

Captain John MacDonald of the Royal Highland Emigrants

*By Brian McConnell, UE **

On a low hill overlooking the upper Hillsborough River in northwestern Queens County, Prince Edward Island is an imposing monument to Captain John MacDonald, an officer of the 2nd Battalion, 84th Regiment of Foot (Royal Highland Emigrants). It was erected in Scotchfort Cemetery by his descendants and others who remember him as the founder of the First Scottish Catholic Settlement in Prince Edward Island. In early November, 2015, as a history enthusiast and member of the 84th of Foot, 2nd Battalion, Regimental Association I visited the site.



Captain John MacDonald's Monument

John MacDonald, born September 29, 1742 at Glenalladale, Moidart, Scotland was the eldest son of Alexander MacDonald, 7th Laird of Glenalladale. He was educated at a Roman Catholic seminary at Regensburg in Germany and acted as the factor to the Clanranald estates. Feeling unsatisfied with the economic and religious circumstances in the west Highlands he supported a plan that led to a group of 210 settlers arriving in Prince Edward Island in 1772 at Scotchfort.(1)

The families that left Scotland on board the *Alexander* included: Beaton, Campbell, Gillis, MacDonald, MacEachern, MacIntosh, MacKenzie, MacKinnon, MacPhee, and MacRae. They were all Roman Catholics from the Hebridean islands of South Uist and Eigg and from mainland areas of Moydart and Arisaig.

On the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the Glenalladale pioneers in July 1922, a large granite Celtic Cross was unveiled in the Scotchfort Cemetery. A small white cross to the northeast commemorates John MacDonald, his wife Margaret, and daughter Flora. Another small plaque to the west denotes Father James MacDonald. There are also 35 stones in the cemetery arranged in a row at the back behind two larger crosses as well as unmarked graves on the site dating back to the French Regime. (2)



Scotchfort Cemetery

The Glenalladale branch of Clan MacDonald joined the standard of Prince Charles Edward Stuart, “Bonnie Prince Charlie” (son of exiled King James), in rebellion and it was on their territory at Glenfinnan that Charles raised the standard in 1745. The father of John MacDonald, Alexander MacDonald, and his uncle, Angus MacDonald, were officers in Prince Charles’ Army. After the defeat at Culloden and end of the rebellion, they suffered the loss of cattle and destruction of their property.

On the death of his father in January, 1761, after schooling in Germany, John MacDonald became the 8th Laird of Glenalladale. Within next few years he married his first wife, Isabella Gordon, aunt of the famous 19th century admiral, Sir James Gordon. She unfortunately died in childbirth and the child only survived a few months.

By 1770 the persecution of poor Catholics in the west Highlands led the Bishop and leaders to believe only choice was emigration to America. (3) Financing was taken on by the Catholic Church. A public subscription made among Catholics in England raised enough to help send the Glenalladale emigrants to Prince Edward Island. They purchased land from the Lord Advocate of Scotland, James William Montgomery, on St. John's (later known as Prince Edward) Island. It was Lot 36, later named Scotchfort.

John MacDonald joined the settlers at Scotchfort in 1773 and visited Philadelphia first to gain information about the circumstances he was facing. MacDonald's efforts at establishing a permanent settlement was interrupted by the outbreak of the American Revolution. In June, 1775 he received an invitation from Lieutenant Allan Maclean and Major John Small to join them in raising a regiment of Scots Highlanders then dispersed in the different provinces of the continent of North America. MacDonald expressed the opinion in a paper to the Secretary of State for Nova Scotia that "***he could not decline an example and exertion of loyalty specially required by His Majesty when the dismemberment of the Empire was in question and especially the dismemberment of the part to which the petitioner now belongs.***" (4)

Despite never having belonged to any military regiment before, John MacDonald was appointed a Captain and made a Company Commander in the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Highland Emigrants, later to be known as the 84th Regiment of Foot. The 2nd Battalion, led by Major John Small, formerly of the 42nd Highlanders and then of the 21st Regiment, was to have its' headquarters in Halifax and be made up of recruits from Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, St. John's Island (Prince Edward Island), and from the Highland settlers in North Carolina. Colonel MacLean organized the 1st Battalion about Quebec and on the northern frontier of New York from discharged men of the 42nd Regiment, Fraser and Montgomery Highlanders who had settled after the end of the Seven Years War (French - Indian War) in 1763.

