THE CENTENARY OF D'ARCY McGEE

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FOR the idea that a nation is a partnership between the living, the dead, and the yet unborn, we are indebted to Edmund Burke. For the popularization of this idea throughout British North America we are indebted to another great Irishman, Thomas D'Arcy McGee, who during eleven years strove manfully to create a mental union among its scattered peoples, and finally gave his life for the cause that he had made his own. As Sir John A. Macdonald wrote, shortly after his assassination, "His only crime was that he steadily and affectionately advised his countrymen in Canada to enjoy all the advantages that our equal laws and institutions give to Irishmen and to Roman Catholics. He sternly set his face against the introduction of Fenianism into Canada, and he was therefore a doomed man." Though the manner and the suddenness of his death have cast something of glamor over his life and work in Canada, his career and personality are fascinating in themselves; but they should be of absorbing interest to us who were yet unborn when he became numbered with the dead. For, to quote Sir John again, "If ever a soldier who fell on the field of battle deserved well of his country, Thomas D'Arcy McGee deserved well of Canada and its people."

To the generations who knew not McGee it is necessary that tradition shall bring its memories, so that this partnership shall not be dissolved; and tradition is unanimous as to the rare charm of his personality, his marvellous eloquence, his large statesmanship, his political wisdom and his patriotism. Tradition is equally unanimous that his personal appearance did not enhance these qualities:—"He had a face of almost African type," says Charles Gavan Duffy; "His face was flat and heavy," says Sir George W. Ross; and according to Rev. W. Flannery, "His naturally dark pallid face, made darker still by a tuft of black crispy hair that rested on his left eyebrow, seemed to droop in sadness, as though he were lost in thought and in utter unconsciousness of his solemn surroundings. A negligé air of carelessness in his slow walk, in his shirt collar, in his buttoned-up dress coat, and hands clasped behind his back, with eyes turned downwards, made him appear so insignificant among the ambitious and self-reliant members of both provinces, that only a prophet inspired from on high could foresee

that one day he would electrify that House, and assist effectually in shaping the destinies of this great Dominion."

But if in dress he was careless and in appearance far from prepossessing, all contemporaries are agreed as to the magic of his voice and the perfection of his oratory. Duffy speaks of his "singularly sweet and flexible voice," his "fertile brains and great originality"; Ross was impressed by "the mellow richness of his voice and the rhythm and cadence of the Queen's English as it flowed from his lips"; an unknown Scottish bard of Montreal has compared his tongue to a "faerie lute"; while the impact of his whole personality upon the youth of his day may be gathered from Charles Mair's testimony in *Dreamland and Other Poems:*

> Yea, we like children stood
> When in his lofty mood
> He spoke of manly deeds which we might claim,
> And made responses fit
> While heavenly genius lit
> His melancholy eyes with lambent flame,
> And saw the distant aureoles
> And felt the Future thunder in our souls.

Fortunately for us, all this eloquence has not to be reconstructed from the sentiments which move us to-day when we think of our country and its history. McGee's more important utterances on his great theme of Canadian unity and nationality have been preserved, and it requires little historical imagination to experience emotions similar to those of Charles Mair; for, apart from statistical tables and references to contemporary history, much that McGee said from 1857 to 1865 still has a vibrant message for us. If we read these carefully-wrought speeches, so rich in historical and classical allusion, in humour, wit and insight, we shall have little difficulty in understanding his power over his contemporaries, whom he inspired with a love for Canada that had hitherto been unfelt or at least inarticulate; and we cannot but feel that if we as children had been taught to memorize a dozen vignettes from his nobler utterances, we would have been lifted above all shame-faced Canadianism, and impelled "to welcome every talent, to hail every invention, to cherish every gem of art, to foster every gleam of authorship, to honour every acquirement and every natural gift, to lift ourselves to the level of our destinies, to rise above all low limitations and narrow circumscriptions, to cultivate that true catholicity of spirit which embraces all creeds, all classes, and all races, in order to make of our boundless province, so rich in known and unknown resources, a great new northern nation."

