

The History of St. Francis Xavier University

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SCOTLAND IS A PROTESTANT COUNTRY. In the 18th century, however, Strathglass, the west Highlands and some of the Hebrides contained large numbers of Catholics. Many immigrants came to Cape Breton and eastern Nova Scotia from those areas during the great dispersal of Highland people that followed the failed 1745 “rebellion” and the breakup of the clan system. By 1851 there were nearly 50,000 Catholics in that part of Nova Scotia; the majority were Scots. Acadians, Irish and natives made up most of the rest of the Catholic population.

Their Protestant neighbours by that time had institutions of higher learning at Pictou, Windsor, Halifax and Wolfville. There was a Catholic college in Halifax (St. Mary’s) but it was distant, and furthermore it was the home of the smooth-talking, double-dealing Halifax Irish who had slandered and vilified poor Bishop William Fraser.¹ Better to send Angus or Donald to brave the Presbyterian rigours of Pictou Academy than throw him among the terrible Hibernians.

The Munros had an excellent grammar school at Boularderie and grammar schools had been run by Catholics at St. Andrew’s and East Bay. But Bishop Colin MacKinnon and Catholic leaders felt the need for their own college in the east, a degree-granting institution where young men could be trained for the priesthood and the professions. There had been no such avenues of upward mobility in the Auld Homeland; the only escape for young Catholic Highlanders was to join the Wild Geese — the mercenary soldiers who swelled the ranks of foreign armies from Spain to Russia. True, a few priests had been educated in the Scots Colleges in Europe and in the fly-by-night seminaries that existed briefly and precariously in parts of the Highlands, threatened always by poverty and Penal Laws. But the Gaels saw the new land, especially the United States, as a land of limitless opportunity for people with education and/or training.

In 1853 a college/seminary was established in Arichat, Cape Breton in what was then the diocesan seat. The bishop and the college moved to Antigonish on the mainland in 1855. This was the beginning of St. Francis Xavier University. In *For the People: A History of St. Francis Xavier University* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996), Jim Cameron, with assistance from the Eatons, has set out to write its story from these beginnings to 1970. He has done a good job. Documentation for the first half-century was difficult to locate. (Too bad there were no tape recorders then!) There is evidence of ample printed sources for the last 70 years and he supplements these with respectable number of interviews. Cameron has skilfully included the broader religious and secular changes occurring within and

1 For an account of the tensions between Scots and Irish, see Rev. A. A. Johnston, *A History of the Catholic Church in Eastern Nova Scotia*, vol. 2, (Antigonish, 1972), pp. 174-80, 198-215, 221-30.

without the Maritime region in his narrative. He has taken a broad and far-ranging approach in considering crises in the life of the university, many of which were exceedingly controversial.

Although the first “President” (rector was the original term used, and used for a long time after the university’s founding) was German, the governing body and staff for many years were of Highland Scots descent, with a few Irish and Acadians. The preponderance of Celts with their alleged ancestral weaknesses for alcohol and internecine bickering resulted in frequent discord. Cameron is quite candid in dealing with the boozing clerics and with the wrangles over courses and discipline which endangered the college’s very existence. In 1870 only 18 students were enrolled in the institution; government aid came just in time to enable the place to remain open. St. Mary’s in Halifax was less fortunate, having to shut down for 12 years.

In some ways St. F. X. was fortunate during its first century of existence. It was not frequently visited by disastrous fires as were Mount Allison University and King’s College in their time. Its endowment funds were not robbed as were those of the University of Manitoba, not that St. F. X. endowments presented much temptation. They were worth only \$21,000 in 1886 and by the 1920s were still only worth \$224,750. The pillaged fund at Manitoba amounted to more than \$900,000. St. F. X. could only operate by making use of the services of scantily paid priest-professors and the Sisters of St. Martha. In 1902 each sister was allowed a monthly wage of two dollars for their arduous work of cooking, cleaning, mending, washing and nursing.

Such financial sacrifices were the rule, and another sacrifice was made willingly by the Gaels. English, not Gaelic was made the language of instruction. The Scots wanted English to be the working language so they could succeed in the world.² There was another compelling reason for the Celtic abandonment of their ancient tongue that Cameron does not mention: hardly any Gaelic books were available. The rich Gaelic heritage of legend and folklore was stored in people’s memories and expressed in songs and oral recitation. Practically the only Gaelic books available were Protestant Bibles and religious tracts, quite unacceptable to Catholics. Along with English there was a strong emphasis on the study of Latin (necessary for the priesthood and for university entrance). There was no time for Gaelic.

