Ralph Connor's County:
A Report on Glengarry
by Royce MacGillivray

Glengarry has long been thought of as the Scottish county of Ontario - numerous though other Scottish settlements in the province have been. It was originally settled by Scots and their descendants make up a large fraction - though a minority - of the inhabitants of the county today. The Scottish pioneers of Glengarry were made familiar to innumerable readers by the once celebrated novels of Ralph Connor. It is probably no exaggeration to say that the stereotype of the Ontario pioneer which prevails in the public mind today derives more from Glengarry, by way of Connor's novels, than from any other locality of Ontario.

Nevertheless, as a part time resident of both Eastern and Western Ontario I know that Eastern Ontario is outer darkness to many people who are fortunate enough to live in or west of Toronto, so perhaps I had better remind some readers and tell others where Glengarry is to be found. Glengarry is the easternmost county of this province, though it beats Prescott for this position by only a nose. On the east it is bordered by Quebec Province and on the south by the widening of the St. Lawrence called Lake St. Francis. When the counties of Upper Canada were created in 1792 Glengarry extended all the way from Lake St. Francis north to the Ottawa River. Then, in 1800, approximately the northern half was chopped off to form a separate county called Prescott - today, Glengarry's neighbour on the north.

The history (1) of Glengarry seems curiously lopsided. Most of its most colourful events and personalities belong to a little less than its first two generations. This was when Glengarry saw the settlement of the United Empire Loyalists and successive groups of Highlanders, the achievements of the Rev. John Bethune of the Presbyterian and the future Bishop Macdonell of the Roman Catholic church, the War of 1812 and the services of the Glengarry Light Infantry in preserving Canada for the British crown, and perhaps the greatest of all the glories of early Glengarry, the North West Company of fur traders. Most of the most eminent men of the company were associated, many of them very intimately, with Glengarry County. But after all this, there is a falling off which makes Glengarry history resemble the life of someone who, after filling his early years with adventure, quietly settles down to a safe, low paying job for life. In this drab later period, covering about the last century and a quarter, what can the historian searching for colourful material find to continue the narrative of Glengarry on the same level of vividness with which it began? He will find hardly anything except John Sandfield Macdonald, a native son who became the first premier of Ontario, and a surprising number of competent or excellent novelists who took the county as their subject. (2) It can be noted
without in the least belittling either Sandfield Macdonald or the novelists that they are hard pressed when they have to provide all but unaided the historical colour of so long a period.

Yet even within this disappointing later period there were certain achievements of an unspectacular kind which have never received much attention outside the county but are probably little less important, taken together, than the achievements of the earlier, more dramatic years. A very important achievement is that Glengarrians of two racial groups, French and Scottish, have lived together amicably over a long period of time – thus proving in the most practical manner that this can be done. Glengarrians have also aided since the days of the North West Company in opening the continent to civilization. Scottish Glengarry has moreover managed with a remarkable degree of success to preserve its own customs and ideas for a long time – in some respects, indeed, right up to the present – in the face of all the disintegrative forces of the modern world.

In an essay-length paper on the history of Glengarry County I must, inevitably, ignore many of the events, prominent men, and historically significant developments which properly belong to my topic. I shall concentrate first on the early settlement of the county and secondly on a selected number of later developments – mostly those which can be seen as a working out of the circumstances of early settlement.

Glengarry was a home of Scots from the very beginning of settlement. When land had to be found in Canada for the United Empire Loyalists, some of them were settled in the south of what is now Glengarry County, along or close to the St. Lawrence. Most, though by no means all of the Loyalists of early Glengarry were Scots; those who were Scots were almost always Highland Scots. They included Highlanders from Sir John Johnson’s settlement in the Mohawk Valley of New York state who had originally come to America in 1773 – the same year the Hector brought its Highlanders to Pictou, Nova Scotia. The arrival of the Loyalists in Glengarry was followed by an influx of other Highland settlers directly from Scotland into the same locality. Some arrived singly or as members of individual families. Others travelled in large groups. The earliest, or one of the earliest, of the large groups were brought to Glengarry by Fr Alexander Macdonell in 1786. Composed of some 500 Highlanders it is said to have contained nearly everyone from his Highland parish of Knoydart. Fr Macdonell became the first priest of St. Raphael’s, which was founded by his group of migrants, and he ministered to his fellow Roman Catholics there till his death in 1803.