It is a sound instinct of mankind that reserves the highest admiration for noble sentiments, whether expressed in advocacy of a new ideal or in defence of an old one, but at the same time does not preclude laughter in the midst of serious discussion. McGee was great in advocacy, but had withal the saving grace of humour; and it is probable that he has been responsible for more parenthetical laughter on the part of reporters than any other Canadian statesman. Not infrequently this humour was used to crush an opponent, though on the whole it was but a means of relieving the feelings of his auditors preparatory to a higher flight of idealism. He disliked interruptions, and it was generally against those who attempted to spoil his beautifully rounded periods that he indulged his wit as distinct from his humour. Such was the case of Hon. Mr. Loranger, who, McGee said, by his dress, manners and uneasy movements reminded him of a little French dancing-master he once knew in Dublin; and of Mr. Dennis, to whom he referred as "the rising man" who was trying "to imitate his protonym in that he came into the capital without his head." But even to-day, sixty years after the personal antagonisms of that era have vanished, we can enjoy his sallies quite as heartily as those who heard his voice ringing in their ears. Witness his raillery over the defeat of Mr. Cayley, Inspector-General in the Macdonald-Cartier administration, who had suffered defeat although he had generously distributed beautifully bound Bibles to the Orange Lodges in his constituency:

> It was a spectacle rare and refreshing to see the Inspector-General, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Finance Minister of the Province, voluntarily turn missionary and act the part of a colporteur in the neighborhood of Lake Huron. I must further remark that the good people of these counties seem to have studied the Sacred Volume presented to them from so high a source to good effect. They appear to have learned the lesson of retributive justice; for, although they accepted the Gospel, they rejected the missionary.

Or again, his ridicule of the initiation ceremony in the Orange Lodges:

> Here I read that the applicant for membership is blindfolded in the ante-chamber, then he is conducted to the door of the lodge-room, where he is presented with a bowl containing W. and W. There is no foot-note stating what these initials stand for, but I should fancy they mean—whiskey and water. Then the applicant is told to dip his hand in the bowl, and sprinkle with its contents the lintel and the posts of the door, and this makes me believe the bowl does not contain whiskey and water

> at all. The candidate is then led to the middle of the lodge-room, and on his bare knees—now can you fancy the fastidious member for Toronto rolling up his trousers to kneel on the bare floor? Or imagine the Hon. Postmaster-General sinking down without even an empty mail bag to place between his knees and mother earth?

Or, once more, his humorous appreciation of the difficulties of choosing a name for the new federation.:

> One individual chooses Tuponia and another Hochelaga, as a suitable name for the new nationality. Now, I would ask any honourable member of this House how he would feel if he woke up some fine morning and found himself, instead of a Canadian, a Tuponian or a Hochelagander?

Having drawn upon tradition for a superficial view of McGee's personality, before attempting to appraise his contribution to Canadian political thought, let us glance at his life in order that we may understand how the elements were mixed up in him, how the "abysmal deeps of his personality" were plumbed by experience, how he attained unto that wisdom, foresight and insight which he devoted so generously to the welfare of his adopted country.

The only son of James McGee and Dorcas Morgan, he was born in Carlingford, County of Louth, Ireland, on April 13th, 1825. With the exception of his father, all the men on both sides of his family had been United Irishmen. Hence he was predisposed to strong sympathy with his country's misfortunes. From his mother, as well as from the romantic beauty of the Rostrevor coast, he inherited his gifted imagination and poetic fancy. It was she who inspired him with love of Ireland, its religion, its music, its legends and its history. Together they passed their leisure hours playing or singing Irish songs and acting the parts of Irish heroes. With the exception of a few years spend in a day-school at Wexford, McGee was self-educated, and the basis of his education was poetry and history.

The history of America attracted him particularly, and at the age of seventeen he crossed the Atlantic to try his fortune in the New World. Arrived in America, he made an oration on the Fourth of July which attracted the notice of his own countrymen there, and as a result he was offered a position on the staff of *The Boston Pilot*, an Irish-American journal devoted to the repeal of the Irish Union. Two years later, he became its editor, and wrote fiery editorials in defence of his countrymen who at that time had incurred the displeasure of the native Americans. His work attracted the attention of Daniel O'Connell, and through his influence McGee was invited to join the staff of the Dublin *Freeman's*

Journal, as parliamentary correspondent. But the freedom that he had enjoyed in America made him dissatisfied with the moderation of this paper, and he placed his pen at the disposal of Charles Gavan Duffy, editor of *The Nation,* the organ of the Young Ireland Party. From this he blundered into rebellion, and—with a price upon his head—he once more sought refuge overseas, landing in New York on October 10th, 1848.

