Captain John MacDonald and the Island

by J.M. Bumsted

In the history of Prince Edward Island, those years in the last half of the eighteenth century when it was officially known as the Island of St. John are among its least familiar and most fascinating. Not only did these years see the development of most of the institutions and tensions which would preoccupy the Island throughout the nineteenth century, but they also bore witness to a large number of fascinating characters — worth knowing not only to Islanders but to all Canadians. While governors Patterson and Fanning were themselves arresting and interesting figures, it is a bit of a pity that this early period is usually delineated in terms of their careers and preoccupations. For there are other men and women worth remembering on the Island of St. John: Robert Clark, for example, the Quaker philanthropist who sought to settle Lot 21; or Phillips Callbeck, attorney-general and acting governor during the years of the American Revolution, who succeeded in persuading the British government (against all reasonable evidence) that the Island was in such serious danger that large sums of money must be spent on defense; or Robert Hodgson, who began his career on the Island as a journeyman carpenter and rose to be a wealthy and powerful landed gentleman; or James Curtis, who came to the Island as footman to Governor Patterson and rose to political prominence; or Helen (Nelly) MacDonald, who singlehandedly managed a major estate on the Island for sixteen years.

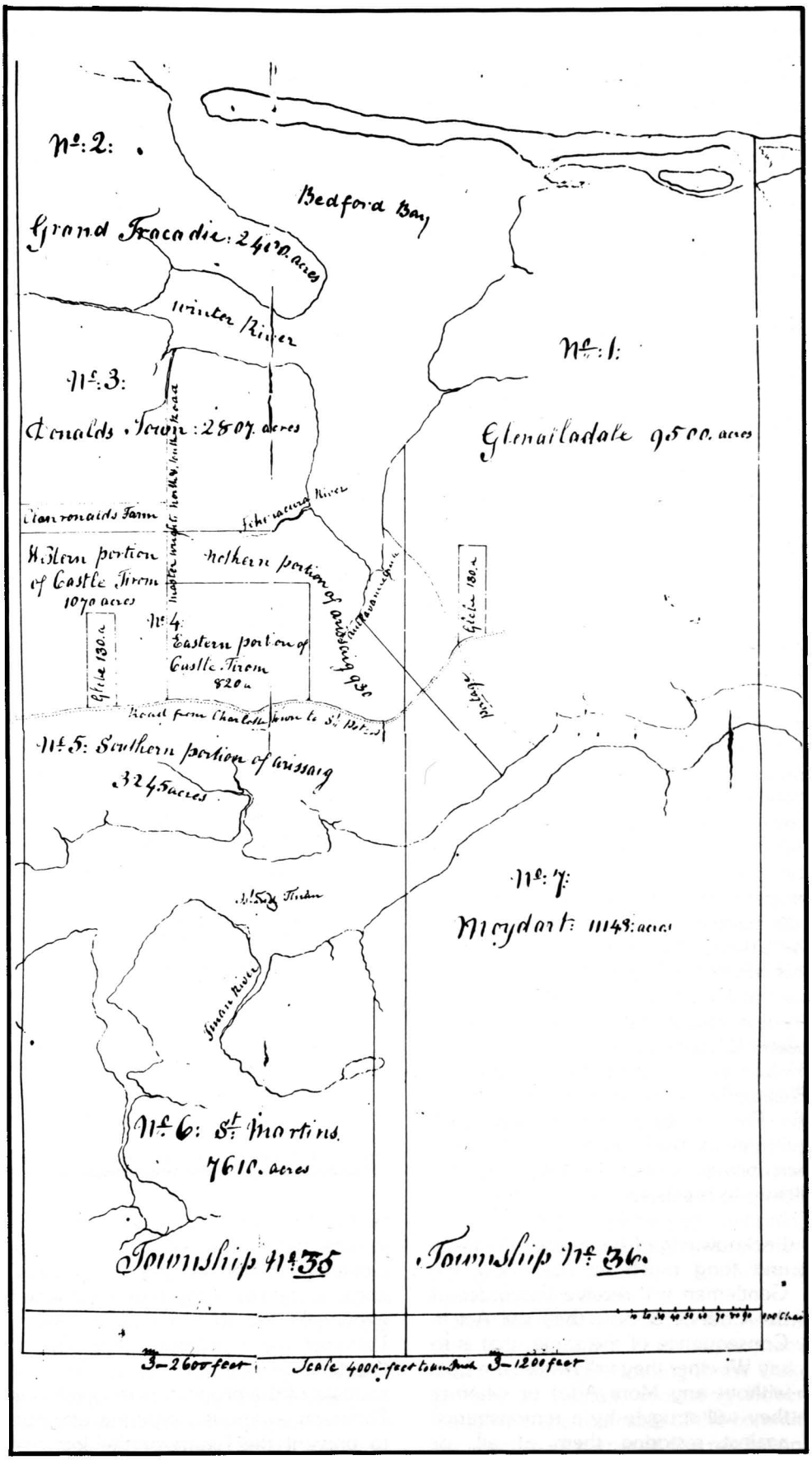
But in the large cast of characters surrounding Patterson and Fanning, easily the most compelling and attractive figure is that of John MacDonald. Originally eighth laird of Glenaladale in the Highlands, "Captain John" — as he was known during most of his Island career — was one of the early proprietors who had actually attempted to settle his land on St. John's. For thirty years thereafter he acted as principal spokesman for the proprietors' interests, in a non-partisan fashion criticizing and opposing *all* governments on the Island. To a considerable extent, he stood above party because he viewed all local factions as inimical to the proprietors, but the fact that as a Roman Catholic he was not really eligible to hold public office may have assisted in keeping him outside the establishment. Captain John was well-educated, extremely perceptive (especially of the weaknesses of human nature), proud, and fearlessly pugnacious. No one on the Island was more skilled at polemical writing, and MacDonald's prose featured quotable and incisive phrases unfavourably characterizing most of his contemporaries. Much of what the British government knew of Island personalities came from the brilliantly hostile descriptions of Captain John in published pamphlets and private submissions. At the close of his life, only old age and ill health prevented him from joining fellow proprietor Lord Selkirk's Red River project as governor of Assiniboia; MacDonald might not have handled the conflict with the Canadian furtraders in the West more successfully, but he would certainly have behaved differently than did Miles Macdonell.