Another early leader of immigration still enjoys a local celebrity in Glengarry but unlike Fr Macdonell has never attained the status of being recognized outside the county as one of the minor worthies of Canadian history. Alexander MacLeod, of Glenelg, Scotland, gathered up about 150 Highlanders constituting in all some 40 families and set sail with them in June 1793 for the new world. Owing to storm damage to the ship in which they were travelling the settlers were twice forced to put back to Scotland. Arriving in British North America too late in the autumn to continue up the St. Lawrence, they had to spend their first winter in the new world in Charlottetown. They eventually
arrived in Glengarry just a little over a year after their setting out from Scotland. Most of the migrants settled in the north east of Glengarry, in the northern part of what is now Lochiel Township, of which they were either the first or among the very earliest settlers. Alexander MacLeod, whose family was given 200 acres of land along with the rest, petitioned the government more than 40 years after his arrival for a thousand acres on the grounds that other immigration leaders had been given the same. But perhaps not very surprisingly in view of the belated nature of his plea, it was rejected. (3)

The most famous of all the immigration leaders came along at a time when settlers were already spread out, even if thinly, over the greater part of the county. This was the second Fr Alexander Macdonell, who also became the priest of St. Raphael’s and was eventually to be the first Roman Catholic Bishop of Upper Canada.

As a priest in the Scottish Highlands, Fr Macdonell had found himself faced with the problem of providing for Scottish Highlanders dispossessed to make way for sheep farming. He describes them as persons who “had never travelled beyond the limits of their native vallies and mountains,” who “neither understood nor spoke any other language but their mother-tongue, the Gaelic,” and who “were perfect strangers to the ways and manners of the world.” (5) His first solution was to settle a colony of them as factory workers in Glasgow. The difficulty involved in this solution was that most of these Highland recruits to the factory system were Roman Catholics and would have to live in the hostile atmosphere of a staunchly Protestant city. But in fact, with tact and perhaps a little good luck, the difficulty was overcome, and the Highlanders prospered until they were thrown out of work in the economic dislocation caused in Britain by the outbreak of war with France in 1793. Fr Macdonell thereupon formed a regiment among them for military service. Said to be the first Roman Catholic regiment raised in Britain since the Reformation, the Glengarry Fencibles, as they were called, served in Ireland, where they helped to suppress the rebellion of 1798, and in the Channel Islands. But with the Peace of Amiens in 1802, the regiment was disbanded. Fr Macdonell thereupon supervised the emigration to Canada in 1803 and 1804 of as many of the soldiers as wanted to try their fortunes in the new world. Numbering in all at least several hundred, his emigrants settled on land towards the middle of Glengarry County.

At the same time as Scottish settlers were taking possession of the land that the government put at their disposal in Glengarry, they were also moving into other land in Glengarry which belonged to the Indians of the St. Regis reserve near Cornwall. This land formed a strip about two miles wide running all along the western edge of Glengarry. Legally it has always been a part of the county. The settlers there were at first squatters or tenants of the Indians but after the crown purchased the land from the Indians in 1847 the settlers were granted regular patents for their holdings. This strip of land was the “Indian Lands” of Connor’s novels and is still known by that name. (6)

Sources for the social history of the earliest Glengarry settlers are poor. They did not keep diaries (7) or write autobiographies. Even a hundred years later Glengarry was not productive of these documents. Even making
allowances for illiteracy, it can be assumed that the earliest settlers wrote many personal letters or had them written for them but very few of them have survived. There are various travellers’ accounts of early Glengarry but these do not tell much about the daily lives of the ordinary people. Travellers, in any case, were likely to describe only the settlers who lived next to the great river-highway – the St. Lawrence. John Howison, who visited Glengarry sometime in the years 1818-1820 but seems to have seen only the settlements next to the St. Lawrence, complained that the Glengarians were unambitious, obstinate, and dirty. (8) But a friend of the future Bishop Macdonell, who came to Glengarry to visit him, spoke more cheerfully in a letter of 1814:

