

**Frank Baird**

## **A MISSIONARY EDUCATOR: DR. THOS. McCULLOCH**

Introduction by Hamilton Baird

In a recent issue of Dalhousie Alumni News it is announced that a number of new senior chairs are to be established and that they are to be named McCulloch Professorships in honor of Thomas McCulloch, first president of Dalhousie.

Thus it seems a happy coincidence when going over some papers which my late father, Rev. Dr. Frank Baird\* had written some sixty years ago, that I should have found a paper entitled "A Missionary Educator—Dr. Thomas McCulloch".

The paper tells of McCulloch's early life, of his work as a minister of the Gospel and of his work in establishing Pictou Academy, up to the point where he "somewhat reluctantly accepted the presidency of Dalhousie College".

Dr. Donald M. Sinclair, who at my request kindly has reviewed the paper, has pointed out that the explanation as to just why Dr. McCulloch might have been reluctant to accept the presidency, is to be found in a paper which Dr. Harold L. Scammell had read to the Nova Scotia Historical Society on February 5, 1954, as reported in Volume 31 of the Collections of the Society. "At the age of 62, an elderly man in those days", Dr. Scammell says, "mentally alert but physically worn out", he relinquished his position as principal of Pictou Academy to undertake the duties of the presidency of Dalhousie College which, although founded 20 years before, had not had a president.

For events in the life of McCulloch as president of Dalhousie College, one must look of course to Dr. D. C. Harvey's *An approach to the History of Dalhousie University*, McCurdy Printing Co. Ltd., Halifax, 1938.

\*Dr. Frank Baird (1870-1951), a native of New Brunswick and graduate of the University of New Brunswick, Dalhousie and Pine Hill Divinity Hall, besides being moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Canada (1930), was the author of several books. In the foreword to *Rob MacNab, A Story of Old Pictou* (1923), the author states, "This story attempts to do, in a simple way, for old Pictou, what Scott, in a grand way, did for old Scotland".

For what it may be worth by way of interest to your readers at this time when the University have seen fit to honor McCulloch, I submit to you, under its original title, and with only very minor editing, the enclosed paper.

Thomas McCulloch was born in Renfrewshire, Scotland, in 1766. At an early age he went to Glasgow University where he took courses both in medicine and in arts, but before obtaining a degree he turned to the study of Theology. He was ordained and began his ministry in Ayrshire. Having heard the call for missionaries to go to Nova Scotia<sup>1</sup> he offered himself to the General Associate Synod (Antiburger) of the Secession Presbyterian Church, and was by that body appointed as missionary to Prince Edward Island.

In November, 1803, Dr. McCulloch, a man of unusual zeal and energy, then thirty-seven years of age, along with his wife and family arrived at Pictou. Before the passengers had been landed, a citizen of Pictou, John Dawson by name, boarded the vessel and was surprised to find in the possession of one of the passengers a pair of globes, one representing the earth, the other the heavens. On returning to shore he reported the arrival of a man of learning. A little later, discovering that in addition to being a scholar he was also a minister, the citizens, by urging their need of a pastor, and by pointing out the dangers of a trip to Prince Edward Island so late in the season, were able to convince Dr. McCulloch that he ought to remain in Pictou. The next spring, on June 6th, 1804, he was inducted as pastor of the then meagre and scattered Pictou congregation.

He was met by hardships and opposition almost from the outset. While the Gospel had been preached in Pictou for several years previous to this, by Dr. James MacGregor and others, the general atmosphere of the place was far from being desirable. Intemperance and profanity, superstition, poverty and ignorance, the difficulty of obtaining even the plainest necessities of life, the length and severity of the winters, the scarcity of fuel, the apathy of the people, the presence in the community of a number of ungodly and violent men, some of them old soldiers and some American adventurers, who were openly opposed to religion and morality,—these and many other problems had to be met and reckoned with by Dr. McCulloch, from the beginning.

Thus it would be a mistake to assume that the Pictou of today is similar in character to the Pictou of a century earlier, when the evangelist, James MacGregor and the schoolmaster and educator, Thomas McCulloch, arrived on the scene. If, in later years, Pictou became essentially Scottish, and took on the traditionally religious Scottish spirit, it must be admitted that at the be-

ginning, it was not so; only by recognizing this at the outset can one measure the greatness of the work done and the greatness of the men who did the work.

Dr. MacGregor had been chiefly an evangelist; the fact of sin and the need of redemption had been the burden of his message; Dr. McCulloch, while not overlooking the necessity for evangelism, was most impressed with the appalling ignorance of the people and though coming to the country as a minister of the Gospel, the need of educational facilities in the land very soon made a deep impression on him. Seeing learning not only as the handmaiden of religion but as an essential element in the growth and prosperity of the country, he undertook the task of securing to the youth of the land the advantages of higher education.