The Highland Background and Emigration to the Island

John MacDonald was born in 1742 into a cadet branch of the Clan MacDonald of Clanranald. When John was but three, his father Alexander joined the forces of the young Pretender in the ill-starred "Forty-Five." Although the family did not lose its property at Glenaladale in Glenfinnan in the wake of the abortive Stuart uprising, as Roman Catholic Jacobites they suffered serious persecution. Consequently, young John had to be sent abroad to the Catholic seminary at Ratisborn (Germany) for his education, there developing the fluency in seven languages which was often remarked upon

Brother Donald also had taken an army commission (he would be killed in battle in 1781), and the MacDonald estate on the Island was being managed by sister Helen (or Nelly, as she was always called). Nelly and Peggy MacDonald intended to leave the Island during the war, but they never did so. John wrote regular letters of advice and exhortation, sending money and luxuries whenever possible from Halifax. Nelly appears to have operated the family farm — which included ninety head of cattle — fairly successfully, but she had great difficulty in collecting rental from tenants who had no place to market their own crops. Although her brother advised her to "have dances & merriment among Yourselves," for "it is very reasonable that you should be innocently Merry & make the Time pass smoothly," he became very upset when Nelly met a handsome young officer at one of those dances. The young man, after all, had no status but a commission in a provincial corps. Promising to return to the Island to look after his sister, John emphasized, "untill then you had better not throw yourself away" and "make yourself & me look silly in the Eyes of the world." Nelly acquiesced in her brother's wishes on this occasion; she would marry only in 1791.

