

Remarks to the Hamilton Association for the Advancement of Science, Literature and Art (HAALSA)

FEBRUARY 20, 2021 (via *Zoom*)

At the first regular meeting of this Association for its 1881-82 season, the incoming president, Dr J.D. Macdonald, described the Association's desire to:

“spread through the community a taste for inquiry and accurate knowledge.”

and he warned of:

“imperfect, inadequate information that is highly prejudicial, and, we may say, dangerous.”

He went on:

"May I not say too, that it is the desire of the Association to aid in the recovery of our people from the impetus with which we have committed ourselves to a course of self-indulgence, of frivolity and dissipation in late years. These are vices which, in past times, characterized chiefly the extremes of society; now, they threaten to corrupt the whole social fabric but we may hope that such an association as this of ours, if it have a successful history, will be among the means of giving a more healthy turn to the minds and to the manners of us all, especially of the young, to show us not only that life is worth living, but that it is worth living earnestly."

Dr. MacDonald need not have worried about this Association having a successful history – a fact borne out by your participation tonight - but he was certainly right to be concerned about the need for accurate knowledge.

He could never have imagined that 140 years after he spoke those words, the Association would be meeting virtually on a thing called *Zoom* and that the chief corruptor of the social fabric and promoter of the highly prejudicial and dangerous misinformation he worried about would be a thing called *Twitter*.

But I suspect he might not have been surprised by the current chaos and raging dysfunction in the U.S. - and the relative peace and stability Canadians enjoy by comparison.

After all, he was just a few years removed from the unravelling of the American republic, the cataclysmic blood bath of its Civil War and the assassination of its President.

And even more recently, he had just witnessed the coming together of the Confederation that had created an entirely different model for a new country - a parliamentary democracy dedicated to “*peace, order and good government.*”

Who among us hasn't given thanks for that model in the tumult of these times and said - if only to ourselves - “*thank God we live in Canada!*”

How did *they* get *there*, and *we* get *here*?

The answer was already unfolding when Dr. MacDonald spoke that night in 1881. Canada had just gone through a cataclysmic shock of its own 13 years earlier - and the events that happened before and after that national trauma were profoundly shaping the path to its future – and to where we are today.

Sadly – and *astonishingly*, those events, that story, and the man at the center of it, are woefully unknown and unremembered by most Canadians today. But, without them, it can be fairly argued that there would be no Canada today - and certainly no Canada as we know it.

Sometime after midnight on April 7, 1868 Thomas D'Arcy McGee, a pivotal figure in the founding of our new country and a Father of Confederation, was murdered by a single bullet, fired at close range in the dark shadows of Sparks Street in Ottawa, just steps away from Parliament.

He had just delivered a brilliant oration in defence of the fragile new federation, a union already teetering on the brink of its own unraveling. The country was only nine months old, and one of its four founding provinces - Nova Scotia - was poised to withdraw and bring the whole edifice down.

Later that day, a shaken Prime Minister Sir John A. MacDonald (who had personally carried McGee's body into his rooming house after the murder) reported the news to a hushed House of Commons still echoing from McGee's eloquence the night before.

Fighting back tears, he described his friend as a hero who died:

“a martyr to the cause of his country, whose hand was open to everyone, whose heart was made for friends and whose enmities were written in water.”

Pierre-Joseph Chaveau, the first Premier of Quebec, also addressed the Commons on the afternoon of the murder. He described McGee as the ***“Prince of orators”*** and his death as

“the baptism in blood of the Confederation he did so much to bring about.”

The baptism in blood!

It was the turning point for the young nation. A transformative national trauma on the scale of the Lincoln assassination two years earlier and the Kennedy assassination a hundred years later.

It impelled its new citizens to take the measure of who they wanted to be and what kind of country they wanted to have.

A week later - on what would have been McGee's forty third birthday - 80,000 Montrealers - **80,000!** in a city of only 100,000 - lined the streets to watch *another* 15,000 mourners march in his funeral procession. Think of that!

It remains the largest funeral in Canadian history. And yet, remarkably, it is all but forgotten today. But, in its wake, the nation came *together* instead of coming *apart*.

