Sir William Alexander of Menstrie
(1567-1640)
Earl of Stirling, Viscount Canada and Lord Alexander of Tullibody

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Sir William Alexander of Menstrie was not the first Scot to be interested in Canada. Scots had participated in the settlement of Newfoundland before Sir William embarked on his plantation, yet we know none of their names. Thus Sir William can be regarded as in an odd way the first eminent Scottish Canadian. It is true that he never set foot on Canadian soil, but he held title at one point to an area which now encompasses the provinces of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick as well as a large slice of what today is the province of Québec. If this is not enough to establish Canadian citizenship, his unique title of Viscount Canada (the title died with him) can be pleaded on his behalf although here too irony is attached. By the time the title was conferred at Charles I's Scottish coronation in 1633, the recipient had for all practical purposes ceased to have any connection with the North American continent. As we shall see, Sir William's efforts to put some substance behind his viscountancy had, by 1633, been brought to nought by English miscalculations in the complicated negotiations with the French that led to the treaty of St. Germain-en-layé, signed in March 1632.

Sir William has not lacked biographers. He has an entry in the British Dictionary of National Biography and a more carefully researched one in the Dictionary of Canadian Biography. He was the subject of a Ph.D. thesis in 1936 which was subsequently published as a book, and there are a number of volumes and articles in which he is the principal or one of the principal personalities. Here all that can be attempted is a brief survey of Sir William's life as it touched on Canada, yet an attempt will be made to look at one subject of his career which has hitherto tended to be neglected. Alexander was not only a colonial entrepreneur, he was also a modest colonial theorist. His ideas on colonization, particularly as expressed in his pamphlet An encouragement to colonies, throw light upon his personality as well as on the times in which he lived. His pamphlet was intended to persuade his fellow Scots to migrate to New Scotland and was therefore a form of promotional literature, yet the arguments used reveal some of the well springs from which the urge to colonize flowed.

William Alexander was born the son of the laird of Menstrie probably in 1567. He was given a classical education by Thomas Buchanan, who was the nephew of George Buchanan, one of the few Scottish contributors to the Renaissance. The young Alexander subsequently travelled through Italy and France while acting as tutor to Archibald, seventh earl of Argyll, through whose influence he was introduced to the court of James VI. His literary and classical interest was first demonstrated by the publication of The tragedy of Darius in 1603, which was followed by a number of other works of poetry, drama and religion, and his scholarship was sufficiently highly regarded that he was chosen to help with the official translation of the Psalms of King David.

During the first two decades of the seventeenth century Sir William steadily gained court influence. He was knighted in 1609, by 1614 he had received the position of master of requests in Scotland, and the following year, when he became a member of the Scottish privy council, it was reported that all the king's correspondence with the Scottish bishops was passing through his hands. This meant that by the time he wished to embark on a colonial scheme he was well situated to obtain the necessary royal encouragement.

The period of Alexander's rise to court circles coincided with much colonial activity. The colonization of Virginia began in 1607. In 1610 Scottish and English planters started to penetrate the heart of the province of Ulster, and after the granting of a charter in 1611, Newfoundland had been settled by a group of adventurers from
London and Bristol. Sir William, who had already shown an inclination to become involved in various projects, including the development of a silver mine near Linlithgow, became interested in colonial schemes through the influence of two English friends, John Mason and Sir Ferdinando Georges. Mason had helped to ensure the success of the Newfoundland venture in which Scots had been involved, while Georges was the treasurer of the council for the plantation of New England, the patent for which was issued in 1620.9

By 1621 Sir William was ready to begin his career as a developer of colonies. On 5 August of that year the king wrote to his Scottish council ordering them to make a grant of land to Sir William of “lands lying between our colonies of New England and Newfoundland.”10 Accordingly, a charter was issued on 29 September bestowing on Sir William the territory now occupied by the Atlantic provinces and the Gaspé peninsula. The royal motive in granting these lands was stated to be the king’s “sovereign anxiety to propagate the Christian faith, and to secure the wealth, prosperity and peace of the native subjects of our kingdom of Scotland”. Almost immediately Sir William granted Cape Breton Island to his friend, Sir Robert Gordon, in order to divide the burden of responsibility, but despite this attempt to limit the extent of his personal share in the undertaking, his first effort at planting settlers ended in failure. A ship had been prepared in London, which was ready in the spring of 1622 to sail to the south-west of Scotland where settlers were to be taken on board. These were eventually collected and included a blacksmith and a minister, but the vessel was not able to leave Scotland till June and did not sight Newfoundland till mid-September.11 By this time the season was too far advanced to enable the small band of Scots to winter on their own. They therefore stayed at St. John’s. A second ship was sent in 1623 to supply the emigrants, but by the time it arrived, some of the original ship’s company, including the minister and blacksmith, had died, while others had joined the Newfoundland settlement and had turned their hands to fishing. Ten remaining would-be settlers boarded the supply ship and sailed along the coast of Nova Scotia to reconnoitre a suitable site, but these eventually returned to Britain with a cargo of fish as there were too few men left to form a viable settlement.12

