundred and ten pupils. They represented between forty and fifty families, with from one to seven children from each family. The ages of the pupils ranged from seven to twenty-four years.

The school day began at 9.30 and continued until 4.30. Apparently there were few holidays. There are entries in the register for December 24th and 25th, and for January 2nd. However, since there are no entries for the month of August, it was, in all likelihood, the vacation period.

Pending the completion of the school building, classes were conducted in the church, which Mr. Munro said was lacking in a gallery, "and other arrangements necessary to carry on the system thoroughly". This remark aroused my curiosity; also an excerpt from a letter of Mrs. Munro's in which she said: "We have had a most laborious winter; none of our pupils being advanced enough to act as monitors, we had all to do ourselves". What "system" were the Munros using.

Apparently it was a method taught by the Glasgow Normal School, and was designed by a man named Lancaster, in order that one teacher might be able to instruct a large number of pupils. The teacher was aided by a group of older and more advanced students who were called monitors. They came to school early each morning and received instructions from the teacher concerning the lessons to be taught. Each Monitor was in charge of a group of about ten. The headmaster was then free to conduct advanced studies with his older pupils. In the ideal Lancastrian school, there was a gallery at the back of the school room which was capable of seating the whole student body. It was used for general lectures and group activities.

It was this system which teachers from all over Cape

Breton came to learn. It was recognized as efficient and effective and was especially necessary in the days when one teacher was responsible for from one to two hundred students.

The few surviving letters which the Munros sent to the Ladies' Association present some birds eye pictures of the first winter of activity at the school. In December Mrs. Munro wrote, "I have thirty little girls sewing, nine to twenty-four years of age; they are exceedingly anxious to learn and all strive to imitate my work and get on remarkably well considering their want of sewing apparatus". And later, "Some of the girls sew tolerably well and are ready for samplers". In March she wrote, "Our school is still on the increase, about one hundred in all; five teachers training: three came from Lake Ainslie last night and said there would be two more following". In July she wrote a summary of the winter's activities. These were the highlights. "One hundred and twelve scholars were our greatest number throughout the winter. We had six teachers acquiring the system. Four have returned to their schools but feeling the value of our method of teaching, they intend to return to us. A smart lad, a Roman Catholic, and teacher of a Roman Catholic School, came to us last week from Judique to study our way. A large school house is erecting for him; he promises to be a good teacher. . . . Eighteen young men required much of Mr. Munro's time. He teaches them grammar and arithmetic and any branch in which they are most deficient. I teach them singing. There were thirty little ones whose Bible lessons cost me much pains and time, from the difficulty of making them understand, they knowing so little English. There are also some night classes for those who wish extra help". According to an old gentleman, a neighbour of the Munros, neither spoke the Gaelic, although Mrs. Munro could read it beautifully. One can imagine their difficulty in attempting to teach children whose only language was the rich vocabulary of "the Garden of Eden".

As the above excerpts indicate, students came from far and wide. Lake Ainslie is about seventy miles from Boularderie. Mr. Munro spoke about teachers coming from St. Ann's and Middle River. The register mentioned places such as Big Pond, sixty miles from Boularderie by road, although less by water; also many points within a radius of thirty miles: Wreck Cove, Big Pond, John's Sow, Chain Point. Many of the students crossed the Bras d'Or Lakes from New Harris on the one side and Boisdale on the other. Some of these zealous scholars

formed a "school hamlet" taking up their abode in log huts near the church. Observers record as many as ten or twelve of these rudely constructed huts at one time, scattered within half a mile of the school. In most cases the boys returned home each weekend to get supplies for the coming week. In a few cases, mothers accompanied their children and "kept house" for them.

The expenses of attending school were not exorbitant. One individual account in the register mentions school fees of ten shillings. All books were bought by the students and the records indicate that they cost between one and three shillings each. These books included dictionaries (of which a great many were bought when the school first opened), Bibles, catechisms, grammars, arithmetic books, and readers for various grades, Mr. Munro's salary, which comprised a provincial grant, tuition fees and a small assessment, amounted to a maximum of £60 per annum.

So much for the initial year. Mr. Munro's cheerful optimism, his uncomplaining acceptance of the meagre facilities at his disposal, and the tremendous popularity which the school enjoyed speak well for his efforts. Mrs. Munro's earnest zeal for cleanliness and godliness was counterbalanced by willingness to move slowly and to be thankful for small improvements. "They come to school cleaner than at first", she said in the first summer, "but when I observe a dirty ear or neck, I send them to the brook, which I could not do in winter".