And the Prime Minister shrewdly - and successfully - harnessed the shock and grief of the galvanized population to accelerate his nation-building dream, to marginalize his opponents and to keep Nova Scotia in the fold.

McGee had been a linchpin in the Confederation project. He was universally hailed as the “***Prophet of Confederation***” and the majestic vision he promoted on the speaking circuit was especially effective in the Maritimes where his soaring oratory and Celtic charm reassured and wooed a skeptical population whose buy-in was indispensable - but not easily won.

By the time the founding fathers assembled in Charlottetown, the connections he had nourished were well lubricated – (and the same could certainly be said of most of the other participants at the conference, led by Macdonald and McGee, who were more inclined to create a country born in *booze* rather than in *blood*!)

McGee was a powerful symbol and voice for a country built on compromise, tolerance, and accommodation – and a fierce opponent of all forms of sectarianism or tribalism. He was determined to *permanently* exorcise them from the national ethos.

And it was religious sectarianism that presented the biggest challenge to the nation-builders. As difficult as the cultural and language differences between French- and English-Canada were, the great divide was between Protestants and Catholics. Unless that divide could be bridged, *there could be no country*.

McGee was an anomaly in the Confederation kitchen. As an Irish-Catholic, he was neither English nor French. To the French, he wasn't Protestant. To the English he wasn't French.

MacDonald, the Protestant Scottish Orangeman, made full use of McGee's unique position, and when the participants at Charlottetown reconvened in Quebec City a month later, it was McGee who designed the foundational compromise that bridged the great divide and sealed the Confederation deal - the resolution that guaranteed protection for minority education rights for *both* Protestants in Quebec *and* Catholics in Ontario.

But there was another divide that was both tribal and intractable – and, tragically for McGee, ultimately fatal. And the fanatics on both sides of that divide hated him with equal fervor.

Because, as eloquently as he preached his vision for a tolerant, united Canada, McGee even more passionately *equally* and ferociously condemned the bigotry of the anti-Catholic Loyal Orange Order, *and* the corresponding scourge of its nemesis, the Irish Fenian Brotherhood, a secret society dedicated to destabilizing British North America as a tactic in its war against British rule in Ireland.

The Fenians considered McGee a traitor to their cause and Patrick James Whelan, a suspected Fenian, was convicted and hanged for his murder – the last public hanging in Canada.

Although Whelan steadfastly proclaimed his innocence – and his trial was a travesty (MacDonald himself sat with the presiding judge as the jury looked on) - history has not cleared him – and neither can I – but that debate is for another day.

In any event, McGee's murder provoked revulsion – and was a catalyst for the widespread rejection of fanatical sectarianism *of all stripes*. The Fenians in Canada never recovered and the character of the nation grew in a different direction.

It is therefore a bitter irony that McGee may have contributed even more *in death* to the united Canada he had dreamed of than he did *in life* – but his contribution in life remains unparalleled.

His backstory is even more remarkable. Twenty years earlier, he had been a fugitive, an Irish revolutionary wanted for treason – for which the penalty was death - following a failed uprising against Britain during the Great Famine.

He was born in 1825 in Carlingford, Ireland, one of eight children of a customs worker. From the day he was born, his mother predicted that he would one day be a *great man*, and she took care to give him the tools to realize his destiny, instilling in him at an early age a passion for language, literature, poetry and history.

But cruelly, she given little time to shape him; her young prodigy was only 8 when she died as a result of being thrown from a carriage. Nevertheless, she remained his inspiration for the rest of his life and she had equipped him well to prove that her prediction had been correct.

Young D’Arcy was devastated by her death and, when his father remarried in short order a few years later, he bravely sailed off to America and moved in with his mother’s sister in Rhode Island. Within weeks, he had a job as a writer with the *Boston Pilot*, the largest Catholic newspaper in the U.S. And just two years later, at the age of *19*, he was its editor in chief!

He was a virtual *savant* when it came to the use of language. In his short 43 years, he wrote 12 books (including an 800-page popular history of Ireland, which is still considered definitive), published 300 poems, (most of which are pretty bad), wrote thousands of newspaper articles and speeches, and even wrote a play. Somewhere along the line, he also even managed to get a law degree from McGill.