As early as 1776 one of his fellow officers was writing of MacDonald, "the estate which he has settled and developed has been ruined; many of his tenants are planning to leave in his absence for free land in the northern part of the Island." By 1781 the situation was indeed desperate. Captain John had received a letter from the Island Receiver of Quitrents informing him that the quitrents were payable in Charlottetown in "hard cash" six months from 13 March 1781 — or Lot 36 would be sold for quitrent arrearages. In receiving the letter in time to act upon it, MacDonald was fortunate; most of the proprietors learned only years later of the threat to their property mounted by Governor Walter Patterson and his Council. But Captain John did not have the money for the back quitrents, since his expenses (including payment for the lot to James Montgomery) were high. He wrote Nelly to try to raise some of the money for the quitrents from the tenants, adding: "If they cannot or will not do this there is an end of the matter & let them shift for themselves the best way they chuse." Much of his subsequent hostility to his tenants undoubtedly stemmed from



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Map (circa 1800) of Lots 35 and 36, showing the Captain John MacDonald Estate as divided among the various members of the family.

by his contemporaries. Like most Highland chieftains, MacDonald was extremely well-educated and accomplished. The average clansman may have been the illiterate semi-barbarian of legend, but his leaders were sophisticated men of the world, equally at home in the glens of the Highlands or in the glittering courts of Europe, as Dr. Samuel Johnson discovered to his amazement when he toured the Hebrides in 1773.

By the mid-1760s John had succeeded his father as laird of Glenaladale ("Fear a-Ghlinne" in Gaelic) and chief tacksman of the Clanranalds. In the rapid changes which struck the Highlands in the second half of the eighteenth century, no class suffered more than the tacksmen, who had traditionally served as the intermediaries between the heads of the clan and the people on the land. With the introduction of a money economy and professional estate management, the tacksman quickly became an expensive and even undesirable middle-man. Like most of his class, John MacDonald was by the end of the 1760s seriously contemplating emigration to North America — not as a single individual seeking to make his fortune, but at the head of his people. The turning point came when the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland asked him to bring to America a group of co-religionists being persecuted for their faith by the Protestant laird of Boysdale on South Uist in the Hebrides. The Church, driven even further underground by the "45" and understandably fearful of its future in the Western Highlands, hoped to use the threat of emigration to protect the religious beliefs and economic positions of its remaining adherents in the region. Since lairds at that time feared nothing so much as depopulation of their estates, the successful removal of one group of tenants might force other landowners to be more tolerant and generous.

MacDonald's connection with the Church at the time of his emigration venture has always been a bit mysterious. Certainly it is true that in his own accounts he tended to overemphasize both his own initiative and financial commitment to the enterprise by overlooking the role of the Church, although it must be added that this omission was carried out with full Church approval, since its leadership did not dare to be openly associated with the scheme. In any event, documents in the Scottish Catholic Archives in Edinburgh establish that the Church took the lead in setting the enterprise afoot, was responsible for the choice of the Island of St. John as destination, fully financed the cost of the emigration of the persecuted tenants of South Uist, and greatly assisted MacDonald financially in bringing out other Catholic emigrants (mainly from Arisaig and Moydart) aboard the *Alexander* in 1772. The documents also indicate that MacDonald's own financial problems were less connected with the emigration venture (as he always attempted to claim) than with the failure of the Ayr Bank in 1772 and financial losses suffered in trading by his younger brother Donald.

However much assistance he received from the Church, it was John MacDonald who purchased from Lord Advocate James Montgomery Lot 36 on the Island, the payment of the purchase price of £600 generously left by Montgomery on an open-ended basis. And it was John MacDonald who arranged all the business details of the emigration, although he did not himself accompany the emigrants. Brother Donald had already been on the Island preparing for their arrival, and he led the venture, accompanied by sisters Helen and Margaret. Glenaladale remained behind to plan further emigrations and to sort out finances. The *Alexander* arrived at Scotchfort in June of 1772. MacDonald soon learned that the emigrants were extremely restive on the Island, disturbed because of the absence of cleared land and the failure of crops. The malcontents were headed by Father James MacDonald, who had accompanied the party as the Island's first Catholic priest since the British takeover. Everyone agreed that Glenaladale's presence on the Island was essential, and having arranged the sale of his Highland estate to cousins by April of 1773, MacDonald managed to get to Philadelphia by the autumn of that year. In the Pennsylvania capital he heard rumours of starvation conditions among his settlers, and rushed first to Boston and then to the Island with provisions for the winter, paid for with bills of exchange drawn on the Catholic bishops of Scotland.