How long Mr. Munro taught in the church, and lived in one half a log house has not been recorded. However, by 1847 there were a house and a school. They were situated on the very shores of the Bras d'Or Lakes, along which the road ran at that time. Here at "Munro's Point" the first sermon on Boularderie Island is said to have been preached. The foundation concaves are still to be seen, about twenty feet from the water.

The school was a little larger than the usual school building on Cape Breton Island at that time. A frame building, dimensions 28x22 feet, it was evidently maintained in a superior condition. The equipment which the school possessed also surpassed in type and number that of other schools. Mr. Munro had globes and maps and a plentiful supply of paper, quills and slates. The library was perhaps its most notable feature. It consisted of some one hundred and fifty volumes, all of which belonged to Mr. Munro. These, combined with his private collection, were regarded as the best on the Island and one of the

best in Nova Scotia. Much of the library was destroyed when the Munro home was burned in 1867. However, we do know that Mr. Munro's personal tastes were very broad. Surviving books of his later collection indicate an extensive interest in medicine, a concern for political events, as evidenced by his collection of the Journals of Assembly for Nova Scotia, and propensity toward religious books on such unique subjects as "Narrative of a Mission of Inquiry to the Jews from the Church of Scotland, 1839". Few men in the Province were better informed than he, and from his varied and extensive reading, he was an authority on almost every subject.

Although attendance at the Boularderie Academy during the first few years reached a record high of two hundred pupils, new schools were gradually erected in the surrounding districts and the average number of students was approximately seventy. The school did continue to serve as a training school for teachers from many parts of Cape Breton and even Eastern Nova Scotia.

The subjects taught, other than the three R's, included grammar, geography, Latin and algebra. The curriculum was the most extensive on the Island and for some years it was the only school in which navigation was taught. The generation born in the 1870's remembers the school chiefly in light of the number of sea captains who received their naval education from Alexander Munro. One gentleman told me that his father and his father's three brothers were taught at the Boularderie School, All became successful sea captains. The son of one of these men, Commander Donald B. MacMillam, is one of the most noted Arctic explorers and geologists of today.

It is not surprising that the school was the first in Cape Breton to be classed as a Superior School, which meant that certain branches of higher learning were successfully taught, and that in architecture and equipment the school conformed to certain requirements. Boularderie Academy did not maintain its unique position as the superior school, but it held consistently a key position among the top three or four schools on the Island.

There was authoritative recognition of the Academy's fine standing from many quarters. Perhaps the most interesting attestation of the value of the school was given by Mr. Dawson, Superintendent of Schools for Nova Scotia at the half century. In 1849-50, Mr. Dawson toured the Province, inspecting schools and sounding out opinion concerning the establishment of a normal school for the training of teachers. Unfortunately, through an error in the schedule, Mr. Dawson did not visit

Mr. Munro's school. However, he has this to say about it, in his official report to the government. "Wherever, in my travels through the Island, I found a pupil of this school, I found a teacher of more than usual efficiency. Should the School continue to be taught as heretofore, it might, in event of the establishment of a Normal School in Nova Scotia, be made a branch school and receive some additional remuneration for giving free instructions to candidates for the profession of teacher".

From 1857 to 1861 the history of the school and its teachers is rather uncertain. In October, 1857, the school report was submitted by John Fraser as teacher, and signed by Munro as a member of the Board of Trustees. Fraser had been teaching for nine months when the report was tabulated. (John Fraser had probably been a student of Munro's.) In 1859 the report was again made by Alexander Munro. In it, he states that he had been teaching for sixteen years, three months. Since there are no school reports for Boularderie from 1854-1859, other than the one from John Fraser, and since it is certain that Munro did teach up to 1854, it may be assumed that he did not teach during those subsequent five years. It is impossible to say why. Evidently he maintained close association with the School and School Board during that time. He commenced to teach again in January, 1859 and continued to do so for two years. He then gave up actual teaching entirely. However, he still retained his position on the Board of Trustees, of which he became chairman in 1865.