After three years in America, his fame as a journalist spread back to Ireland and he was enticed to return to become the London parliamentary correspondent for *The Freeman's Journal*, a leading Dublin newspaper. But he was fired after 14 weeks at Westminster for anonymously sending "*Letters from London*" to a rival newspaper, *The Nation*, reflecting his personal political views.

His increasingly radical views were more suited to *The Nation* and he joined its staff just as the horrors of the famine began to catastrophically decimate the Irish population. It was the beginning of his metamorphosis into an Irish Patriot.

He helped to form a radical movement known as the *Young Irelanders* and, prophetically, became, for the first (but not last) time a father of Confederation when he was one of forty men appointed to the Council of its new party, the *Irish Confederation*, in 1847.

In another prophetic turn, he brought his power as an orator to bear as a keynote speaker at its inaugural meeting where he gave a rousing oration that asserted Ireland's right to an independent legislature.

He was Secretary of the Revolutionary Council when the Young Irelanders staged a botched uprising in Tipperary which became known as the "*Cabbage Patch Rebellion*". It was a fiasco, but it was enough to make McGee a marked man, on the run for his life, with a price on his head. He eventually escaped, disguised as a priest, onboard board a ship named the *Shamrock*, bound for Philadelphia.

Within 3 months of returning to America, he launched a new Irish newspaper in New York and proudly proclaimed himself a *republican revolutionary* and a *traitor to the British Crown*.

He later started newspapers in Boston and Buffalo and, by 1850, he had returned to New York as Irish America's best known Catholic journalist and editor of the *American Celt*. He built a reputation as a compelling speaker and political commentator, especially about the immigrant experience, the Celtic perspective and, from afar, the cause of Irish liberation.

But he soon became disenchanted with the America of his imagination – a land of liberty, where the Irish could flourish as part of a new world where old world prejudices would be washed away in a grand experiment dedicated to the ideal that *all men are created equal*. It was a model that he believed could serve as an inspiration for Ireland.

Instead, he found a cruel, undisciplined, dog-eat-dog society roiling with greed, bigotry and demagoguery and where the fastest growing political party was the nativist “*Know-Nothing*” Party – a populist movement which was violently anti - immigrant and especially anti-Irish and anti-Catholic.

The Know-Nothings were all about polarization based on fear of the other. Sound familiar? For them, the U.S. was a Protestant, Anglo-Saxon nation that was being over-run by foreign hordes of “*mongrel races*” and “*Papists*”. Its chief platform called for closing the gates and denying citizenship and the right to vote for immigrants until they had lived in the US for at least 21 years.

Its name arose from the scripted response of those suspected to have been part of the murderous mobs that rampaged through Catholic neighbourhoods in Philadelphia and New York and other cities, killing Irishmen in the streets, burning churches and seminaries, and assaulting Catholic clergy: “*I know nothing.*”

It didn't take long for McGee to conclude that, far from flourishing in the New World, the Irish were, as he wrote:

“socially and politically the weakest community in the Republic – weaker than the negroes themselves in the free states.”

And, in a particularly prophetic piece he published in 1852, he railed against: ***“the numerous array of demagogues who afflict American Society”***

He went on to describe what he meant by a demagogue:

“He is a mob-leader who is capable of any trick to insure his object; he lives only in agitation, turmoil and sedition. All his lines are out in troubled waters. He is a moral wrecker, who would evoke the whole fury of a popular tempest for the sake of the driftwood it might cast up at his door.”

Happily for us, McGee was to discover another place in the New World where things were already shaping up quite differently, and which he was destined to help shape into a profoundly different country. In 1852 - that same year that he railed against American demagoguery - he was invited to speak to the St Patrick Society in Montreal where the seeds of his next metamorphosis were planted.

There, in *British* North America – in the last place he expected to feel welcome - he observed a completely different Irish immigrant community, and he was struck by the stark contrast between the way minorities were treated there as compared to in the U.S. He was particularly impressed by the fact that French Catholics had *real political power* and had used it to promote and establish their own schools in English Canada.

