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VOL. 1473
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The Epic of Norman McLeod

To appreciate the story that I propose to tell, it is necessary to recall briefly the situation that obtained in the Western Highlands of Scotland in the second half of the eighteenth century.

For the people there the year 1746 was a melancholy landmark. It saw the defeat of the Young Pretender, Bonnie Prince Charlie.

Appearing among them suddenly from France, Charlie revived their ancestral loyalty to the House of Stuart. He appealed to the romantic strain in their Highland nature. He included in his address to them a few Gaelic words that were an 'open sesame' to their hearts. Young, gay, and chivalrous, he had asked for their allegiance and they gave it, holding nothing back. They were Celts--and had not Aristotle himself once said of a Celtic nation that when they fought, it was not with the rational courage that calculates the risk, but with the insensate rashness that takes no consideration whatsoever of the chances of success.

Charlie led his Highlanders to meet the Royalists on Culloden Moor. He was convinced that they could conquer any foe; but they were only human, and when he pitted them against this enemy the odds were weighted heavily against them. "The weary Highlanders," says one historian (MacKenzie, A Short History of the Scottish Highlands, p. 268), "utterly exhausted by want of food and sleep, dragged themselves back to the field of battle." There his "five thousand half-starved and fatigued irregulars, disheartened by misadventures, and officered by men whose discords and blunders alike were a scandal, faced nine thousand veteran troops in the pink of condition, well-provided with cavalry and artillery." If his men could not win, "they at least knew how to die." Further, spies had informed the enemy of Charlie's plan of attack. The day, under these conditions, ended in his utter defeat, and finished the Stuart cause forever.

The aftermath of Culloden was unspeakably sad. It was made an offence for Highlanders to wear their traditional garb. It was declared illegal for them to own arms. Their chiefs, who had enjoyed

great prestige, were progressively reduced to the status of landlords, with all the commercial temptations attached thereto. It was reported that before 1776, five thousand clansmen had left Scotland for what is now the United States of America.

Economic conditions also conspired against any hope that the Highlanders might have had of finding a livelihood in their homeland. The phenomenal growth in the demand for black cattle boosted the rental of grazing fields beyond anything that the tenants could reasonably pay. The idea of reserving large areas for the feeding of deer caught the imagination of other proprietors. Finally, the rapid development of sheep farming led some land-owners to expropriate, and burn the cottages, of as many as a dozen crofters to make room for a single shepherd. So it was written, "cattle depopulated the glens; deer to some extent continued the process; but sheep proved the greatest exterminator of all" (MacKenzie, p. 310). Each process reminded the poor that the country could do quite well without them.

Writers who were presumed to look at the Highland problem objectively said that the root cause of the continuing poverty there was surplus population, and its final solution was the encouragement of emigration. In new lands like Australia, Upper Canada and Nova Scotia, wide unoccupied spaces were available to them, and endless vistas of opportunity beckoned the hopes of youth. One famous visitor to the Highlands reported that the interest in emigration there had reached an "epidemical fury."

Norman's Early Life

It was in the circumstances just described that Norman McLeod was born in Assynt, Sutherlandshire. The year was 1780. Norman's father, Daniel McLeod, was a fisherman. In religion he was a Presbyterian. His mother, Margaret, had been born an Anglican but she had, of her own volition, become an Independent.

It is only possible to surmise what their home was like, but it is safe to say that it had none of the refinements that even

people of the most modest circumstances today expect. The poorer classes who made up the vast majority of the population lived in houses of two rooms, one of which was usually given over to domestic animals. A peat fire burned in the centre of the family room, and the smoke escaped through a barrel-shaped opening in the roof or through the door and window. The floor was trampled earth, sometimes mixed with ashes; and the walls, made of field stone, with clay for mortar, admitted both moisture and cold. If such dwellings seem very primitive, I should say that I have paraphrased this account from a review of conditions in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, given to the Statistical Society of Glasgow by competent authorities in the year 1838. I myself have seen dwellings of this kind in the Hebrides, where they are called "black houses". Perhaps the McLeod home was somewhat better than the average, but it should be kept in mind that the father was a labourer and not a member of the more prosperous classes.