Conditions generally improved for the settlement in 1774, as they did across the Island at large in that year. Indeed, an optimist might have been entitled to the belief that the Island was over the hump, that the severe difficulties of the first years of settlement were over. There was a steadily growing population, agriculture was expanding, and the economy was moving forward. MacDonald himself had entered into promising negotiations with the government to remove the legal disabilities against Roman Catholics, which were disenfranchising a substantial proportion of the population. Then came Lexington and Concord, opening the warfare of the American Revolution. For eight years the Island was exposed to Yankee privateering, losing population and becoming commercially isolated. John MacDonald responded to the coming of war by accepting a captain's commission in the 84th Regiment, the Royal Highland Emigrants, spending most of the next six years in Halifax.

The Years of the American Revolution

As its name suggests, the 84th was intended to be organized from recently-arrived Highlanders in North America, including Nova Scotia and the Island of St. John. It was to be a Loyalist regiment, recruited in part from provinces which did not join the rebellion. This point is worth emphasizing, since "Loyalist" came later to be considered by the British government as synonymous with "refugee," and the exiled American Loyalists received special compensation for their suffering from the British after the war. But John MacDonald was a Loyalist as well. He too suffered for his commitment to the British cause, experiencing the anguish of fear that his property had been confiscated in his absence. The causes of his suffering were not rebellious American governments, however, but the actions of an administration in a colony thoroughly and loudly British throughout the war.

According to Father James MacDonald, John had accepted a commission in the 84th regiment in order to obtain a decent livelihood, "for it is impossible for any man to live in this part of the world without some employment or other; unless a man should have a yearly income." As Father James realized full well, Captain John was ineligible to hold public office (the source of income of most gentlemen on the Island), and was receiving virtually no revenue from his tenants on Lot 36. The quitrents the proprietors owed to the British government nevertheless would have to be paid.

their failure to assist him at this juncture. In his letter, MacDonald also indicated that he had his eye on adjacent Lot 35, one of the finest properties on the Island, a matter of great importance in his future activities.

Captain John left Halifax for New York about the time that many proprietorial lots were put up for auction on the Island in November of 1781. Since the events surrounding the auction were shrouded in secrecy and skullduggery, it was not surprising that he was unaware that Lot 36 was not put up for sale; its quitrents were, after all, in arrears. But in New York in 1782 to take part in the disposition of British troops and American refugees after the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown, he came to recognize (as he later wrote Nelly) that "our Property in St. John's was the best thing for us to hold by." He thus decided to head personally for London to get his Island holdings "if possible, restored to their former footing."

The Struggle Against Walter Patterson

Arriving in London late in 1782, MacDonald joined other proprietors early in 1783 in petitioning the King in Council for restoration of the auctioned lots, on the gounds that the war had made it impossible to pay the quitrents (which were too high anyway), and that the proprietors had not been given proper warning of the sale. The petition was made especially difficult because of the absence of hard information from the Island on exactly what had happened; MacDonald only discovered at the last minute that his Lot 36 had not been included in the sale, although Lot 35 had been auctioned and bought by Phillips Callbeck. Granting the petition, the Privy Council insisted that back quitrents be paid. But as Captain John perceptively noted in reporting this victory to his sister:

> I acknowledge I have great Curiosity and long much to hear how the Gentlemen will receive this order of the Council & how they will Act in Consequence of the same, that is to say Whether they will restore the Lots without any More Ado, or whether they will struggle by a remonstrance against restoring them at all, or endeavour to elude and disappoint Any part of the order. In these latter cases a Contest would ensue in which I firmly believe they & the Government of the Island will undoubtedly be overset. They may be sanguine enough not to foresee this, but they will find themsleves confoundedly mistaken....

Claiming indifference to the question of opposition, MacDonald planned to remain in London until Lot 35 was restored to its original owner (General Maitland, from whom Captain John hoped to buy or lease the lot). He was fully prepared to battle for the restoration of Lot 35, and, he wrote Nelly, "most cursed Noise I will make if I am Obliged to do it."