As a devout Catholic, he had long advocated for parochial schools and was loath to consign the education of his precious daughters to what he considered the ***“tyranny of a Protestant majority in an unchecked democracy”*** in the common school system in the U.S. ***“Here”***, he wrote of Canada, ***“the State is made a partner in the work of Education; but the parents, also, are partners.”***

The Irish fugitive who just a few years earlier had arrived proclaiming himself a ***“republican revolutionary and traitor to the English Crown”*** was so disillusioned with the *land of Liberty* and impressed with British North America that he now proclaimed it to be:

“ better to languish and die under the red flag of England than live to beget children of perdition under the flag of a proselytizing republic.”

He was in no doubt that Irish Catholics were much better off in British North America than they were in Ireland - and certainly better off than they were in the U.S. “*The British flag does indeed fly here*”, he wrote, “*but it casts no shadow.*”

By 1857, Know-Nothingism had, in his words, “*won everything they played for*” and “*swept the country with hurricane force*” in recent elections all over the U.S.

It was time to escape again – this time from the shadow cast by the “**tyranny of the majority**” and opt for the “*heavy balance of healthiness in favour of Canada*”. He accepted an invitation to start a new newspaper and a new life with his family in Montreal where he hoped that his two remaining daughters would fare better than his three other children who had heartbreakingly succumbed to disease and died during their years in the U.S.

McGee quickly established a new newspaper in Montreal which he called *The New Era* and he and his family made themselves right at home in *La Belle Province*.

He had no difficulty getting himself elected shortly thereafter to the legislative Assembly of the United Province of Canada for Montreal. His fellow-Irish immigrants made up over one-third of Montreal’s population – and in fact, there were more Irish in the four provinces that were to join at Confederation than there were English or French or Scottish.

McGee became a fierce advocate of the British Parliamentary system of government - even of the functional advantages of a constitutional monarchy. It was a stunning evolution.

He was utterly fearless in his war on sectarianism. He often required police protection or had to flee for his life when he spoke publicly, but he persisted in preaching his vision of a united country based on principles of accommodation and tolerance.

To give you a sense of the gospel he preached leading up to Confederation, permit me to read from the play I was inspired to write after reading the definitive biography of McGee by Professor David Wilson of the University of Toronto. I titled my play *It's Morning Now* (which are McGee's last known words after he was bid "Good Night" just before turning onto Sparks Street on that fateful early morning of April 7, 1868); These lines are taken from his own speeches:

"Mr. Speaker, we are a mixed people, with mixed origins, mixed languages and mixed creeds. But in unity we find our strength, in unity we find our security and in unity we find our destiny!"

We have seen our Southern friends fill their fields with blood to save their union. We see in their dreadful Civil War the wreckage of a house with no foundation.

But our union will have the strength of the old foundation. But our union will have the strength of the old foundations: a sovereign monarchy, a free Commons and an independent judiciary.

These ancestral heritages distinguish our people from their people, our institutions from their institutions, and our history – when we shall have a history – from their history.

*'Oh fiery, fierce and fickle is the South,
But loving, true and tender is the North!*

Here we have no ancient quarrels to paralyze our progress or move our people to hatred. Here is no aristocracy, except of virtue and of talent. Here is a new land, a land of hope and decency, a land that is the creation of our own free, unbiased and untrammelled will.

Most importantly, we have guaranteed that no minority will ever be oppressed by the majority in our new country. Our Catholic and Protestant minorities in Upper and Lower Canada may depend on it. We shall fix forever the great and vexing problem of church and state!

And finally, gentlemen, let us learn from our forest-born Federalists - our Six Nations brothers who achieved their own great union on this very soil. Let us dare to emulate their great statemen – Brant, and Pontiac, and Tecumseh – who showed us that, only by rising above the old grievances and tribal prejudices of the past, in a spirit of tolerance, can a great nation survive.

Gentlemen, I am persuaded in my inmost mind that these are the days of destiny for British America, that the opportunity to determine our future is upon us, that there is a tide in the affairs of nations, as well as of men, and that we are now, in this place, at this time, at the flood of that tide!”

By the late 1860’s his message was *urgent*. It was a tenuous time for British North America. The American Civil War had left 800,000 soldiers armed and restless. Lincoln had just been assassinated, the U.S. Secretary of State was talking about annexation and continental ambitions - and the Fenian threat was *real*.