Norman, like One whose name I do not need to mention, grew up in that environment and increased "in wisdom and stature" (Luke 2, 52). He became known locally for his physical strength, a useful asset in the fishing in which he served his apprenticeship with his father. It cannot be said, in completion of the familiar text that I have quoted, that he increased also "in favour with God and man". Reverend John Kennedy discovered that when he became Assistant Minister in Assynt, and learned Norman was regarded as a "clever, irreverent, forward youth, with a courage that seemed never to have known a childhood". (Quoted by Reverend John Murray, D.D., in History of Presbyterianism in Cape Breton.)

It happened that Norman, however, had secretly been giving serious thought to his own religious faith. Although his parents were Presbyterian he considered himself for a while a Roman Catholic. Then he fell under the spell of Universalism, which held out hope for those who are unredeemed in the present life. After that he turned to Deism, and on to Atheism, in which he lingered for two

years. His spirit, still restless, was then drawn by the Society of Friends, which answers the spiritual requirements of some deeply religious minds, but in his case it failed to maintain the hopes that it inspired. From the Friends he became enamoured of Arminianism, the doctrine of the Methodists, and he not only read everything that he could find on that subject but persuaded other members of his family to do the same. Finally he came back to Presbyterianism and the theology of Calvin, and for the rest of his life felt no urge to leave it. Perhaps the influence of Mr. Kennedy had something to do with his decision, for it was during an evangelistic campaign conducted by him that Norman made his public profession of faith. The "clever, irreverent, forward youth" was now convinced that he was called to the Christian ministry. So like the first disciples he forsook his nets, at twenty-six or twenty-seven years of age, and commenced the seven years course of study that led to ordination. He discussed the matter with Mary McLeod, whom he had asked to be his wife, but she was the last person to stand between him and his duty, and she agreed to wait.

Preparation for his Career

His mind now being clear about his life work, Norman went to the celebrated University of Aberdeen. He must have been older than most students, for it was not unusual for boys to register in the University as young as fourteen years. The distance from his home to Aberdeen was one hundred and fifty miles, and Norman had to walk all the way. He took the usual Arts course and finished, it has been alleged, with the Gold Medal in Moral Philosophy, but that has never been confirmed. How he managed financially no one knows, but he lived frugally; and there are well-accredited accounts of two students sharing a room with a single bed in it, each one sleeping half the night while the other worked at his books. Each summer he returned to Assynt to help his father with his fishing.

Something, however, seemed to be disturbing him. He was convinced that the ministry was the highest calling on earth, but

his own contacts with the "cloth" led him to believe that many of the ministers of Scotland had not the remotest conception of what it really meant. Some were like Reverend William MacKenzie, who had been minister in Assynt as long as Norman lived there. He was a man of friendly but convivial habit, who went through the formalities of worship without the slightest consciousness of the "mystic germ", as Professor William James called it, or the moral passion that in Norman's mind were the first requirements of a true preacher.

From Aberdeen he went to Edinburgh to concentrate on his theology, but his disillusionment steadily deepened. One of the other Divinity students in Edinburgh at the time, Thomas Carlyle, who has been rated as "the only truly great spiritual thinker that Scotland has produced" (Finlay, Scotland Today), lost his faith in the church and its leadership and finally found his opportunity for preaching his message, not from the pulpit but through the printed page. Norman remained a candidate for the ministry until his sixth year and then he too decided that he must withdraw. He had nothing but scorn for the clergy of Scotland as a whole. His judgement of them was characteristically harsh, for the Disruption in 1843 in which three-quarters of them resigned from their congregations and left their comfortable manses, for conscience' sake, proved that most of them were not time-servers at all. Like Carlyle, Norman turned to teaching. He had recently married Mary McLeod whom he did not think it fair to keep waiting any longer.

The Teacher

His first and only teaching appointment in Scotland was in the village of Ullapool. It was included in the large parish of Lochbroom of which a certain Dr. Ross was the minister. Part of the teacher's salary came through him, and the remainder from fees. On Sundays when Dr. Ross could not conduct the service in Ullapool, the teacher was supposed to read the scriptures and make appropriate comments on the passages.