> Twice have I sail'd the Atlantic o'er,
> Twice dwelt an exile in the West.

Sixteen days later he issued the first number of a new paper, *The New York Nation,* in which he carried on the warfare which had failed in Ireland. Here he ventured to assert that the failure of the Young Ireland insurrection had been due to opposition of the clergy. As a result of this statement a controversy ensued with Bishop Hughes of New York; and as the Irish laity sided with their bishop, McGee lost popularity and his paper languished. He then migrated, first to Boston, where he published *The American Celt,* then to Buffalo, and back again to New York. But though he publicly proclaimed his conversion from revolutionary methods in politics and radicalism in religion, he does not appear to have recovered his former influence. In 1856 he arranged a convention in Buffalo, with a view to encouraging the Irish in the overcrowded cities of the East to migrate and take possession of the fertile lands of the West; to become

> The Army of the Future, and the Champions of the unborn,
> Who pluck the primal forests up, and sow their sites with corn.

Out of this Convention came an invitation to join the Irish colony in Montreal, whither he removed with his little family in 1857.

Prior to his arrival in Canada, McGee had lived a very dangerous and troubled life, but throughout it all he had cultivated both the muse of poetry and the muse of history. After his death his fugitive poems were collected in one volume, and published with a very sympathetic Introduction by Mrs. Sadlier. With the exception of the *Arctic Indian's Faith, Jacques Cartier,* and the *Death of Hudson,* none of them were inspired by Canadian life or influenced by Canadian landscape. All the others are narrative, dealing with Irish history, or lyrical, dealing with his own woes or the woes of Ireland. *A Small Catechism* is the only one that can be said to have a universal appeal. The epic which he had planned, to be entitled *The Emigrants,* was never finished, owing no doubt to his early and sudden death, as he had hoped to retire from public life

as soon as the new Dominion had been properly launched on its hazardous voyage. His poetry, therefore, with the exceptions mentioned above, may be described as Irish and for the Irish. As an artistic achievement it may be dismissed.

In history and biography he was also busy, but the harried life and journalistic attitude of mind made it inevitable that none of his numerous essays should ever be authoritative, although they could not be uninteresting. Like his poetry, his history and biography treat of Ireland or Irishmen, at home or in America. In this brief article they can only be enumerated as follows:

"O'Connell and His Friends"; "The Irish Writers of the 17th Century"; "Life of McMurrough"; "Memoir of Duffy"; "Historical Sketches of Irish Settlers in America"; "History of the Reformation in Ireland"; "Catholic History of North America"; "Life of Bishop Magin"; and "A Popular History of Ireland."

His literary work in Canada is comprised in *Notes on Federal Governments Past and Present; Speeches on British American Union;* in the editorials of *The New Era,* and in contributions to various periodicals on political questions. These last have not yet been collected, although they are necessary to a fuller appreciation of his youthful dreams, his tireless activity and his influence:—

> I dreamed a dream when the woods were green
> And my April heart made an April scene,
> In the far, far distant land;
> That even I might something do
> That should keep my memory for the true,
> And my name from the spoiler's hand.

Immediately after his arrival in Montreal, McGee started a paper, *The New Era,* a title that was significant in that it marked a new era both in his own life and in that of Canada. For him it meant a complete break with his revolutionary past, an escape from the odium of his tactical blunders in America, and a second chance to live his life again. For Canada it meant that she had found a gifted orator and journalist who would devote his energy, his talents and his life to her unity and self-determination. In an early number of his paper he struck off a phrase, "the new nationality," and after a decade of advocacy he had the pleasure of seeing this phrase used in the speech from the throne, on the opening of that famous parliament which was to debate the Quebec Resolutions on Confederation.