“You might travel over the whole of the county and by far the greater part of Stormont without hearing a word spoken but the good Gaelic. Every family, even of the lowest order, has a landed property of two hundred acres, the average value of which, in its present state of cultivation, with the cattle, etc., upon it may be estimated at from 800 lbs. to 1,000 lbs. However poor the family (but indeed there are none can be called so), they kill a bullock for the winter consumption; the farm or estate supplies them with abundance of butter, cheese, etc., etc. Their houses are small but comfortable, having a ground floor and garret, with a regular chimney and glass windows. The appearance of the people is at all times respectable, but I was delighted at seeing them at church on a Sunday; the men clothed in good English cloth and many of the women wore the Highland plaid.....(9)”

Ralph Connor wrote three novels about the Glengarry pioneers rich in details of social history, The Man from Glengarry (1901), Glengarry School Days (1902), and Torches through the Bush (1934). The first two are set in the north west corner of the county where the author’s father was the Presbyterian minister of Indian Lands – a role Connor also assigns to his fictitious clergyman Mr. Murray. They describe a territory which extends north west from the present day town of Maxville (non-existent in Connor’s period in Glengarry) through Connor’s birthplace, St. Elmo, to the Glengarry-Prescott border. Torches through the Bush is set in a hard-to-define location in the north east of the county but seems to be in all essentials simply a further description of the Maxville-St. Elmo area. All three are set in the 1860’s, the decade of Connor’s boyhood and the one decade of his life he spent in Glengarry.

All the evidence upholds the view that Connor’s wonderfully full and vivid portrait of Glengarry life is accurate except possibly in a few insignificant details. It must be emphasized, however, that the portrait is accurate for those pioneers he professes to be describing and not necessarily for other Glengarry pioneers. Connor was not trying to describe, as a historian might, the different kinds of Glengarry pioneers of all periods, but rather just those pioneers who flourished in one particular part of the county at one particular period. Thus we find that the pioneers he describes were virtually all Presbyterians, whereas in reality in his decade, the 1860’s, Roman Catholics made up approximately half the population of Glengarry. Also, he describes a part of the county where settlement began relatively late and where pioneers were perhaps rather slow in turning forest into farmland. The south of the county had its pioneer experience much earlier.
Connor describes his Glengarry with love but wholly without nostalgia. He sees it as simply a portion of the nation passing through a necessary stage of development on the way to being something else and in accordance with his active and forward looking personality he sees it as right and proper that it should become something else. He never suggests that in the passing of backwoods Glengarry a utopia has been lost or even that how people lived in backwoods Glengarry shows how they should ideally live elsewhere.

Glengarry is equally transitional and its transitional nature is equally little to be regretted in the lives of his heroes. Ranald in The Man from Glengarry grows up in Glengarry and goes away; Jock the minister’s son in Torches through the Bush, another child of Glengarry, leaves for medical school; and no doubt something not very dissimilar will be the lot of Hughie, the other minister’s son of Man from Glengarry and Glengarry School Days. But to go away is not a desertion of Glengarry or a betrayal of Glengarry ideals. It is only the last stage of growing up. Much though Connor admired the primitive Glengarry he chronicled he never doubted that for the ablest people it produced the real business of life lay elsewhere.

The population of Glengarry grew rapidly in the nineteenth century. (10) By 1824 Glengarry had received nearly all the immigrants from Scotland it was ever to receive and its population was stated to be a little over 7000. In the next seventy years the population increased about threefold to reach a peak of about 22½ thousand in the 1890’s. Then it began to drop and it had dropped, with some fluctuations, to the present figure of 18½ thousand. This decline probably reflects, more than anything else, certain economic troubles in the county that I shall discuss later.

Also within the framework of these figures an important social change has taken place in the form of the break-up of the once solid community of the Glengarry Scots. There are two aspects of this which I want to discuss in turn: the French Canadian penetration into the county and the propensity of the Scots, lured by far horizons, to pack their bags and go and live elsewhere in North America.