He was quick, too, to perceive that if the work of evangelization was to be carried on there must be provision for the training of a native ministry. His activities therefore, as time went on, turned more and more in that direction, and the proud pre-eminence of Pictou in the educational world is in no small degree due to his far-sighted plans in the interest of higher education.

Thus it was no mere accident, by which we find that men like Dawson of McGill, Grant and Gordon of Queen's and Forrest of Dalhousie, all College Presidents, were all born and trained in Pictou.

From the first, Dr. McCulloch had been a lover of learning; the two globes prove that. However, it was not until 1805, two years after his arrival, in meditating upon the alarming ignorance revealed by his catechising of some children at West River that he conceived the idea of founding a school. Before him there opened suddenly, as if by inspiration, the vision of a complete programme of education including every grade of school from the primary to a college for the training of a native ministry. From that time on he set himself resolutely and devotedly to the task of giving form and substance to the ideal which had become the ruling passion of his life.

First he built, largely with his own hands near his own house in Pictou, a small school building. It was of logs chinked with moss and clay mortar. The work of teaching was here scarcely begun when the little building was secretly set on fire by an enemy of Dr. McCulloch, and burned to the ground. Undaunted the schoolmaster and minister built again on a better site and on a larger scale. Here, in 1811, when the passing of the provincial Grammar School Act brought a grant of £100 per year to the school as representing the Pictou district, a dormitory was added to the building which gave room for sixteen resident pupils. The fame of the school spread. Students came from

all over Nova Scotia, from Cape Breton, and at one time there were six representatives from the West Indies. This school, known as a Grammar School, fulfilled but a small part of Dr. McCulloch's ideal for education. By 1815, when the Grammar School had been in operation for ten years, the time seemed ripe, and the pupils seemed ready, for another step forward. Accordingly a number of Pictou citizens formed a society and began raising funds for the establishment of a more ambitious and advanced institution, which was destined to be known as an Academy.

For the carrying out of this plan, the Provincial government, on the petition of Dr. McCulloch and several others in Pictou and elsewhere, in 1816 granted letters of incorporation for a Board of Trustees.

It is at this point in time that Dr. McCulloch and his plans first appear on the political horizon of the province. His first little log schoolhouse had been set on fire, but that evidence of hostility was but a foreshadowing of the opposition which his larger plans were to meet in the wider Provincial field. Here a glance backward is necessary.

In 1788 there had been founded in another part of Nova Scotia—at Windsor—an institution subsequently designated King's College. Its charter, granted by the Imperial Government, was reasonably liberal, but the parties to whose lot it fell to make bylaws, so hedged the Windsor institution about with tests and rules, that practically four-fifths of the population of the country—all Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Baptists and Methodists—were excluded from its classes and privileges.

Consequently when Dr. McCulloch's plan for another institution of higher learning, open to all, was laid before the popular branch of the legislature, namely the Assembly, the movement was hailed with satisfaction, and a bill incorporating a Board of Trustees for the proposed Academy<sup>2</sup> was passed unanimously. However, the other branch of the Legislature, termed the Council, through which all bills had to pass before becoming law, took quite a different view. They so amended it as to restrict the office of trustee and teacher to either Episcopalians or Presbyterians, denying authoritative places in its government to the other religious denominations, all of which were growing in membership.

The trustees, thus restricted in practice to Presbyterians, of whom there were not more than twenty scattered congregations, though much disappointed at the loss of the prospect of enlisting the support of these other denominations, at once set to work raising the necessary funds for the erection of a building.<sup>3</sup> They chose Dr. McCulloch as first president of the new institution and in

the fall of 1817 he opened his first classes in the house of a private citizen, teaching besides Greek and Hebrew, Logic, Moral Philosophy and Natural Philosophy. In each of these sciences he had drawn up a system for his own use. During the first five or six years of the life of the Academy let it be remembered, he "had charge of a congregation, and regularly preached twice each Sunday, save when over-exertion ended in sickness".

Though he had a considerable staff to assist him, Dr. McCulloch was the heart and soul of the entire institution. And various as were the subjects which were assigned to him, he taught them all efficiently. Possessed of a clear and powerful intellect he went at once to the central point of any subject in either Arts or Theology: and in addition to being a scholar he was an inspiring and popular teacher. If, viewed from the standpoint of today, the breadth and variety of his teaching were to be taken as an indication of lack of thoroughness, it can only be said that at the beginning of the last century the day of specialization had not yet dawned.