But his journalistic efforts were soon to give way to active co-operation in building a nation through parliamentary effort. From 1858 to 1866 he represented Montreal West in the Canadian

Assembly. During the Macdonald-Cartier administration he was against the government, and still showed signs of past bitterness in his rather sarcastic humour. When this administration was defeated, he entered the J. S. Macdonald-Sicotte ministry as President of the Council; but when, on reorganization of this ministry prior to an election, he was omitted, he joined forces with John A. Macdonald and upon their return to power became Minister of Agriculture. This portfolio he retained until Confederation. He was a member of the Canadian delegation to the Maritime Provinces in the summer of 1864, to the Charlottetown Conference of September, and the Quebec Conference of October. In the debates of 1865 in the Canadian Assembly he played a prominent part, and after this session he visited Ireland, where he made a vigorous attack upon Fenianism and pleaded for harmony between the Irish and the English. "Each country would suffer loss in the loss of the other, and even liberty in Europe would be exposed to the perils of shipwreck if those islands were divided by a hostile sea." This speech provoked bitter feeling amongst the Irish of Montreal, and 600 of them signed a document repudiating it as "unhandsome, ungenerous and unjust." For McGee this was the beginning of the end. In 1867 he acted as Canadian Commissioner at the Paris Exposition, and on his return had a bitter fight in his constituency which was contested by Mr. Devlin, another Irish-Catholic. In this election he again denounced Fenianism, and in consequence he was returned to the first parliament of the new Dominion with a much diminished majority. In the composition of the Dominion Cabinet he felt that he was entitled to a portfolio, and at first held out stoutly for his rights; but, apparently on an appeal from Sir Charles Tupper who also sacrificed his personal claims, he generously gave place to Sir Edward Kenny, a Catholic member from Nova Scotia, thereby enabling Sir John A. Macdonald to form a Cabinet at a moment when he was on the point of giving up in despair owing to the difficulties of satisfying the demands of Quebec and Ontario.

In the spring of 1868 rumors were rife of designs on McGee's life. At the request of Mr. Godwin, Sir Charles Tupper warned him to be moderate in his speech at the St. Patrick's banquet in Ottawa. He replied, "I shall do as you say, but threatened dogs live long." Sunday, April 5th, he spent with the Godwins, and the same day he wrote two letters, one to Lord Mayo, Chief Secretary for Ireland, advising him how to deal with Fenianism, the other to Sir Charles Tupper, asking him to arrange in London for the publication of a brochure on Fenianism, *Cyrus O'Neil*, which "for obvious reasons must be published anonymously." On April 7th, he made a

brilliant speech in the House, on behalf of the solidarity of the new federation:

> By and by, time will show us the constitution of this Dominion as much cherished in the hearts of the people of all these Provinces, not excepting Nova Scotia, as is the British Constitution itself . .
>
> We will compel them (the Nova Scotians) to come in and accept this union; we will compel them by our fairness, our kindness, our love, to be one with us in this common and this great national work.

While these words were yet stirring their hearts, and before the members had retired for the night, McGee was shot at the door of his lodgings, and thus passed out of Canadian politics into Canadian tradition. True to his life, his last thoughts had been for the welfare of Ireland, the land of his birth, and of Canada, the land of his adoption.

To the biographer the bare facts of McGee's life are not enough. On its face the record is remarkable for stirring adventure and glaring inconsistency; but, on a deeper view, there is an underlying unity that is equally remarkable. It was easy for his critics to taunt him for having been a rebel, a turncoat, and an unprincipled adventurer; but the very fervour with which he embraced his later conservatism affords the key to his earlier radicalism; and the bitterness of his experiences in Ireland and in America easily accounts for his ripe unfolding in a more congenial atmosphere.

It was in answer to such a taunt, in the Canadian House of Assembly, that he said; "I am as loyal as any Tory of the old or new school. My native disposition is towards reverence of things old and veneration for the landmarks of the past." His statement carries conviction. By temperament he was ardent, whether in love of the beautiful, of liberty, or of Ireland, of Canada, of humanity; and he was peculiarly sensitive to ideas and environment. Flung into life in the midst of that discontent which characterized Ireland "enfolded in the melancholy main," venerating her past history and her ancient heroes both secular and religious, his conservatism made him fight for her ancient freedom. But when, in exile, his patriotism brought him into conflict not only with the alien English but with the venerable Church of his fathers, this gave him pause and caused him to readjust himself to new conditions. On his arrival in Canada, where British rule was neither oppressive nor intolerant, his historical imagination reasserted itself, and with remarkable facility he assimilated her past history, identified himself with her natural line of development, and seized the opportunity to play a part in her affairs. Fortune threw him at first into the

arms of those who were against the government; but personal affinity with Sir John A. Macdonald coincided with personal estrangement from John Sandfield Macdonald, so that without hesitation he allied himself with the former and at last found his natural level in political thought.