Norman began his teaching with fine promise, but he was not an easy man to get along with, and problems soon made their appearance. Dr. Ross was himself a better than average scholar, who loved to illustrate his discourses from the classics or modern astronomy, but there was little gospel in his sermons or sacrifice in his life, and Norman discontinued his attendance at Church. The minister complained of this to the Session and proposed a boycott of Norman's school, but the people stood by the teacher.

There was also the question of the baptism of Norman's first child. He and his wife wished a relative of his, Reverend Lachlan MacKenzie of Loch Carron, to officiate at it, and they carried the infant forty miles to the Loch Carron manse. Mr. MacKenzie, however, may have thought that this was a good time to induce Dr. Ross and Norman to reconcile their differences; at any rate, the Doctor was there when the McLeod's arrived. When Dr. Ross realized what Mr. MacKenzie was up to he warned him that he would not tolerate any trespassing upon his pastoral privileges; so the McLeods had to take their baby home unbaptized.

Then there was the charge that the teacher had stolen some firewood belonging to the minister. The incident is reported in Watchman Against the World by Flora McPherson, an excellent study of Norman's life. Dr. Ross had wished to clear a piece of ground and announced that anyone who cared to participate could keep half the wood he cut. A cousin of Norman's who was visiting him said that he would like to get a load, so he and Norman cut down some of the trees and piled his share of the wood at Norman's house, until the cousin could find time to come for it. The next thing Norman knew he was summoned to court to answer a charge of theft laid by Dr. Ross, and the affair soon became a local scandal. It has to be remembered that, before the Criminal Code was revised, larceny, or theft, of more than a few shillings, was punishable by death or deportation. Norman was put to the inconvenience of traveling to another town, explaining the situation to a lawyer, and

having the charge withdrawn. There seemed to be no way out of this whole unhappy situation but for him to resign his teaching appointment, which he did, and forfeit a third of his salary.

He got a job "in the dangerous and troublesome Caithness fishing" (Robertson, Lion of Scotland, p. 44) on the East Coast of Scotland, and by the end of the year he was out of debt. When the next mid-summer arrived, he had put aside a little money. He therefore decided to leave Scotland and try to carve out a new life for himself in far off Nova Scotia. He took passage on the Frances Ann, which was carrying four hundred Scots, including a number of his personal friends, to the port of Pictou--he left his wife and three children behind, to come as soon as he had made a home for them. He was now thirty-seven years of age.

The Emigrant

In mid-ocean the ship ran into bad weather and developed a serious leak, and a state of emergency quickly developed. The captain convened a meeting of all his passengers, explained the danger to them, and said that it was his considered judgment they should turn back and hope to reach the coast of Ireland; and they in their desperation were prepared to accept his advice. Norman, however, dissented, and persuaded them it would be safer for them to keep to their course. The captain, over-ruled in the management of his ship, said to Norman "You'll hang for this" a fate from which, if they were headed for a watery grave, he would at least have been spared! He gave a lead in organizing the male members of his crew to keep the pumps working day and night, and when at last they came in sight of land the captain had the good grace to apologize to him. There was great rejoicing among them when they disembarked at Pictou Harbour.

People in a pioneer community realize the importance of mutual aid. Every man helps his neighbour secure the necessities of life. Norman obtained a grant of land for himself, and with the help of his friends built a shelter on it. He was still a

layman, but the preaching of the Gospel is not the preserve of any profession, and he lost no time in inviting those who were interested to come to his cabin for worship and instruction. The number of his admirers increased steadily, and we have it from a reliable annalist that no man ever wielded as great an influence as he over the Highlanders in Pictou. How much of his preaching was really the good news of the Gospel is another matter. One man who heard him said that his sermons consisted in "torrents of abuse against all religious bodies and even against individuals, the like of which they had never heard".

If Norman ever thought that he could leave the iniquities of the old world behind by the simple expedient of crossing the Atlantic he very soon discovered his error. In the emerging towns of Pictou and New Glasgow he encountered profanity, dishonesty, deceit, drunkenness, and all the sins that provoke the wrath of God. Having endured these evils for almost two years, he gathered a group of his followers together and informed them that a Highland congregation in the United States had asked him to come and minister to their spiritual welfare, and he had decided to accept. If any of them were disposed to throw in their lot with him he would be glad to have them; and so strong was their attachment to him that some of them were pleased to go. Thus the Pictou chapter of his life came to an abrupt end.