From time to time application was made to the Legislature by the trustees for financial aid. This was sometimes granted but more frequently refused owing to the hostile attitude of the Council to the Academy which by the year 1824 had been able to graduate a class of seven young men trained for the ministry in both Arts and Theology. Of these seven—and they were the first regularly trained native ministers sent out by any college in Canada—three proceeded to Glasgow, and there, on examinations, won the degree of M. A. Several other young men entered other professions, and it was now generally recognized that the Academy had vindicated its founder by showing its efficiency and usefulness.

But these evidences of success only roused to greater effort the opponents of the Academy. Accordingly when in 1825 the trustees applied to the government for the removal of denominational restrictions regarding trustees and teachers, and asked for the making permanent of the grant of £400 per year, the Council, notwithstanding the approval of the request by the Assembly persistently and repeatedly refused its assent.

In the year 1826 opposition from another source developed. Two ministers of the Church of Scotland (The Kirk Party), both settled in Pictou, out of a spirit of narrow denominational jealousy on account of the advantage given the Secession Church by the existence of the Academy, entered a protest against the teaching of Theology, demanding the down-grading of the institution to the level of a Grammar School. Resulting from this the Council, in-

stead of granting a permanent endowment refused even the annual allowance of £400; thus in the year 1827 the Academy, after ten years of useful service was stripped of all state support.

In 1828 the Council went still further by decreeing that all the trustees, including Dr. McCulloch, should be removed and the Academy reduced to the level of a Grammar School; but in this sweeping measure the Assembly refused to concur, and so matters came to a deadlock which continued through 1829 and 1830, the Assembly standing strongly by Dr. McCulloch and his Academy, the Council persistently refusing either money or moral support. The result was that the Academy languished, debt accumulated, and friends became disheartened.

However, by the resolute efforts of Dr. McCulloch and one of his former pupils, Jotham Blanchard, a member of the Provincial Assembly and a man of substance and influence, the life of the Academy was prolonged. The Presbyterian friends of the institution rallied to its support up to the limit of their scanty means. Dr. McCulloch went home to Scotland to plead for support for the unfortunate Academy. Mr. Blanchard carried the whole case to the foot of the throne, through the medium of the United Secession Synod in Scotland who petitioned the King with a view to obtaining justice for the Pictou institution. As a result of these efforts the Governor of Nova Scotia was instructed to inform his Council that provision be made for the maintenance of the Academy out of the funds of the Province. To this order the Council had to bow, but while the grant was passed as ordered by the Imperial Government, the further teaching of Theology was forbidden, four members of the Kirk party were added to the board of Trustees, and while some of the higher branches of learning were retained, it was ordered that the Academy be conducted as a Grammar School. By these changes the primary and chief aim of Dr. McCulloch was over-ridden. Thus, as a result of years of deliberate and studied opposition he was finally forced to abandon the great work which he had carried on with such zeal and energy and at such a cost in personal sacrifice.

That the state of his feelings may be better understood, part of a letter written by him in 1825 may here be quoted:

"I have at present the prospect of beginning the world anew.<sup>4</sup> No man can have the interests of the Academy more closely at heart than myself, but if our clergy and congregations continue their torpidity, it must go down, and if I must leave it, the sooner the better".

In 1838 Dr. McCulloch somewhat reluctantly accepted the presidency of Dalhousie College, carrying out the duties and responsibilities of this position until his death in 1843. The Pictou Academy, to which he had given so many years of his life, was closed in 1842, but was remodelled and opened a few years later, when it became a part of the regular school system of the Province of Nova Scotia.

Of the results of Dr. McCulloch's forty years of patient and heroic efforts to break the monopoly which had been built around education in Nova Scotia, much might be said; his influence extended far beyond his great labors at the old Pictou Academy, at Dalhousie and at Pine Hill; to him, more than to all the others who took part in the struggle for free institutions is due the credit for laying the foundation for liberal, non-sectarian and progressive schools and colleges in Canada.

#### NOTES

1. Nova Scotia, strictly speaking, did not include the Province of Prince Edward Island but the name Nova Scotia, which formerly had included New Brunswick, may have been used in Scotland as a general term to describe the entire Maritime Provinces area. MacBeath in *The Burning Bush in Canada* reports that an earlier missionary, Rev. James Murdock, was appointed "to Nova Scotia or any other part of the American Continent where God in His Providence may call him".
2. Dr. H. L. Scammell, as reported in Volume 31, *Collections of the Nova Scotia Historical Society*, points out that although admittedly there would be competent instruction in Hebrew and the Classics, the Legislature denied them the use of the name College and the right to grant degrees, assigning to them only the "little name" of Academy.
3. C. W. Jefferys, in *The Picture Gallery of Canadian History*, Vol. 2 shows the Pictou Academy building, built in 1818, along with a portrait of McCulloch.
4. This "prospect of beginning the world anew" appears to refer to an offer of the position of president of Dalhousie College, which he accepted 13 years later, in 1838.