

From the Isle of Coll to Malagawatch, Inverness County: A Pioneer's Account

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The Historical Account of Bartimeaus

At the end of July 1820, my father with eight of his family and many others left the Isle of Coll to emigrate to America. The vessel boarding the exiles lay in Tobarmory Harbor (Isle of Mull.) It was a sad sight to see relations parting with little expectation of meeting again.

The weather was clear as the sails were hoisted and the **Dunlap of Greenock** left Tobarmory under the command of John Brown, setting a course from the west side of Barra for Cape Breton Island (although the settlers were to be landed in Pictou.) We were fortunate as we endured only one storm during the voyage. Five children were born aboard the ship: John MacLean, Lachlan MacKenzie, Ebenezer MacMillan, John Rankin and a MacNiven. All were of Coll stock. Three came out to Cape Breton and two went on to Prince Edward Island.

Five weeks after departure, at ten o'clock on a sunny morning, we got our first glimpse of Cape Breton. Since there was a favourable light breeze, every yard of sail cloth was unfurled and in a short while we entered the Strait of Canso with the wind and current. Settlers turned out to greet us from both sides of the strait and before nightfall we reached Cape George (Antigonish County.) Following that, a pilot was taken on board who guided us into Pictou Harbour where the immigrants and their belongings were put ashore. The passengers then dispersed: some going to Prince Edward Island, some to Cape John and others to Cape Breton. The **Dunlap of Greenock** continued on to Richibucto (New Brunswick) picking up a cargo of pine lumber for the return trip to the Old Country.

My father and a number of others chartered a small vessel from one Angus MacDonald to bring us to Cape Breton. The weather was fair leaving Pictou, but reaching Cape George we were overtaken by a storm from the north-west. The boat was tossed to and fro until the top rigging was destroyed by the fury of the waves. It was the passengers opinion that if not for the presence of an adept Barraman who knew how to handle everything, we wouldn't have made port. As Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair said in his poem to Clan Ranald's Galley, "The navigator called to the helmsman and another took from her what was needed..." And so we safely reached the Canso Strait where we were met by a kindly man from Long Point, Judique. He advised us to spend the winter and five families accepted the offer.

Over the winter we received much generosity from two men, a MacDonald and a Chisholm, and also from the parish priest: the

Reverend Alexander MacDonald. When summer arrived, the charitable folks of Long Point gave us seed and advised us to plant it on their land so we would have it for the next winter.

My father heard a report about the great Bras d'Or Lake, and after planting, a party of us went with a guide in a small boat to St. Peters. There we hauled the boat over "The Crossing" and onto the Bras d'Or where we were met by a magnificent sight on that calm, sunny day. The south side of West Bay was already taken up by those who came before us, but North Mountain (Marble Mountain) was unoccupied. We passed many lovely islands and went through the Boom Narrows to Malgawatch Lake - named by the Mi' kmaq and meaning "Lake Full of Islands". Here were the headquarters of the Mi' kmaq tribe and its chief, John Denny, from whom the River Denys derives its name. He was a brave and benevolent man but very wild if angry.

The Mi' kmaq kept their territory here, and although few live in the area today, a thousand acres of the best land was reserved for them.

The River Denys empties into Malagawatch Lake. When we arrived in 1821, there wasn't a single European living on its shores. We began to clear the forest where we intended to settle, everyone near their neighbour. After that, we communally built moss-caulked log houses thatched with tree bark. Straight, slender, adze hewn sticks served as flooring.