It is in the context of this first failure that we must place the publication in 1624 of An encouragement to colonies and the scheme to raise money in Scotland to finance Sir William’s project by the sale of baronetcies. Sir William had already spent £6,000 sterling on New Scotland and could not hope to finance any further expeditions without help. Thus, up to one hundred titles were to be granted to those who would subscribe to the project.13 Accordingly, a proclamation was issued on 30 November 1624 offering titles of baronet and 16,000 acres of land in New Scotland to those who would contribute 1,000 merks Scots to Sir William “towards his past charges and endeavours”. Baronets were also expected to “set forth six sufficient men, artificers or labourers” and equip them with all they would need during two years in the “royal colony to be established”.14

No baronets were created under James, who died in March 1625, but within a few weeks of Charles I’s accession, the new king showed his determination to continue his father’s policy of encouraging the plantation of New Scotland. Eight baronetcies were conferred during May 1625, and in August arrangements were made permitting Nova Scotia entrepreneurs to receive their grants in Scotland instead of having to travel to court to procure them.15 Despite these and other measures taken to foster the project, the Scottish gentry showed little inclination to support it. Only eight baronets were created in 1626, and it was not till the following year that we find preparations being made for a new expedition.16 In March 1627 a letter to the Scottish council remarked that Sir William had already spent much more money on the plantation than he had received from the baronets, and that if more men did not come forward to participate, Sir William, along with his project, would be ruined. A grant made at about the same time to Sir William of £6,000 sterling from prizes brought into Scottish ports was possibly an attempt to stave off this type of disaster.17 By one means or another Sir William was able to find sufficient funds to prepare ships for another expedition, and although events conspired to postpone their departure, the prospects for the venture brightened.18

It should be explained that in 1604, some four years before Quebec was founded, the French had established a settlement on the Annapolis basin at Port Royal (or more precisely at Granville). After some of these French settlers had moved south, Port Royal had been sacked by an English expedition operating from Virginia under Captain Argall.19 By 1627 Richelieu had decided to revive the French claim and had sent a fleet to effect this purpose, but by the time it neared the Nova Scotia coast, England and France were at war and Captain David Kirk, apparently acting under powers granted to Sir William, fell upon the French squadron and took eighteen transports, with 135 pieces of ordnance, as prizes.20 Immediately the future of the Scottish scheme looked more hopeful and no less than thirty-five baronets were created during 1627 and 1628.21 It was under these more auspicious circumstances that the second Scottish expedition was launched in 1628.
There has been some disagreement over the date when this expedition set sail. Insh, followed by more recent authorities, have argued that Sir William’s second settlement was not established till 1629.22 The issue is of some consequence as the expedition resulted in a colony which showed signs of being permanent before it was ordered disbanded by Charles I. Thus the date of the first British settlement in mainland Canada rests on the outcome of the debate. The argument for 1629 is based on the assumption that the Scots landed after 24 April 1629, the date on which hostilities between England and France ended. During the ensuing treaty negotiations, the French demanded that Québec city, which we know was surrendered after the peace had been signed, should be returned and that the Scots should be removed from Port Royal. It has been assumed by some historians that, because the French demanded the removal of the Scots and because Charles ultimately agreed to the demand, the colony must have been begun after peace was signed. Charles, it is argued, knew he was on weak ground and conceded Port Royal, and in return obtained concessions, including the remaining portion of his wife’s dowry which had not been paid at the time of his marriage. Charles, it can be shown, stated in 1631 that the Scots arrived after the peace was signed.23 There is some reason to believe, however, that the French position was that the situation in Nova Scotia should return to the status quo ante bellum, not simply to the position before the peace. The royal warrant for the colony’s evacuation ordered that “Port Royal shall be put in the estate it was before the beginning of the war” (my italics).24 As the war began in 1627, any settlement taking place in 1628 would have been as affected by the agreement as that which occurred in 1629. The French demand and Charles’s acquiescence to it does not, therefore, prove that the date of the first settlement was 1629. Moreover, despite Charles’s specific statement to the contrary, the evidence that is not connected with the treaty proves that 1628 is the true date of the Scottish arrival. A Scottish fleet of four ships set sail from Dumbarton for New Scotland during the spring of 1628 under the command of Sir William’s son, also called Sir William. On 23 November 1628 it was reported in Edinburgh that Sir William junior had “come home again from Nova Scotia, and hath left behind him 70 men and women, with provision to serve them by the space of a year”. Charles’s remark in the midst of complicated negotiations seems to be a weaker source than this contemporary evidence.25