In 1866, a Fenian force, trained and equipped during the Civil War, actually invaded from New York across the Niagara River and took Fort Erie. They were led by a former Union cavalry commander and at Ridgeway, just down the peninsula from here, they routed a Canadian militia commanded by a Lieutenant Colonel from Hamilton’s 13th battalion.

The Battle of Ridgeway was the first battle fought exclusively by Canadian troops and led entirely by Canadian officers. It was also the last battle ever fought in Canada against a foreign invasion.

In the wake of the scare at Ridgeway and other unsettling Fenian raids in New Brunswick and Quebec, the impetus for union grew more urgent among the alarmingly vulnerable Canadian and Maritime provinces of British North America.

Within a year, we had a country.

The late prime Minister, John Turner, was fond of saying:

“Democracy doesn’t happen by accident.”

Neither does a country.

When it came time for the first Prime Minister to put together its first government, McGee made one more key contribution by agreeing to give up a position in cabinet - which he had undoubtedly earned - to a Nova Scotian - a graceful gesture which helped keep the country together and a skittish Nova Scotia onboard.

In the months following Confederation, an exhausted McGee took to his bed with a serious foot ailment as well as a deep depression brought on by the scars of his political battles and family tragedies and his long struggle with alcoholism.

But by 1868, things were looking up. His health had improved and after almost a year on the wagon, he decided to leave politics. A grateful MacDonald secured a lifetime position for him as Director of Patents and McGee was looking forward to concentrating on his family and his first love, writing.

But there was one more battle to be fought for the country he had done so much to build.

In the elections following Confederation, anti-Confederation candidates had won 18 of Nova Scotia’s 19 seats in parliament – and 36 of the 38 seats in its legislature. Their champion, Joseph Howe, had gone off to London to petition Disraeli to let Nova Scotia out of the Confederation compact.

Macdonald sent Charles Tupper to London to oppose Howe on behalf of Canada. Dr. Thomas Parker, one of Nova Scotia’s anti-confederation M.P.s immediately brought a motion to recall Tupper, which was fiercely debated in Ottawa in the early morning of April 7, 1868.

It was perhaps McGee's finest hour. He rose in the House of Commons and delivered a spellbinding defence of Confederation that was to serve as his valedictory to the nation.

Minutes later, he was dead.

But the country endured.

Let me end with another excerpt from my play, which includes that last speech:

“Mr. Speaker, I see in the distance, one great nationality, bound, like the shield of Achilles, by the blue rim of ocean. I see within the round of that shield, the peaks of the Western mountains and the crests of the Eastern waves - the winding Assiniboine, the five-fold lakes, the St. Lawrence, the Ottawa, the Saguenay, the St. John and the basin of Minas – by all these flowing waters, in all the valleys they nourish, in all the cities they feed along their courses, I see a nation united. I see a nation of industrious, contented, moral citizens – free in spirit, free in name and free in fact.

The breakers ahead have all gone down and all is plain sailing – except for my friend Dr. Parker, who was elected on the fair play ticket, but never misses an opportunity to strike under the belt!

He dares insult the great Charles Tupper – who is not here to defend himself – because he is even now upon the sea on a mission to preserve our great union!

Unlike the member opposite, who seeks only for subjects of irritation – strange behaviour, I may say, for a doctor – Sir Charles understands that temporary popularity, which fuels the blather emanating from that side of the chamber, is the shifting sand upon which stand all of history's fools. History's giants, on the other hand, know that the true leader will resist the tide of unpopularity and, if need be, sacrifice himself upon his principles.

Nova Scotia has nothing to fear. The single aim of our confederation has been to consolidate all of British North America with the utmost respect for the power and privileges of each Province.

And I Sir, who have been its earnest advocate, speak here, not as the representative of any Province, but as a Canadian, ready and bound to recognize the claims of all of my fellow Canadians, from the farthest east to the farthest west, equally to those of my nearest neighbour who proposed me on the hustings!

My friends, do not suffer this miracle to pass. The great statemen of four separate Provinces – and the leaders of the parties opposing them – have, remarkably and courageously, set aside their many differences to make a most improbable dream this reality. And, while this Canadian draws breath, he will stand on guard for it!

So, on this February 20th, 2021, let us give thanks for Canada.

And for Thomas D’Arcy McGee, who gave his life to it.

And for it.

Dermot P. Nolan, February 20, 2021