His espousal of Canadian national unity preceded his alliance with Canadian conservatism; but in his mind the two ideas became reconciled and readily merged into one. The great names and achievements of the four chief races in Canada could be adequately venerated and conserved only by co-operation on the part of these races in one great national mission. Freedom of thought and conscience could be maintained only by mutual tolerance and goodwill. Freedom and unity could be built only on a foundation of order; and here he called Burke to his aid in preferring the British monarchical system rather than American Republicanism:

> I maintain that the limited monarchy, with representative institutions, is as essentially a free government as any republic that ever existed. The name republic is not always synonymous with freedom, as we may see in Venice and ancient Rome; indeed some kingdoms have been administered throughout upon republican principles, and some republics upon despotic principles. I acknowledge the salutary efficacy of what Burke called "the suppressed republicanism" of the British system, and that there are periods and circumstances in which it ought not to be suppressed; hence seeking anxiously for my adopted country stability as well as the largest liberty, I confess I turn, after many anxious years of consideration, to the expedient of an inviolable head, with responsible advisers, as the only one yet known among men which can give us, in harmonious proportions, a government preservative of freedom and conservative of law.

Yet it is not for either his radicalism or his conservatism that we Canadians owe a debt of gratitude to Thomas D'Arcy McGee, but rather for his contribution to the psychology of Canadian unity. From the first year of his arrival in Canada, he caught the vision of a great new northern nation existing side by side with the American Republic, and during the next ten years he gave voice to this idea, not only in the Canadas but in the Maritime Provinces, which he visited seven times before Confederation. He did not conceive the idea of national unity, nor did he determine its final form; but he gave definiteness to the idea, and had not a little to do with the final constitution itself. In his paper, in the Canadian Assembly, on the public platform, he discussed and debated and explained the vision. As he talked of an extended market, a more diversified field for capital and labour, enhanced credit with the

mother-country, greater effectiveness in defence, a wider career for the talented youth of the hitherto obscure colonies, a Dominion extending from sea to sea, his hearers were spell-bound and readily rose to that vision of a great future which has haunted them ever since:

> Territory, resources by sea and land, civil and religious freedom, these we have already. Four millions we already are; four millions culled from the races that, for a thousand years, have led the van of Christendom . . . . We have more Saxons than Alfred had when he founded the English realm. We have more Celts than Brian had when he put his heel on the neck of Odin. We have more Normans than William had when he marshalled his invading host along the strand of Falaise. We have the laws of St. Edward and St. Louis, Magna Carta and the Roman Code. We speak the speeches of Shakespeare and Bossuet. We copy the constitution which Burke and Somers, Sidney and Sir Thomas More lived or died to secure or save. Out of these august elements, in the name of the future generations who shall inhabit all the vast region we now call ours, I invoke the fortunate genius of a United British America, to solemnize law with the moral sanction of religion, and to crown the fair pillar of our freedom with its only appropriate capital, lawful authority, so that hand in hand we and our descendants may advance steadily to the accomplishment of a common destiny.

It was because almost every speech of McGee's had purple patches such as these that Irishmen, Scotsmen, Englishmen and Frenchmen were for the moment willing to merge their rivalries and superiorities into one common partnership which was to embrace the living, the dead, the yet unborn; and because an anonymous bard in the Caledonian Society of Montreal illustrates how completely McGee's advocacy transcended religious bigotry and racialism, it is fitting that I should conclude this memorial article with his simple rhyme:

> The gentle maple weeps an' waves
> Aboon our patriot-statesman's heed;
> But if we prize the licht he gave
> We'll bury feuds of race and creed,
> For this he wrocht, for this he died;
> An' for the luve we bear his name,
> Let's live as brithers, side by side,
> In Canada, our hame.