We can, therefore, assume that Sir William junior left the settlers at Port Royal in 1628. He returned home in the autumn, only to find that an English group, including Captain Kirk, was trying to secure a patent that would infringe on that of his father. A compromise was arranged between the two groups under which the Alexanders were to have the sole rights to trade and plant in La Cadia (approximately Nova Scotia and New Brunswick) and on both sides of the St. Lawrence up to within ten leagues of Tadoussac. Above that line English and Scots were to cooperate in planting a colony of mixed nationality.26

During 1629, the younger Sir William crossed the Atlantic again, this time taking with him some sixty additional colonists led by Lord Ochiltree, whom he deposited on the shore of Cape Breton Island near Louisbourg. This group, therefore, did land after the peace. Sir William then continued to Port Royal, where he found that thirty of the original colonists had died. That summer the French quickly uprooted Lord Ochiltree, though they in turn suffered a reverse when Captain Kirk took Québec.27 At the end of 1629, therefore, the French had thrust the Scots off Cape Breton Island, the English had captured Québec and the Scots occupied Port Royal.

The senior Sir William obviously had high expectations for his colony at this stage. An encouragement was republished; he obtained a charter to develop a port at Largs so that he could control a Scottish outlet through which trade might be conducted with Nova Scotia, and he made arrangements with the chiefs of some highland clans whereby they were to transport themselves and their followers to the colony. His son wintered in Canada, but returned to England in 1630 only to find on his return that his father was having to defend himself against a French diplomatic attack.28

It has recently been demonstrated that the colony was not the victim of Charles’s duplicity and greed for his wife’s dowry. Charles made a genuine effort to preserve the Scottish toe-hold in North America and was sincere when he asserted to his Scottish council that he would “be very careful to maintain all his good subjects who do plant themselves there”.29 Charles, however, was outmaneuvered in the negotiations and felt that he was faced with the choice of conceding Port Royal or continuing the war. Instructions were given that the settlers should be evacuated though Charles maintained that this did not affect his title or that of Sir William senior, who was created Viscount Stirling and awarded £10,000 compensation “not for quitting the title, right or possession of New Scotland, or any part thereof, but only for the satisfaction of the losses incurred when the colony was removed”.30

It was alleged later that Sir William’s expenses incurred in the venture amounted to £20,000 and that the £10,000 he was promised were never paid.31 Even if he had received the money, it is unlikely that he could have started the colony again. In 1635 the management of New Scotland was placed in the hands of Sir Ferdinando Georges,
working on behalf of the council of New England. In April of that year the council granted Sir William, now created the earl of Stirling and Viscount Canada, all the mainland in New England from the St. Croix [St. John] river to the St. Lawrence and up the St. Lawrence to Québec “to be called henceforth the country of Canada”. Long Island, now to be called the “Isle of Stirling”, was added to the grant for good measure. This was the largest grant the Scot was ever to receive, but it was also the most useless as he lacked the means to develop it. He died in 1640 deeply in debt and we may suspect as deeply disappointed.

These bare outlines of Sir William’s career, it must be admitted, hardly do justice to the nature of the man. It is only by looking at his ideas about colonization that we gain some measure of his mind and obtain an insight into the motives that inspired him to devote some twenty years of his life to a project that was fraught with risk and cost him dear. The first document we may look at is the king’s letter of 5 August 1621 instructing the Scottish council to issue the grant for Alexander’s plantation. It is very likely that this was composed by Sir William himself as it contains ideas that recur in statements where his authorship is not in doubt. It began by recognizing that colonization was a form of conquest and therefore implicitly raised a moral question. But plantation, it asserted, was an “innocent” type of conquest, particularly when it involved sending people to a “commodious” country which was empty “or at least only inhabited by infidels, the conversion of whom to the Christian faith . . . might tend much to the glory of God”. This theme was taken up again towards the end of An encouragement to colonies. Leaving worldly considerations aside, its author wrote, the strongest encouragement to colonies was that “here is a large way for advancing the gospel of Jesus Christ”. The other reason given for colonies in the king’s letter was that Scotland was populous, and that plantations would employ idle people and would not result in the export of money, but only “men, women, cattle, and victuals”. This theme also turns up in An encouragement: “Scotland by reason of her populousness being constrained to disburden herself (like the painful bees) did every year send forth swarms . . . ”