Norman and his friends commenced work on a little ship of about eighteen ton capacity, to carry them to their destination. The scoffers derisively called it the Ark, reminiscent of the more commodious craft that Noah had prepared in anticipation of the Deluge, because Norman had been saying that God would punish Pictou for its evil ways. They probably sailed round Cape North, where Cape Breton points like an index finger toward Newfoundland. Coming down on the open Atlantic side they reached the beautiful harbour of St. Anne's, named by the French in honour of the Queen of Austria, the mother of Louis the Fourteenth. On its spacious

waters, surrounded on both sides by high wooded hills, a thousand ships could lie at anchor. Its fertile farm lands and its proximity to the sea recommended it to the French explorers as an ideal site for a colony, but military experts preferred Louisbourg, so St. Anne's was abandoned. How perfectly adapted it was for Norman's secret ambition, which was to build a society far removed from contamination with the world! Property was available here for a purely nominal sum. The date of their arrival in St. Anne's was May 20, 1820.

They sent the Ark back to Pictou, presumably to bring more of their friends who would like to join the community, but she was lost at sea. Others however came, and the population of the St. Anne's district reached a maximum of about two thousand persons. Norman was now about forty years of age--the same, I have read somewhere, as St. Paul traditionally was when he became a Christian missionary, and as the late Dean Inge was when he went to St. Paul's Church in London, which suggests that even at that age a man may still give a good account of himself in the ministry.

St. Anne's

It is not too much to say that in St. Anne's Norman became a kind of uncrowned king--the "able-man", as Carlyle said, who "has a divine right over me". His authority was derived ultimately not from birth or the ballot-box, but from the power of his own personality and the principles for which he stood.

One of his first projects in St. Anne's was to build a school for the instruction of the children. He drew up a programme of studies in which there was no time for nonsense. The course was based on the classical tradition of education and the Bible. I strongly suspect that he had the severity of the "rigorous school masters" who "seized the youth" of the youngsters, and left very little room in school for frivolity. His conception of learning, judged by modern standards, left much to be desired, but his work as a teacher drew only praise from almost all concerned.

It was necessary also for the community to have its own representative of law and order, so he had himself duly appointed magistrate. Most of what he did under this designation is now forgotten, but one unhappy case is still recalled. I well remember a day during a summer holiday in Cape Breton when I took my mother in my car to visit the scenes of her childhood. As we passed the ruins of a house she said, "That is the house where a robbery took place in Norman's day", and she repeated a story that I had often heard. A pedlar with his pack had stopped there to sell some of his wares, and the man of the house brought out his savings to pay him. Soon afterwards it was discovered that someone had helped himself to what was left of the treasure trove, and a neighbour's boy seemed the likeliest culprit. He denied it emphatically, but, unable to resist the pressure that was being applied, he confessed; and Norman, as a warning to everyone that such things would not be permitted in St. Anne's, had a nick cut in the lad's ear. Miss McPherson says that a week after the sentence had been carried out, someone reported that he had seen the pedlar himself coming out of the house by a window, and the man, when confronted with this eye-witness, admitted his guilt. I have no doubt that the author, who undoubtedly checked her sources very carefully had grounds for believing that there was this tragic anti-climax to the trial, but I never heard it mentioned by the older people who were familiar with the local traditions. I should add the Mr. Justice L. D. Currie, who was at one time the Attorney-General of Nova Scotia, and made a special study of Norman's career, told me that there was no record of this incident among the complaints made to the Attorney-General's department about Norman's administration, and he was therefore inclined to regard it as a canard invented by his enemies. I have at least given you both sides of the story.

The most indispensable of the needs of St. Anne's was, by common consent, a place of worship, and Norman gave this its proper priority. He first put up a temporary structure, and after

that a stately edifice that seated twelve hundred persons, and it was usually crowded. Some of the diets of worship may have been truly edifying, but Norman's castigation of any improper conduct made others exciting and terrifying. He was very hard on the women who followed the fashions of the world in the matter of clothing, but posterity finds it hardest to exculpate him for criticizing his long-suffering wife, by name, from the pulpit, for wearing some feminine ornaments that he did not consider becoming.