The easy surrender of their ancestral tongue made it difficult for the Celts to understand the Acadian desire to retain French. The teaching of French was sadly neglected until the university’s vice-president, Father “Jimmy” Tompkins, persuaded the Carnegie Corporation to endow a French chair and provide four bursaries for the study of the language in 1919. Father Jimmy, a human dynamo from Margaree, was the prime mover in the creation of the Antigonish Movement, an experiment in adult education, community organization and economic co-operation which brought international renown to the University. He was also a leader in an attempt to merge the Maritime universities into super-university at Halifax. The Carnegie Corporation promised three million dollars toward the federation scheme. The proposal aroused a storm of controversy. Sectarian suspicions, distrust of Halifax and Dalhousie, church

2 D. Campbell and R. A. MacLean, *Beyond the Atlantic Roar* (Toronto, 1974), pp. 173-80; Gilbert Foster, *Language and Poverty* (St. John’s, 1988), pp. 55-7; C. W. Dunn, *Highland Settler* (Toronto, 1968), pp. 121-34; Kenneth J. McKenna, *Highland Paths* (Ottawa, 1998), pp. 87-91, 112-14.

politics — all these were used in the deadly serious game of merger versus anti-merger factions. Cameron covers this contentious business in masterly fashion. A factor he does not include in his analysis is that the move would have been an economic bodyblow to Antigonish town and county. Heavy pressures against the union were applied from those quarters.

The federation scheme was turned down by St. F. X., as it was by all other Maritime universities except King's. Father "Jimmy" Tompkins was summarily removed from St. F. X. and sent to the isolated parish of Canso, a place he bitterly described as an outpost of "fish, fog and fornication". St. F. X. was determined to remain Catholic and poor. A Dalhousie professor who later became provincial premier and who was a former student of Tompkins, Angus L. Macdonald (whose name is consistently spelled MacDonald throughout Cameron's book), voiced his regret years later over the failure of the merger scheme. The Maritimes, said Angus L., could have had a "Canadian Princeton", a first-class university with attached denominational colleges. Instead the region continued with 13 colleges, in Angus L.'s opinion, "each about equivalent to a first-rate high school". In his history of Dalhousie, P. B. Waite gives figures to show the relative poverty of post-secondary institutions in the region. Six Maritime colleges with 1,759 students had total endowments of \$3,350,000; Bowdoin College in Maine, with an enrollment of 500, operated with approximately the same endowment.³

Having spurned a shower of gold from above, St. F. X.'s Extension Department soon became deeply involved in a programme of adult education that proposed to "bring the university to the people". Farmers, fishermen, coal miners and steelworkers would be taught how to run their own business affairs through co-operative organizations. Catholic leaders believed that such activities would slow the migration of people and money from the region and check the spread of Communism. The mobilization of "ordinary" working people to a consciousness of their collective power and abilities came to be called the "Antigonish Movement" and brought international fame to St. F. X.

Jim Cameron has depicted these developments and others in the 50 years after 1920 very well. He has neglected none of the men and women who fought the battle to "awaken the people" during those exciting years at St. F. X. But the university was not only the Extension Department. Cameron may be excused for concentrating on administration and a few faculty members during the first half-century of St. F. X.'s existence; his frustration at the lack of records is made clear in the ample notes — 57 pages of them. But there are serious omissions. He practically ignores athletics on the pretext that it will be the subject of another study. This will not do! How can a history of St. F. X. leave out "Little Doctor Hugh" who inspired a hockey team capable of defeating Harvard in 1910 and who brought the Irish rugby expert John McCarthy in to introduce the game to the university? Amateur sport — hockey, rugby and basketball in particular — has been an essential part of the St. F. X. tradition. At times the struggle in sports took on aspects of a crusade. There were giants in those days — "Ajax" Campbell, Tom Trainor, "Skeets" MacLean, Jack Chisholm, "Tarp" Walsh,

3 P. B. Waite, *The Lives of Dalhousie University*, vol. I, 1818-1925, Lord Dalhousie's College (Montreal and Kingston, 1994), p. 270.