Perhaps the most sincere endorsement of Mr. Munro's capacity as a teacher was expressed by an old pupil who was never weary of telling this story about his school days at Boularderie. Apparently he boarded with the Munros, and attended school. He was very poorly educated, and was especially adept at grammatical errors. Despite his frequent lapses, Mr. Munro never corrected him in front of anyone. Always he took him aside later on and illustrated his errors. The student became a successful minister. He never forgot the debt he owed to his schoolmaster.

Mr. Munro was not only a teacher. The offices which he dispatched in his community were many and varied. He was probably motivated by a dream of "Cape Breton Fulfilled", for in a letter to the Ladies' Association, dated July 1840 he said, "There is every requisite (here) for the improvement of the Island, lime in every part, gypsum, coal and freestone in abund-



ance.... Perhaps I am sanguine in my expectation, but from what I have seen, I do anticipate this little island will be the Britain of America, and this makes me the more anxious that all should be done to lay a foundation of goodliness and godliness".

One may re-construct Mr. Munro's community activities from a biographical note, published in *The Presbyterian Witness* on May 9, 1885, shortly after his death. It reads in part; "In 1851, he was appointed Justice of the Peace, and he faithfully discharged the duties of this office until his death. By discouraging lawsuits and arranging amicable settlements between the would-be litigants, he did a great deal to maintain harmony and friendly relations among the people of Boularderie. In 1841 he was appointed Way Office Keeper and in 1857 Post Master which he held until his death". In the large Munro home, the new one which was built after the fire of 1867, and which still stands about two hundred yards from the road on the way to Ross's Ferry—in this house, in one of the front rooms, there is a small closet. In it is a semi-circular shelf on which the names of the places to which the mail was to be delivered may still be seen: Black Brook, Point Clear, Kempt Head, Church Road, Boularderie and Boularderie West. It was probably in that room that the Munros had their small store. One can imagine the tall, well built, bearded "Big Alex" greeting his neighbours, while Mrs. Munro, tall but slight, welcomed the children with "Come in dear and have a cookie". This is a fond recollection of one old gentleman who grew up very close to the Munro home. This same gentleman told me that the mail was delivered once weekly by a man who walked the distance from Sydney to Margaree—some ninety miles—distributing and collecting the mail at each centre, of which the Munro home was one. Probably this same mail carrier delivered the newspaper which was printed in Sydney, and for which Mr. Munro was agent in Boularderie.

The account in the *Presbyterian Witness* continues. "In 1853 he was made Collector of Customs and held this office until Confederation when the office was moved to Baddeck. Mr. Munro took a deep interest in the militia organization, holding a commission as Major, and afterwards as Colonel. In 1868 he was appointed Inspector of Schools for Victoria County, a position which he filled most efficiently for several years (until 1873) when, finding the duties too onerous for a man of his years, he resigned". In politics he was a firm Liberal, in religion, a staunch Presbyterian, in his community, a good citizen.

Despite his many activities he was a genial host. "This house was the half way resting place between Cape Breton and Victoria Counties and strangers were always made welcome and entertained with genial hospitality with no distinction between rich and poor".

What remains of Alexander Munro and his works. Several things. Historically, there are the remains of his old home, beside the Lakes, and also the second home which is still lived in. There are some of his possessions, especially his books. There are records, the early register, the letters, the school reports which are to be found in archives at home and abroad.

Then there are the less tangible things. There is the summing up of his character in the words of an old friend. "Mr. Munro, in all his walk through life was just and honorable, a warm and devoted friend to all who were worthy of his respect. By his death the people of Boularderie have met with a loss that can never be repaired and the name of a good old man will long live in their memories". There is the sentiment which motivated the erection of the monument over the graves of Alexander and his wife. They lie buried side by side on the shore of the Lakes, in the quiet cemetery at Man O'War Point. Amid the stalwart silver birches, which reflect the whiteness of winter snow and the luxuriance of summer green, amid the tombstones of many of the early settlers, there stands a tall red granite shaft, untouched by time. On it are inscribed these words: "In memory of Alexander Munro, born near Montrose, Scotland. Died in the 71st year of his age. Teacher. His varied and extensive information and great hospitality secured for him the respect and veneration of all classes of society.

Erected by old scholars and friends in New Zealand, United States and Nova Scotia".

Finally, there are the living memorials; the little country school house at Boularderie, not the one in which Alexander Munro taught, but still called the Munro School; and the students, past and present, who perpetuate the tradition which he established through his teaching and his personal example—sound education and useful citizenship.