Captain MacDonald raised a Company among his own Scots and others on Prince Edward Island. It was brought to Halifax and then he went to Newfoundland to recruit in that colony. While MacDonald was away his sister Helen (Nelly) was to manage his Estate. When he returned to Halifax he spent two years there until in summer of 1776 he returned to Scotchfort to deal with some dissatisfied tenants. Late in 1778 he was given command of a detachment in Annapolis.(5) In the Muster Roll of January 21, 1778, Captain John MacDonald's Company was identified as the 9th Company of the 2nd Battalion. (6) The Royal Highland Emigrants were regularized and placed on the British establishment on December 25, 1778 and numbered as the 84th Regiment of Foot. Captain MacDonald remained on active service until late in 1783.

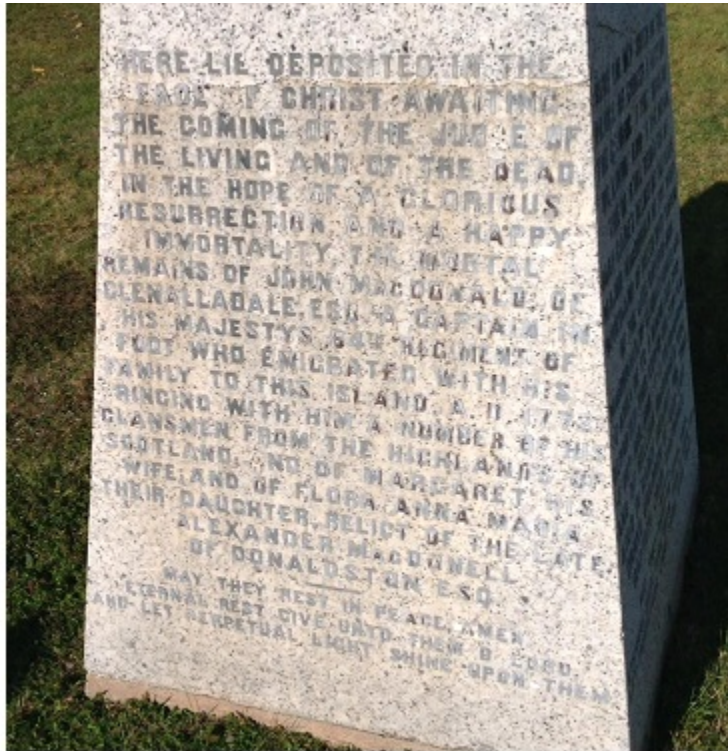
Major Small complimented the service of Captain MacDonald with the 84th Regiment by referring to his "***activity and unabating zeal, in bringing an excellent company into the field***" and to his being "***one of the most accomplished men, and best Officers of his rank, in His Majesty's Service.***" (7)

Captain MacDonald said that he did not meet the enemy, however there is an account of his seizure of an American man-of-war, which was apprehended on a plundering expedition along the coast of Nova Scotia, that indicated:

“During the American Revolution an American ship of war came to the Nova Scotia coast, near a port where Glenalladale was on detachment, with a small party of his men of the 84th Highland Emigrants. A part of the enemy’s crew having landed for the purpose of plundering the people of the country. Captain MacDonald with his handful of men boarded the vessel, overcame those who had been left to take charge of her, hoisted the sails and took her in triumph into the harbour of Halifax. He then returned with a reinforcement and took the crews of Americans and French all prisoners.” (8)