At the end of a month's time, we all returned to Judique for the winter. In the first month of summer 1822, we returned to Malagawatch with seed from the previous summer's planting and made our homes there. In the way we had learned from our Judique friends, we made our first planting. Fences were unnecessary as there were no animals to bother the crops other than bears that came at night to chew on sprout tops. Squirrels were troublesome after the harvest, stealing seed from the barns to store for winter. (To be continued)

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Number I

The Historical Account of Bartimeaus (Part II)

When we acquired cattle, a cow would very often come home mangled by a bear. When we got sheep, the women made all types of clothing from their wool. Since we had potatoes, and the lake was full of every kind of fish, we envied no one under the sun. These were happy days, although modern folk think they were mindless. I must confess, however, that the area was very much unenlightened, lacking as it did a school and teacher inside the Bras d'Or region. What's more, there wasn't a doctor in the territory we now call Inverness County. In 1823 one of my neighbour's legs was frozen, and it was necessary to take him sixty miles by small boat to Dr. MacDonald in Antigonish.

Around 1824, Dr. Noble arrived. Many readers of *Mac-Talla* are

familiar with the song written for his wife by Bard MacLean. In the year 1824 William Compton, from Prince Edward Island, built a saw mill on the north side of Malagawatch Lake; something that was a great service to the area's people. There wasn't a road from Judique to River Denys around Malagawatch or to West Bay. A track ran from West Bay through River Inhabitants to the Strait of Canso. A person had to follow the shore going around every point and cove. Fear of bears kept travellers out of the woods.

In 1825 John Lewis was commissioned by the government to establish property boundaries for the settlers. He established the first road running from Malagawatch through River Denys and Judique Mountain on to Long Point. In the same year the Kavanaughs arrived in St. Peters. They were in business on the Boom Strait (Alba) getting lumber and shipping it to Europe. I remember once seeing four, great three-masted schooners loading lumber at the same time, and very often three.

In 1827 the ship called "James and Tom" - which I mentioned in another issue of *Mac-Talla* - was built for a company out of Liverpool, England. John MacNeil, one of our neighbors and a good scholar, sailed aboard her to England. He obtained finances from the Home Mission to open a school here which was done upon his return in 1831. After a few years he relocated to Prince Edward Island where he remained. By this time River Denys had become well populated and was famous for its pine. (**Stopped 2/2/06**)

Donald MacDonald from Glengarry, Scotland was the first minister to come out to Cape Breton. He served for two years between Whycocomagh, West Bay and Malagawatch. From here he went to Prince Edward Island where he died. In 1826 the Free Church of Scotland sent the Reverend John MacLennan to Cape Breton as a missionary. He advised the people of this area to build a church in which visiting clergy could preach.

We began this work with a single-mindedness in 1828. The church's dimensions measured forty feet long and thirty feet wide with three lofts: one at the end and one on both sides. Its capacity was spacious, and it was the first Presbyterian Church built in Cape Breton. Among those contributing to its building was a young lad who made spruce shingles. I saw him preaching in that church after he received an education from the Free Church in Edinburgh. The church heard its first sermon in the summer of 1829: delivered by the Reverend Dougal MacKeigan. In 1832 the Reverend John Stewart was placed in West Bay. From him we received a service every fifth Sunday. In 1837 the Reverend Peter MacLean was appointed to Whycocomagh and the congregation was provided with a service by him every fifth Sunday as well.

The Reverend Alexander provided us with some of his services around the time he was located in Middle River. He experienced many hardships while travelling from place to place as a missionary. Boats weren't as plentiful as they are today and very often Indians would transport him in canoes of bark. I recently got proof that

it is true he went from Middle River to Miramachi in one of these to be ordained, because that was the nearest Presbytery.

Many missionaries informed us in the following years. Among them, I can name these: the reverends James Fraser, Adam MacKay and Murdock Stewart. We also had the Reverend Angus MacMillan who was with us for thirteen years. He is now in West Bay.

Great changes have occurred since my first memories of coming to Malagawatch. Fine homes have taken the place of humble shanties, and the old church has been replaced by a new one including a manse a few yards away. Regular schools and a Sunday school have been established along with wide horse and coach travelled roads. The mail is delivered regularly and there are many other improvements which I needn't waste time mentioning. True is the proverb that says, "He who lives a long life will see many things." Bartemeus

Translation by Jim Watson

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