In the year 1826, Norman took time off to visit the United States, and secretly arranged with one of the ministers in New York to propose him for ordination to the Christian ministry. After satisfactory trials, the Presbytery concurred, so Norman came back to Cape Breton a fully qualified clergyman. Incidentally, he had not, up to that time, dispensed, nor did he ever afterwards dispense, the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper; neither did he baptize children, for he felt that the parents could not live up to their solemn vows. I have sometimes wondered if his reluctance to baptize stemmed unconsciously from his humiliating experience with Dr. Ross.

Not being on cordial terms with the other ministers in Cape Breton, he never told them that he had been ordained by an American Presbytery. As far as they knew he was still a layman. About fourteen years later they heard by rumor that he once claimed to be a minister of the Church of Scotland, and they ordered him to produce his credentials at the bar of the Presbytery within a specified time. His reply in part read as follows:

"Rev. Sir: Your letter of the 24th ult., I received this morning, to which I beg to answer that it requires a piece of self-denial in me to take any notice of such a fulminating farce; but the sacred proverb says, 'answer a fool according to his folly lest he be wise in his own conceit'. And of all fools I consider religious fools, at the pinnacle of their profession, to be the most dangerous to deal with.

I flatly deny ever having claimed the 'status of a minister of the Church of Scotland', and in all humility and sincerity, desire to bless heaven for having enlightened my mind to dread and abhor that state.

I have certainly from time to time professed myself as, in my own estimation, a poor and unworthy member of the once venerable and glorious Church of Scotland; but the meagre, pitiful and degenerate thing that passes now under the pompous and bloated sanction of that name, I utterly and indignantly disclaim with all its alarming 'bars' and awful 'authority', in the most open and unreserved manner possible, so that you or any other cannot make this avowal more public than I freely allow...."

This was Norman's acknowledgement. He did not add anything to their information, but he repudiated the Church of Scotland in the most unequivocal language. So he pursued his solitary way, making friends and enemies, yet somehow managing to keep the admiration of most of the members of his congregation at St. Anne's for the thirty-one years that he lived there. He accepted no stipend from the Church, but he let the people assist him with his farm work, which does not seem to be very different in principle from letting them pay him a stipulated salary.

When his second son, Donald, reached young manhood, Norman, who had taught him the science of navigation, had a ship built which he called the Maria, loaded her holds with potatoes, and sent him to dispose of the cargo in Britain. Miss McPherson suggests that the young captain, having reached his destination, sold both the potatoes and the ship and dropped out of sight, and that is the way I heard the story; but someone who read her book before I did, put a pencilled note in the margin that Donald sent back all the money, and that is how it is reported in the History of Presbyterianism in Cape Breton. What the truth is no one can now say. Donald at any rate vanished, and his parents heard nothing from him for eight long years. Then a letter arrived from him in Australia where he was working as a journalist. It was like a voice from the grave!

In his letter he praised Australia as a country of kindly climate and boundless possibilities. In every respect it seemed the opposite of Nova Scotia with its crop failures--the potatoes had failed that year--and its long winters. It would be wonderful to live in such a land of heart's desire, but it was very far away, and it would take tremendous courage and the venturesomeness of

youth to travel so far. The idea nevertheless began to catch the imagination of the people. Young men began to see visions and old men to dream dreams, and eventually Norman, the old leader, now well beyond his seventieth birthday, like Tennyson's Ulysses who said as he embarked on his last voyage, "Old age hath yet his honour and his toil", announced that subject to the will of heaven, he would lead a migration to Australia himself! He arranged for the building of a large barque at a selected spot near the Church. He called her the "Margaret", after his daughter. She was designed by the men of St. Anne's to carry him and the chosen circle of his friends on their incredible odyssey. She had on board, including her crew, one hundred and forty souls. She sailed out of St. Anne's Harbour about the end of October, 1851.