First, a few statistics on the tendency of Glengarry to be absorbed into French Canada. According to the 1961 census, the last for which complete figures are available, 57.6 per cent of the Glengarry population was French Canadian by ethnic origin and 47.5 per cent was French by mother tongue. For Alexandria, the principal town and only trading centre of more than negligible importance, these figures are considerably higher. At Confederation, persons of French descent made up one-eighth of the Glengarry population. They increased rapidly throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century and more slowly in this century to become a majority of the Glengarry population in the 1930’s. The Scots ceased to be an absolute majority in the county in the first decade of this century.

There is no scholarly study of the revolution I have just described but there is an interesting novel about it by Dorothy Dumbrille. (11) All This Difference (1945) is a love story in which she analyses different kinds of Scots-French conflict in a Glengarry town which is in all but name Alexandria. In the end
the expected marriage of Wencie MacMillan, Scottish and Protestant, to Raoul Faubert, French and Roman Catholic, is frustrated by Raoul's death while heroically saving one of the MacMillan children from drowning in the MacMillan family's mill pond. At about the same time the MacMillans succeed in keeping their economically unsound mill from falling into the rapacious hands of Raoul's anti-Scottish or at least anti-English father. In the course of the novel, too, a plot to replace Katie Macdonell, the high school principal, with a French Canadian has been defeated. All this takes place against the background of the engulfment of Glengarry by foreign invaders. The style and some of the flavour of the novel are imparted by an important passage in which one character confesses, somewhat bitterly, that he is now reconciled to what he see happening in Glengarry. "Katie," he says,

"There's something I see coming, like rain across a field. We always thought we could keep this old County for the Scots - a little Scotland here in Canada, but we're losing out."

She knew what he meant. Farm after farm had been bought by some French-Canadian people. Thrifty and hardworking, they soon saved money on land which had failed to support English-speaking people.

"We mustn't be too bitter, Katie," he went on. "In July, 1939, I was in the highlands of Scotland. I saw only mounds of earth covered with gorse and heather where the homes and castles of our forefathers once stood. The wind swept through our Glen, bleak and desolate, and I knew that an era had passed. As I stood there I changed my mind about a lot of things, just as you have had to do. I'd rather see this old County settled, filled with the laughter of happy children, no matter what their nationality, than have its homes forsaken, their dooryards grown up with burdock and bindweed."

(12)

As I claim that this novel ought to be much better known than it is as an exceptionally revealing document in the social history of the meeting of the two Canadas, I have, I suppose, the responsibility of pointing out a respect in which it seems to me it must be used with great caution. I suggest that it paints an excessively gloomy picture of Scots-French relations in Glengarry. These relations have always been so remarkably good that it is difficult to think of anything in them that deserves to be called a racial "incident." One can pay the Glengarry Scots and the Glengarry French the compliment of saying that their coexistence has been, for all practical purposes, a subject without a history. They are even, if my opinion is of any value, a people of a decidedly similar outlook and way of life who have much more in common with each other than with most of the farm or city folk of, say, Western Ontario.

The other aspect we have noted in the break-up of Scottish Glengarry is the propensity of the Glengarry Scots to go elsewhere. Glengarry has been a great seedbed of people from which the Scots have spread out all over the continent. As far back as 1887 a writer on Glengarry noted what he called the "migratory propensity" of its Scots. He observed that as they moved out French Canadians filled their place. He also contrasted their migratory qualities with the much greater inclination of their Scottish brethren back in the Highlands to stay put.
(13) Less than two decades after he wrote a new and important stage of the Glengarry migration was in full swing with the rush of Glengarry settlers to the prairies. (14)

All this has meant that the number of Scots in Glengarry has shrunk far faster than the population as a whole. The Scots resident in Glengarry now amount to less than half their numbers at the time of Confederation. Then there were close to 16,000 Scots in Glengarry. But in 1961 the census returns listed a little over 7000 “British” in Glengarry. The British are not broken down further for this census into Scots and so forth, but the figures certainly show that there are under 7000 Scots in the county today.