What is already evident in 1621 is a preoccupation with the ethical aspects of colonization, and a stress upon the social value of the process for Scotland and a concern for its moral justification. In a sense Sir William’s observations about the Christian purpose behind the plantation only expressed the conventional wisdom of the day. The link between Christianity and western European expansion needs little elaboration. As early as 1479 the Spaniards had justified the conquest of the Canary Islands on the grounds that the inhabitants were “enemies of our sacred Catholic faith [and] . . . in great need of being subdued”. Yet Sir William and the Spaniards differed in their perception of the rôle of Christianity in colonization. The conquistadors were required to read a document to the Indians of the New World which demanded submission to the Spanish sovereign on the grounds that the land had been received by papal grant. Conversion to Christianity was not deemed to be obligatory, but obedience to the Spanish monarch was, the penalty for refusal being slavery. For Alexander, although plantation offered the opportunity to advance the gospel (“making the gospel of Jesus Christ known in unknown parts”), Christianity was not used as a justification for occupying the Indians’ territory. As a protestant, Alexander could not invoke the pope to supply a title to the land. Instead he developed the position that the land did not belong to anybody before the Europeans took possession. “For here”, he argued, the colonists “may possess themselves without dispossessing others, the land either wanting inhabitants, or having none that do appropriate to themselves any peculiar ground, but (in a straggling company) run like beasts after beasts, seeking no soil, but only after their prey”. This is not to say that Sir William condemned the plantation of populated lands. To have done so would have been tantamount to condemning his king’s Irish policy. Alexander was well aware of what had happened in Ireland. Indeed, if there was a model for Nova Scotia it was Ulster. The creation of Nova Scotia baronets followed a similar scheme used in Ulster by the English. The proclamation announcing the Scottish title made reference to the earlier scheme’s contribution “toward that happy and successful plantation of Ulster in Ireland”. Similarly, the Scottish council insisted on a surety system that had previously been used in Ulster to ensure fulfillment of the terms of the baronetcy patents. Some of those who joined Sir William in his Nova Scotia venture had already participated in the Ulster project, and Sir William himself acquired 1,000 acres of land in County Armagh and became an Irish denizen in the expectation that his port at Largs would trade as much with Ireland as it would with North America. His view of plantation in Ireland may be regarded as inconsistent with his justification for the settlement in Canada, yet he did not evade the moral issue even in this case. The technique he used to surmount the potential moral embarrassment of Ireland was to contrast plantation there with what the Babylonians had done to the Israelites. The Israelites had been “exposed to ruin in a remote country”, but “our king hath only divided the most seditious families of the Irish by dispersing them in sundry parts within the country, not
to extinguish, but to dissipate their power" .42 He then argued that James had acted with even greater moderation in Ireland than had the Romans in similar situations and that conquest and settlement of Ireland was justified in that it prevented Ireland draining England in the manner that the Netherlands sapped Spain.43

What is important about Alexander's comments on plantation in Ireland is not the strength or weakness of the arguments, but the manner in which he developed them. They show that the source of his ideas on plantation was his humanist training. It has been suggested recently that the motives behind colonization, particularly in Ireland, were antipathetic to humanist ideas, and it is true the Spaniards found their justification for their actions among medieval moral philosophers.44 But Sir William, by contrast, virtually ignored the medieval period. Humanist that he was, his arguments supporting colonization were essentially historical and the examples on which he drew were either from his own times or from the Bible or the classical period. "Who will doubt" he wrote, referring to plantation, "but that the world in her infancy, and innocence, was first peopled after this manner".45 He then went on to look at biblical, Greek, and finally Roman examples. Yet his justification was not confined to a simple assertion that what had been done in the biblical or classical past gave warrant for its continued practice. There had also to be a social need, in particular a surplus of people, who would, if not exported, cause trouble. Of the Romans he remarked, they "had no use of colonies" except as rewards for soldiers as they came "to command a well peopled world".46 His only reference to the period immediately before the sixteenth century was the observation that a surplus of population and the absence of space led to conflict, so "Spain was striving with France how to part Italy, as Italy had formerly done with Carthage how to part Spain".47 The same concern with population emerged when he began to discuss his own time. It was Spain's misfortune, he thought, to have lacked sufficient people to inhabit her colonies. As a consequence, the Spaniards had had to import black labour from Angola "which being but an unnatural merchandise" was bought "at a dear rate" and led to internal insecurity as the blacks felt no loyalty towards their masters.