The events of the next few years are far too complex to discuss in any detail in this paper. Suffice it to say that Governor Patterson and his Council chose to defy the King, a decision which eventually led to the replacement of Patterson with Edmund Fanning as Lieutenant-Governor. In all the responses of the proprietors in London to Patterson's various desperate attempts to prevent the return of the lots and vindicate his conduct, one can detect the fine hand of Captain John MacDonald. His acerbic pen was clearly responsible for several published pamphlets attacking the governor, including *Remarks on the Conduct of the Governor and Council of the Island of St. John's* (1787), and he served as solicitor for the proprietors when criminal charges were brought against Patterson and others of his government before the Privy Council in 1789. In a lengthy letter to Nelly dated 12 September 1789, Captain John described his encounter with Patterson before the Council:

> When he came home he held up his face... & thought by mere impudence & blustering & such impositions as they practised in St. John's to run down all the world & carry every thing before him. I let him run the length of his tether on every occasion, & when matters were ripe very quietly laid him on his back in them all. Indeed, his conduct was that of a man who looked on all mankind, excepting himself, to be fools. It was also in every shape the management of a downright fool. He has an amazing cleverness, but I am sure it is mixed with an equal proportion of folly and madness. He rose from nothing, & would have done extremely well, had he known where to stop, but the being too successful had led him constantly to goe too far — indeed he could not possibly have succeeded in going so far, but in a place as St. John's.



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Lieutenant-Governor Walter Patterson.

Return to the Island

Despite the tenacity with which he pursued Patterson, Captain John always felt more sympathetic to the Island's first governor than to his successor Edmund Fanning. Indeed, even before he had met Fanning, MacDonald commented that the change of administration had merely substituted "deep far fetched despicable Yankey cunning" for "audacious open tyranny." Nevertheless, he remained apart in 1791-92 from the efforts of merchants John Cambridge, John Hill, and William Bowley to bring down Fanning and other officers of his government with charges of malfeasance, spending his energies instead in negotiating the purchase of Lot 35 and in wooing Margaret MacDonald of Guernish, Scotland. He acquired both land and wife in 1792. After sixteen years absence from the Island MacDonald finally returned to Tracadie in that year with some sense of accomplishment. Patterson was languishing in debtor's prison, totally ruined politically and financially, while John

MacDonald not only possessed what he supposed to be the two best lots on the Island, but had a new mistress to preside over them. The imperious ways of his wife would win for her the Island sobriquet "Queen of Tracadie." Unfortunately, MacDonald's own financial affairs were hardly in a flourishing state. Sister Nelly had done her best — even building a house for her elder brother to his specifications — but many tenants had left for other lands and those remaining seldom paid their contracted rentals. But MacDonald had his officer's half-pay pension and his land. He settled down to be a resident proprietor and to recreate his previous Highland standing in the New World.

As well as attempting to replicate his Scottish social position, MacDonald also sought to reproduce the Old World agrarian environment with which he and his people were most familiar. He regarded himself as an improving landlord, but his goal on the Island was basically to raise cattle rather than to clear, plough, and cultivate extensive tracts of land. He spoke highly of the potentiality of the soil, cautioning, "A bungler will do little good with it: — he will neither plough it sufficiently to mix intimately the sand and clay: he will not properly manure it: he will over crop it: and himself, the soil, and the crops, will all alike be poor." But despite such talk suggestive of mixed farming, Captain John focussed his own agricultural efforts on banking the salt marshes — particularly on the north side of the Hillsborough River — in order to drain them, and in erecting steadings for the storage of hay. He regarded hay as the principal crop, arguing it "commands everything" on the Island; those without it would "do anything to procure hay." Insofar as he sought to cultivate his uplands, it was also mainly to produce hay, both as a cash crop and for his own livestock. While the raising of black cattle for sale off-Island may have been a sensible approach to agriculture in these early years, cattle-raising was also the traditional Highland way. MacDonald's lead encouraged his tenants to maintain their old agricultural practices of raising only enough grain and vegetable crops for food while concentrating on livestock production. Such a programme was not particularly forward-looking. Significantly, MacDonald refused to lease his best lands to tenants, later writing, "I reflected that I would be subject to just blame, if, having the incomparably best situation on the island, I did not reserve them for my own family."