Meanwhile, the old language of Gaelic has disappeared, though rather recently. I doubt if any native of the county could maintain a conversation in it today. However, many people still live in Glengarry who spoke it in their childhood. As late as the 1940's one could still hear occasional Gaelic conversations. Kenyon Presbyterian church at Dunvegan in the north west of the county was apparently the last Presbyterian church in Ontario to hold regular Gaelic services. Not till 1932 were they reduced from every Sunday to once a month, and then in 1934, just two years later, they were ended once and for all. (15)

A powerful force in the breakdown of Gaelic in Glengarry is believed to have been the elementary school system. Children who learned Gaelic as their first tongue at home switched to English while going to school and so abandoned Gaelic. However, this can hardly have taken place till a time when even in the home the ascendancy of the old language had been badly undermined.

French is of course today a common language in Glengarry, but nearly all the people of French descent also speak English. As virtually none of the Scots have learned to speak French, communications between the two racial groups are carried on in English as the one language known to both.

An unfortunate aspect of present day Glengarry is that the county has not prospered as well as many other parts of Ontario. In a University of Toronto study cited in the Globe and Mail in 1965, Glengarry ranked last among the 53 counties and districts of Ontario in “per capita disposable income,” i.e., income after taxes. In the same study Glengarry ranked second last in industrialization. (16) Because of the lack of industry and business the towns of Glengarry are small. The largest, Alexandria, has something over 3200 persons. The next in size is well under a thousand.

Agriculture is still important in Glengarry but it is not agriculture on a large scale such as one finds in Western Ontario. The family farm, long the basic economic institution of Glengarry, is moreover visibly in decline in the county. (17) When family farming is abandoned by the owner-operators on a farm an arrangement is often reached by which one of the neighbours works the land while the owners continue to live in the house which henceforth becomes merely a residence devoid of any agricultural significance. When a farm is sold the purchaser is often a city businessman in search of a weekend home.
To continue the gloomy picture, in the same study mentioned above Glengarry ranked 50th in Ontario in the percentage of the population with university educations. (18) This is perhaps factually true, but it gives a misleadingly bad impression of the people. It simply overlooks the steady production in Glengarry of university educated people who grow up there, go away to university, and at last obtain work outside the county. Because the county can for economic reasons provide only a very limited number of jobs for university educated people getting a university education normally commits one to leaving Glengarry permanently.

Despite all this, there seems little in Glengarry that anyone could reasonably call poverty and most people seem to live in reasonable comfort. This is worth mentioning because there has been a certain amount of outside discussion of Glengarry “poverty.” The Globe and Mail about eight years ago, in the series of articles (19) from which I have been citing the University of Toronto study, annoyed Glengarrians by some very unflattering remarks on depressed conditions in Glengarry County. The series was published under a title which, though it actually referred to Eastern Ontario generally rather than just Glengarry, made all sensitive Glengarrians cringe with embarrassment.

But if this series exaggerated the economic misfortune of Glengarry, as probably most Glengarry readers of the articles concluded it did, the question remains why things have not turned out a little better economically for the county. The debate on world poverty and underdevelopment has shown that such questions are not very easily answered. I will, however, make one very cautious suggestion. I advance it not so much as something I believe as something that I suggest merits investigation and discussion. Can the failure of Glengarry to develop economically as well as much of the rest of Ontario be in large part the result of early and nineteenth-century Glengarry’s lack of middle class settlers? If it had got Glasgow businessmen and tradesmen instead of ex-Highland tenants, what would have happened? Nineteenth-century Glengarry certainly had no lack of small businesses: tanneries, carding mills, sawmills, and so forth. But virtually all remained on a small scale and virtually all have long since withered away without burgeoning into larger enterprises in their own or other fields. Middle class settlers and their sons might just conceivably have raised these businesses, which as it was remained strictly local conveniences, into wider commercial enterprises.

One thing that admirers of Glengarry would generally claim to be true of the county is that a more-or-less distinctive way of life has been worked out there. This is the claim that the Scots of the county – and also those living to the immediate west and north of it in Stormont and Prescott – have worked out a whole set of often very agreeable conventions for living and that these conventions mark them off from most of the rest of North America. This way of life is now disappearing and for the most part it lacks a historian. Ralph Connor wrote brilliantly about it as far as one corner of the county in one decade of its development was concerned. However, there is a book which is not about Glengarry but which gives a reasonably good picture of what Scottish life in at least the northern part of Glengarry was like twenty years ago: J.K. Galbraith’s The Scotch (1964). I presume his description fits the Scots of the south of Glengarry as well as those of the north, but I do not know how
closely. Also, I give the date of twenty years ago because so many of the older ways of life in Glengarry are now being swiftly replaced with ways that are distinctly North American.