The Antipodes

Space does not permit me to recall the routine that was established on the voyage, but provision was made each day for religious exercises and the education of the children. The Margaret reached Adelaide, Australia, after a voyage of five and a half months, but the new-comers were deeply disappointed with what they found. The land was poorly suited for farming and was subject to severe droughts. Further, Donald was not there to greet them: he had left for Melbourne which was then in the throes of a gold rush. A number of the passengers on the Margaret were tired of their wandering and their unsettled life and resolved to go no further; the rest however under Norman's leadership pressed on to Melbourne. Here they reached the end of their resources and had to sell their ship to keep themselves in provisions. Deep tragedy also overtook them, for typhoid fever was raging in the city and it carried off three of Norman's sons. It must have seemed to them that they had followed an ignis fatuus, thinking that it was a vision sent from heaven.

The Cape Breton community in the meantime had built another ship, the Highland Lass, which followed the same course of

her predecessor, and arrived in Adelaide in September, 1853. Its owners heard there about the Margaret's misfortune and about her passengers who were marooned in Melbourne. They traded for a short time in Australian waters and then sold the Highland Lass and bought a larger ship, the Gazelle. They had convinced themselves, however, that Australia was not the country they were seeking, but they had heard some things about New Zealand, two thousand miles away, that intrigued them. Norman himself had actually written Sir George Grey, the Governor, who encouraged them to believe that if they came to New Zealand good farm-land would be made available to them. So the Gazelle took a load of the beleaguered Nova Scotians from Australia to New Zealand, and then returned for Norman and the rest. They obtained a large tract in the Waipu area, north of Auckland. They gave such a good report of it in their letters to Nova Scotia that in less than a decade six other ships were built by the farmers and fishermen of the district, and these carried eight hundred and eighty-three persons, or almost half of the St. Anne's population, to the Antipodes. To it they transferred the Scottish placenames of Nova Scotia and "helped to mould the destinies of their adopted home". The entire journey from Nova Scotia was fourteen thousand miles! Ancient Israel by contrast has travelled a mere five hundred miles to their own Promised Land.

Norman remained their minister until he died, at the age of eighty-six. He had grown old in the service of his people. Now they no longer needed him for the numerous functions that he had discharged in St. Anne's. His great work as a pioneer and leader was done. Impatient of him they often were, but they still looked up to him as a patriarch and a prophet. He had tried consistently but not very successfully, to keep his flock together and prevent them from being conformed to the world. His last words were, "Children, children, look to yourselves--the world is mad".

The descendants of the Nova Scotian Highlanders in New Zealand erected a monument to their forebears, which showed the six

famous ships in full sail and carried the text in Gaelic, from Genesis the twelfth chapter and the first verse, "And God said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, into a land that I will show thee". They felt that the description could truthfully be applied to New Zealand.

What shall we say of Norman himself? He would be classified as a Puritan, but what is that? George Bernard Shaw said he would call himself a Puritan, which he defined as a man who found his principles of conduct within himself. Norman was a Puritan of that type, but he was also the less attractive kind who spurned the lighter side of life, for himself and others. He was closer to Amos and John the Baptist than to Hosea of Galilee and the greater Galilean whom Norman thought he was serving. Yet there was something about him that caused an old man in St. Anne's on whom he called before he left, to order a carpenter to change the position of the door, for no one was worthy to cross its threshold after Norman, and that prompted his congregation in New Zealand to dismantle his pulpit when he died.

He belonged to his own day, not to ours. He was an autocrat, not a democrat. His manner was aloof; he wanted followers, not friends; and he had no fellowship with the ministers either in Nova Scotia or New Zealand. A man of sincere piety he undoubtedly was, and a protagonist against every kind of evil, yet no one would quote in his epitaph the words of St. Paul, "Not that we have dominion over your faith, but are helpers of your joy", because he seemed to have little room for joy in his disposition. But as long as we appreciate strength of character, unflinching courage, devotion to duty as one sees it, the faith that endures as seeing Him who is invisible, and the conception of the work of the Christian pastor as the overseer of the moral, intellectual and religious interests of his flock and of their physical as well as their spiritual welfare, we shall pay this unusual man our tribute of cordial but not uncritical praise.

[AEK?]