Sir William's prime purpose was to persuade his fellow countrymen, whom he believed to be too numerous, to go to New Scotland, which he believed to be largely empty. Undoubtedly his objective shaped his argument. It might also be considered that his ideas were more protestant than humanist. Protestants regarded moral philosophers associated with Rome as poor protagonists for the causes they wished to pursue. They, therefore, had to seek out biblical and classical precedents. Yet Sir William was not simply a protestant opportunist who sought arguments to justify what he wanted to do from any source he found convenient. He was a trained humanist who was aware of the social problems of his period. A century before Sir William embarked on his project Sir Thomas More described one of the social problems of the Utopians. If, he wrote,

the population throughout the island should happen to swell above fixed quotas, they [the Utopians] enroll citizens out of every city and, on the mainland nearest them, wherever the natives have much unoccupied and uncultivated land they found a copy under their own laws.49

More was neither a protestant nor a colonial undertaken, yet here, in abbreviated form was Sir William's recipe for a remedy to one of the social ills of early seventeenth century Scotland. Practical colonial developer Sir William may have been, but the spring from which he drew his ideas was the humanist tradition. Sir William's humanist training and his colonial efforts have both been separately recognized. What needs to be emphasized is the way that these two aspects of his career were connected.

NOTES

1Insh, G.P. Scottish colonial schemes 1620-1686, Glasgow, 1922, pp. 31-2; Reid, J.G. 'The Scots crown and the restitution of Port Royal, 1629-1632', Academicons, vi (1977), p. 40. I am most grateful to Professor Carman Miller for directing me to a number of the sources I have used.

2Complete peerage, xii, p. 279.

3Harvey, D.C. 'Sir William Alexander', Dictionary of Canadian Biography, i (1966), pp. 50-4, subsequently cited as D.C.B.


6 Alexander, Sir W. An encouragement to colonies, London, 1624. A second edition was published in 1630 with the title The map and description of New-England; together with a discourse of plantation, and colonies. Spelling has been modernized throughout.

7 Memorials, i, p. 33; Royal letters, p. 10; Insh, 'Sir William Alexander', op. cit. p. 440; D.C.B., i, 50-1.


9 Insh, Scottish colonial schemes, pp. 31, 39, 46, 48; Insh, 'Sir William Alexander', op. cit., p. 441; Patterson, op. cit., p. 82; D.C.B., i, p. 51; Reid, op. cit., p. 40.

10 Register of the privy council of Scotland, 1619-22, p. 774-5.

11 Memorials, i, pp. 63-4; Patterson, op. cit., 83.

12 Memorials, i, pp. 64-5; Insh, Scottish colonial schemes, p. 59; D.C.B., i, p. 51.

13 Memorials, i, p. 66.

14 Ibid., pp. 71, 74; Royal letters, p. 21.

15 Register P.C. Scot., 1625-7, p. x19; D.C.B., i, p. 52.

16 Register P.C. Scot 1627-7, p. ciii; Memorials, i, p. 98; Stirling's register, i, pp. 118-9.

17 Royal letters, p. 38; Stirling's register, i, p. 134.

18 Stirling's register, i, pp. 118-19, 144-5.

19 Insh, Scottish colonial schemes, p. 54; Patterson, op. cit., p. 90.

20 Patterson, op. cit., p. 91; Memorials, pp. 100-101; Royal letters, p. 41.

21 D.C.B., i, p. 52.

22 Insh, Scottish colonial schemes, pp. 3, 78; D.C.B., i, p. 53; Reid, op. cit., pp. 44n-54.

23 Reid, op. cit., pp. 44n, 54.

24 Ibid., pp. 54-5 quoting Stirling's register, ii, p. 544.

25 Memorials, i, p. 104. McGrail provides additional convincing evidence, which is not connected with the treaty, indicating that the settlement took place in 1628, but this evidence has been ignored in favour of that arising out of the treaty (McGrail, Sir William Alexander, pp. 109, 238-45).


27 Insh, Scottish colonial schemes, p. 78; D.C.B., i, p. 53; Patterson, op. cit., pp. 95-6.

28 Reg. P.C. Scot., 1629-30, p. 393; Stirling's register, i, p. 386; H.M.C., Appendix to the third report, p. 401; Patterson, op. cit., p. 96; Memorials, i, pp. 107, 113, 128.