If someone who had grown up in Galbraith's Scottish farming community on the shores of Lake Erie in the period Galbraith describes had been transplanted twenty years ago to northern Glengarry he would have found among the Scots there another farming community where the daily round of agricultural life, the prevailing puritanism, and many of the ideas, institutions, and social rules were perfectly familiar to him. He would find, for example, that in Scottish Glengarry as in his old home there were "Men of Standing" (though in Glengarry they would not appear under that name) and that "ignorance" was a term the Scots had adopted as a standard means of reproach. He would also find a similarity of the two communities of Scots in a somewhat equivocal or arm's-length attitude to religion. The religious fervour of the Glengarry Scots in Connor's novels was accurately described, but it belonged to one particular event in Glengarry history, the religious revival of 1864-1865 and was not typical. He would also find that the Lake Erie Scots, who were separated from Glengarry by almost four hundred miles, were quite unknown to the Glengarrians, and that the Glengarrians themselves, whatever may have been the case with the Lake Erie Scots, had long since lost all contact with Scotland. From this he could conclude, if he were reflective, that he had seen a strange case of the independent survival and manifestation of national characteristics in two widely separated groups.

In one matter of great importance to his new friends he might or might not feel himself on known ground. What most distinguishes the Glengarry Scots of every part of the county, and of today as well as the past, from most other Ontario people is something Galbraith implies but does not emphasize: an almost Mediterranean sense of the importance of family relationships, of kindred. While no clan feeling of any kind survives in Glengarry, the sense of being part of a blood family, in which the individual is bound to even the remotest cousin by a special bond, is something a Glengarry Scot absorbs from his earliest years. The question, among Glengarry Scots, of who some fellow Glengarrian is almost always to a large extent and often is principally a question of where he fits into some known network of kinship.

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NOTES

1. There is no volume-length history of Glengarry nor is there even an essay which gives a connected account of the development of the county from the earliest times to the present. But much valuable information is available in J.F. Pringle, Lunenburg or the Old Eastern District (1890; reprinted Belleville, Ont., 1972); J.G. Harkness, Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry: a History 1784-1945 (Oshawa, 1946); a long and data-packed genealogical compilation of
great value for social history called The MacLeods of Glengarry: The Genealogy of a Clan (Iroquois, Ont., (1972)); W.A. Douglas Jackson’s study of land granting policies in an area which includes Glengarry, “The Lands along the Upper St. Lawrence: Canadian-American Development during the Nineteenth Century” (University of Maryland Ph. D. thesis, 1953); Dorothy Dumbrille, Up and Down the Glens (Toronto, 1954) and Braggart in My Step (Toronto, 1956); the annual volumes of the Glengarry Historical Society (1961 –); an extensive periodical literature.


3. Petition (including a description of his voyage) printed in The MacLeods of Glengarry, pp. 58-61. This volume contains many references to Alexander the Captain.


7. An interesting diary belonging to a later stage of settlement was kept by Angus MacMillan of Kenyon Township during the years 1862 to 1884 and is now in PAC, Ottawa.


10. Throughout the remainder of this essay all statistics on population size and racial and linguistic groups in Glengarry unless otherwise indentified are from the Canadian census reports.

11. This novel is discussed much more fully in St. John, “Image of the French Canadian.”


14. Short biographical and autobiographical sketches of Glengarrians who settled near Plenty, Sask., are collected in The Land of Plenty ((Plenty, Sask., (1967?))).


17. Census figures report that there were 1649 "census farms" in Glengarry in 1961, 1441 in 1966, and 1138 in 1971.


19. The four-part series called "Ontario's Rural Slum" was published on 12-15 Jan. 1965 and followed by an editorial on the same subject, 16 Jan.