Jackie MacLellan, Lorne Whalen, Joe “Beef” Cameron, John Mykety, to mention only a few. The “Upper Canadian” football game, which St. F. X. adopted with reluctance, never caught on in the same way as rugby.

John Reid, in his splendid two-volume history of Mount Allison, very effectively incorporated brief accounts of colourful faculty members and their special contributions to Mount Allison.⁴ Cameron has not done enough of this. Only once is Father Leo “Poppy” McKenna mentioned. Lord! For forty years “Poppy”, that marvellous, smiling, warm-hearted man, was literally the spirit of St. F. X. What of Dr. Egbert Munzer, an internationally recognized scholar, famous at “X” for lobster and beer parties? What of the grim-visaged, foghorn-voiced philosophy professor known as “Long Mal” or the “High Priest”? Or Sister Marie Reine, the long-serving Infirmary? I could not locate in the book, although there is a photograph of her, Sister St. Veronica, almost the whole History Department in herself. There seems to be no other mention of her. A man still with us in 1998, the “Deacon”, Dr. John Hugh Gillis (I may yet be caned for calling him that in print) does not get his due. He was probably the greatest Latin and Philosophy teacher anywhere.

You may say that all this additional material would swell the work to unmanageable size. Well and good. The history would possibly be better as a two-volume work, with the dividing point being let us say, 1928, the year that Moses Coady was given the green light to establish a department of extension. Jim Cameron has demonstrated his writing and organizing ability. A two-volume work would have permitted him to put some gravy with the meat. The book as it is leans heavily towards administration.

The few errors and spelling mistakes may be blamed on proofreading. Labour leader J. B. McLachlan’s name is mis-spelled in the notes. Allan J. MacEachen is miscalled a sociologist rather than an economist. Jack “the Carpenter” MacDonald gets proper recognition, but he is confused in the index with a priest-professor bearing the same name. We may perhaps excuse the mis-spelling of *Comunn an fhraoich*, Gaelic for the Heather Society launched by father D. M. MacAdam.

Something else, which is not a critical comment on Cameron’s excellent work, comes to mind. He can hardly be blamed for neglecting a part of university life which few other university histories have mentioned at all — clerical employees and others who are not part of the faculty. Half a century ago the university employed young women known to students as “jeeps” to aid the sisters in domestic duties. Edward MacDonald comments on a similar group at St. Dunstan’s, “serving girls, mostly Acadians” who lived “in a small dorm in the Sisters’ cramped quarters”.⁵ University officials saw them as a potential moral danger to the students so all communication between the two groups was officially proscribed. Among the students, however, these girls were rumoured to be “extremely passionate”. Similar fantasies were entertained by St. F. X. students about the “jeeps”. Some of the girls, now elderly women, retain rather bitter memories of coming in from the country, working hard for miserable wages, and being forced to live near-cloistered lives.

4 John G. Reid, *Mount Allison University: A History to 1963*, 2 vols. (Toronto, 1984).

5 G. Edward MacDonald, *The History of St. Dunstan’s University, 1855-1956* (Charlottetown, 1989), pp. 263-4, 363.

Partly because of the precarious nature of their financing before governments subsidized them, universities have had a dubious record as employers. McMaster was criticized by unions for firing striking maintenance staff during the 1930s. Dalhousie had a maintenance strike in the 1970s over wages and contracting out. St. F. X. has frequently been accused of underpaying employees and discouraging attempts at unionizing them. Faculty members have been reasonably well paid since the 1960s — about on a par with public school teachers. But the university pension is quite inadequate compared with that of public school teachers. Faculty members are treated as if they are independently wealthy; they lose nearly all benefits upon retirement and are regarded as non-persons by the university except in special cases.

I cannot resist a final comment. Jim Cameron skilfully describes the secularization of the university, then comes to the shaky conclusion that St. F. X. remained a Catholic institution in 1970. The presence of clergy and the existence of a Catholic chapel are hardly enough to warrant this conclusion. Perhaps, as Christian apologist C. S. Lewis once declared, it is impossible to operate a Christian university in today's pagan, materialistic society. Since Lewis' passing, the Christian Trinity has been displaced by a new supreme Trinity — profits, industrial efficiency and electronic communication. This, though, is hardly pertinent to Jim Cameron's book, since he goes only to 1970. Apart from the few mistakes and omissions mentioned, he has done well.

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