The Conflict with Fanning and the Stewarts

Whatever resolutions Captain John had made to stay clear of Island politics — and no one was more conscious than he of the morass it represented — he became inexorably drawn into a posture of leading the local opposition to the Fanning administration. MacDonald had opposed Walter Patterson in London as an absentee proprietor; he struggled with the Fanning regime at close range as a resident proprietor. A number of factors combined to lead MacDonald to open clashes with the government. The immediate cause was the publication and circulation in 1796 of a pamphlet "To the Farmers in the Island of St. John," calling for the introduction of crown escheat courts to take back unimproved lots from inactive proprietors. Ostensibly written by Colonel Joseph Robinson, MacDonald was convinced that the pamphlet was really the brainchild of Fanning and his political allies the Stewarts. The intimate connection between Fanning and the Stewart clan also distressed MacDonald, for it both permitted Fanning to operate behind the scenes and made a mockery of justice — dispensed mainly in Chief Justice Peter Stewart's Supreme Court in which one son (Charles) was clerk and another (John) frequent customer. Between Fanning's Loyalist cronies (such as Robinson) and the vast network of Stewarts holding positions of power, the Island was dominated by the governor's party to such an extent that apparently honest men like James Douglas (Comptroller of Customs and agent for proprietor James Montgomery) and Attorney-General Joseph Aplin were frustrated and persecuted at every turn. MacDonald, Douglas, and Aplin found themselves the only public opposition to the Fanning administration in the last years of the eighteenth century.



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Lieutenant-Governor Edmund Fanning.

The critical year was 1797. It saw MacDonald challenged to a duel in the streets of Charlottetown by House of Assembly Speaker "Hellfire Jack" Stewart, the latter armed with a regimental broadsword while Captain John carried only a Highland dirk. It saw MacDonald attempt to complain to Governor Fanning of the existence of a "Levelling Party" that "has been for a year past employed in disseminating principles among our tenants and the people at large which may vie with the like which have laid France in ruins." For this charge Captain John was summoned to appear before both the Council and the Assembly to defend his accusations. He refused. Both bodies labelled him a malcontent, and the Assembly dispensed with his attendance on the grounds that to require it would "raise him into a degree of consequence" unwarranted by his remarks. It then proceeded to pass a series of resolutions critical of MacDonald, as well as a number asserting the failure of most of the Island's proprietors to fulfill the terms of their grants and petitioning the British government either to compel the proprietors to act or to move to confiscate their lands.

MacDonald responded to the Assembly's actions with a contentious memorial sent through Fanning to the Duke of Kent at Halifax, protesting Robert Hodgson's chairmanship of the committee which had prepared the resolutions of censure. Fanning turned the document over to Hodgson with a recommendation for a prosecution for defamation of character. Although Attorney-General Aplin managed to

dissuade Hodgson from court action, Aplin himself was soon thereafter dismissed from office for his hostile attitude to the government. Captain John found himself increasingly sympathetic to the arguments of James Douglas and Aplin that the only solution to the Island's political ills was annexation to Nova Scotia, hardly a popular position in Charlottetown. After Aplin's departure for Britain in 1798, leaving only one lawyer (the new attorney-general) on the Island, MacDonald himself was forced to take over the cases of all those who were not friends with the administration.

Not surprisingly, when the British government began to consider the question of quitrents, the proprietors, and escheat in 1802, John MacDonald was again in London defending his interests and those of his fellow proprietors. He was clearly responsible for the biographical sketches of Island officials appended to proprietor John Hill's "A Detail of Various Transactions at Prince Edward Island and in Particular the Conduct of Certain Persons Entrusted with the Offices of Government," which was submitted to the government late in 1801. These sketches pulled no punches, and were particularly harsh on the members of the Assembly, calling one legislator "the laughing stock of the Common People," noting that another had been presented by the Grand Jury for "incestuous intercourse with his Daughter in Law," and commenting that a third had "set all decencys at defiance, by resisting in the Court of Law the payment of the Surgeons Bill for curing him and his Wife of a complaint he had communicated to her." Although the action of the British government was ultimately favourable to the proprietors, this outcome was due more to the activities of arch-enemy Jack Stewart than to MacDonald's efforts. But the laird of Tracadie had had enough. Captain John put his estate on the market and proclaimed "if there was no other place for me I would sooner go to Turkey" than ever return to the Island. He refused in 1805 to play any further role in proprietorial affairs, claiming his health and hearing were bad and pointing out that "the falsehoods of Governor Fanning and the Stewarts... have laid me under disgrace at the Public offices."