With the end of the war and disbandment of the 84th Regiment, Captain MacDonald was placed on half pay and returned to his affairs on Prince Edward Island. The share of his regimental lands granted to Col. John Small in trust for all the officers, men and families of the 2nd Battalion, 84th Regiment, was located on Five Mile River. On December 13, 1785, Captain MacDonald was deeded 700 acres in a 1000 acre regimental lot No. 5E near the NW corner of lands belonging to John Lehey. He struggled with his Estate in Prince Edward Island as most of his tenants left for other lands. In 1805 he found it necessary to go to England and consider selling his Estate. He managed however to have his past rents that were due to the Crown forgiven and to retain his property. When he died on December 28, 1810 he was survived by his second wife Margaret and five children, Donald, who was his successor as head of the Estate, William, John, Roderick C., and Flora Anna Maria. (9)

Captain MacDonald was unique in several ways among the Officers of the 84th Regiment: 1) unlike other Officers he had no previous military experience; 2) he was a Roman Catholic while his Commander and other Officers were Protestant; 3) he had already settled in what would become part of Canada and remained there after the war, unlike most other Officers who returned to Scotland; 4) he was one of the few Officers to have his place of death recognized with a Monument. For these reasons it is perhaps easier to remember him and to recognize his place in history.



Wording on Monument to Capt. John MacDonald:

Here lie deposited in the
face of Christ awaiting
the coming of the Judge of
the Living and of the Dead
In the Hope of a Glorious
Resurrection and a happy
immortality the mortal
remains of John MacDonald of
Glenalladale, Esq., a Captain of
His Majesty's 84th Regiment of
Foot who emigrated with his
Family to this Island A.D. 1773
bringing with him a number of his
Clansmen from the Highlands of
Scotland, and of Margaret, his
wife, and of Flora Anna Margaret
their daughter, relict of the late
Alexander MacDonnell

May they 'Rest in Peace' Amen
Eternal rest give unto them o Lord
And let perpetual light shine upon them.

Notes:

* This article was prepared on November 21, 2015. To contact Brian McConnell email: brianm564@gmail.com

(1) Captain John MacDonald, "Glenalladale", article by Rev. Allan F. MacDonald, CCHA, Report, 31 (1964) pp. 21-37

(2) "Scotchfort Pioneer Cemetery", Canada's Historic Places, <http://www.historicplaces.ca/en/rep-reg/place-lieu.aspx?id=12282>

(3) "MacDonald of Glenaladale, John (Iain MacDhomhnaill), by F. L. Pigot, Dictionary of Canadian Biography, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/macdonald_of_glenaladale_john_5E.html

(4) Letter from Captain Alexander MacDonald to Captain John MacDonald, November 18, 1778 in *The Letter Book of Captain Alexander MacDonald, 1775-1779*

(5) Quoted in Montreal Gazette, May 10, 1919. His loyalty to the crown is also attested by his presentation, in 1776, of a paper to Secretary of State Germain of Nova Scotia, in which he stressed the need for "pursuing henceforth the most vigorous measures to counteract the propensity to Independency." P.A.C. Annual Report, 1894, p. 354

(6) Transcriptions of 15 Early Muster Rolls (for the period 1775-1778) of the 2nd Battalion, Young Royal Highland Regiment of Foot, later called the Royal Highland Emigrants, the 84th Regiment of Foot contained in the Ward Chipman Fonds, Library and Archives Canada, MG23 D-1, Vol 27, Microfilm C9818. See: <http://www.uelac.org/PDF/Early-Muster-Rolls-84th-Regiment.pdf>

(7) See "MacDonald of Glenaladale, John (Iain MacDhomhnaill), by F. L. Pigot, Dictionary of Canadian Biography, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/macdonald_of_glenaladale_john_5E.html

(8) R.C. MacDonald, "Sketches of Highlanders (St. John: Nentry Chubb & Co., 1843), pp. 44-45

(9) John V. Duncanson, "Rawdon/Douglas: Two Loyalist Townships in Nova Scotia", (Belleville, Ontario: Mika Publishing, 1989)