The Final Years

Despite his problems, Captain John made an enormous impression upon the Earl of Selkirk, and when no one came forward to purchase Lots 35 and 36, Selkirk loaned MacDonald the money to return to the Island and carry on. In 1809, Selkirk wrote to MacDonald suggesting that the doughty old Highlander might be interested in commanding a new colonization expedition that the Earl was projecting, obviously a reference to Red River. Captain John answered that he was 68, "rather unwieldy, constitution fled, courage departed, memory impaired, unpractised in the official and superior walks — activity gone." But in a separate and lengthier letter, the old man indicated that he had lost neither his interest in Island affairs nor his acerbity. He continued to blame the Island's officialdom for the mistaken belief of the people that "the proprietors are the sole bar to all their earthly felicity," and greatly feared the outcome of an American war. While the Canadas, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia might be able to cope with American annexation, he wondered what would happen to "this abortion of a Province and Community?" In a sort of a valedictory, Captain John stated to Selkirk his two principal beliefs: that "the land interest[s] are the mainstay of every well constituted Country, and also the legitimate conductors of its policy and prosperity," and that the Island had been laid low by ambitious men only bright enough to see the value "of taking down the actual Proprietors and placing themselves in their stead." Eight months later, on 28 December 1810, he died.

John MacDonald had spent much of a lifetime defending his own interests as a proprietor against what he always regarded as the illegitimate behaviour of the office-holders of the Island. Unlike most of his fellow proprietors, he had a considerable investment of time and money to protect. And he had some reason to approach his defense with pride. A devout Roman Catholic, he had assisted his fellow Catholics in Scotland in their time of need, striking a blow for religious tolerance he had attempted to extend to the Island. A committed Highland laird, he had endeavoured to preserve and extend Highland culture in the New World. Like most of the descendants of the supporters of Bonnie Prince Charlie, he had accepted George III and had fought for his King against the American rebels. MacDonald was no democrat, but then, few on the Island were in his time. He was, at least, a lifelong enemy of cant and double-dealing wherever it could be found. Above all, one suspects, he would want to be remembered as an honest man.

Sources

There are no book-length biographies of any early Island figures, including Captain John. The best biographical sketch of MacDonald is Allan F. MacDonald, "Captain John MacDonald, Glenaladale," *Canadian Catholic Historical Association Report,* 1964, pp. 21-37. For his involvement in early emigration to the Island, consult my "The Scottish Catholic Church and Highland Emigration to the Island of St. John, 1770-1774," *Dalhousie Review*, Vol. 58, No. 3 (1979), pp. 511-527. General background for MacDonald's activities can be found in F.W.P. Bolger, ed., *Canada's Smallest Province: A History of Prince Edward Island* (1973), especially pp. 37-95. See also W.S. MacNutt, "Fanning's Regime on Prince Edward Island," *Acadiensis*, I (1971), pp. 37-53, and my "Sir James Montgomery and Prince Edward Island, 1767-1803," *Acadiensis* VII (1978), pp. 76-102. Original documents by or about MacDonald may be found scattered throughout the Colonial Office 226 series (on microfilm at the Public Archives of Prince Edward Island); the Montgomery Papers in the Scottish Record Office; the Selkirk Papers in the Public Archives of Canada; the Blairs Papers at the Scottish Catholic Archives, Edinburgh; and various collections at the Public Archives of Prince Edward Island, especially PAPEI 2664, which contains fascinating private correspondence between Captain John and his sister Nelly, upon which this paper has relied heavily.