

Thomas D’Arcy McGee, Father of Confederation

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Family and Early Life

McGee was born April 13, 1825 in Carlingford, County Louth, N.E. Ireland. His father worked for the Coast Guard Service. His mother was the daughter of a Dublin bookseller who inspired in her son the love of their country’s song, literature, history and Irish nationalism. They were very close and his mother was convinced that he would grow up to be a great man. When D’Arcy was eight years old the family moved to Wexford in S.E. Ireland because his father was transferred to a new posting.

Unfortunately his mother died shortly after they arrived in Wexford as the result of an accident during the trip. Her death left the young boy feeling abandoned and lost. According to David Wilson (Thomas D’Arcy McGee), D’Arcy tried to fill the void by seeking the approval of friends and seeking accomplishments and public acclaim. “McGee burned through life with a driving, restless energy, possessing a mind that was ‘swarming with new thoughts’ and approaching everything with ‘my usual impatience.’ “

While in Wexford D’Arcy attended a hedge school and earned the reputation as the best student there. The young man came to temperance before liquor had ever passed his lips when Father Matthew, a Franciscan preacher brought his anti-drink campaign to Wexford. D’Arcy and his father signed the pledge along with some five million other Irish people. A number of breweries and distilleries shut down as a result. History is silent on the length of the closures. A popular view at the time was that previous unsuccessful rebellions failed not so much due to the efforts of the English masters as the Irish propensity for over indulgence.

McGee did his first public speaking at temperance rallies and at the age of 14 wrote his first published poem:

Rejoice, ye hearts, who love
Your nation to be free,
No more shall whiskey prove
A source of slavery,
He comes - the conquering hero comes,
And with him brings us victory.

When D’Arcy’s father remarried, there was friction between the children of the first marriage and their stepmother which probably was a factor in his departure, just shy of his 17th birthday, from Wexford. He sailed with his sister to Quebec City and went on to Rhode Island where his aunt lived.

During a return visit to Ireland, on July 13, 1847, at the age of 22, McGee married Mary Theresa Caffrey whom he had met in Dublin. Apparently they were well suited to each other and D'Arcy was a loving husband and affectionate father, although Mary would discover that "being married to McGee was no sinecure." (Wilson)

The couple had five children but only two grew to adulthood with three dying before the age of five (two died in the same year of scarlet fever). Mary also suffered from loneliness and depression due to McGee's constant travels and sometimes had her mother living with her for help and support. Of course, he also had a serious drinking problem.

McGee in the U.S. (1842 - 1844)

McGee stayed only a short time with his aunt in Rhode Island and then went to Boston in search of a job. After giving a rousing speech on conditions in Ireland at a rally he was offered a job with the Boston Pilot. The job required him to travel around New England, sell subscriptions, collect money, give speeches and write for the paper. Two years later he was an editor at the age of 19. Politically at this time he supported Daniel Connolly who favoured change in Ireland through constitutional (non violent) reform. McGee wrote in favour of the U. S. annexing Canada.

Return to Ireland (May, 1845 - September, 1848)

During this three year period a number of important things happened in McGee's life:

1. His employer, the Freeman, sent him to England to cover Parliament. This enabled him to learn a lot about Parliamentary procedures and strategies and, as well to spend his spare time at the British Museum learning about Irish history. Eventually he left the Freeman to write for the more radical Nation newspaper.
2. He started to drink.
3. He got married.
4. He saw the worst of the Great Hunger in Black 47.
5. He joined Young Ireland, a group who were dissatisfied with Connolly's leadership and he had a leadership role in this group's abortive 1848 rebellion against the British.
6. He had to flee in disguise from the British authorities, going by ship from N. E. Ireland back to the U. S.

Back in the U.S.A. (1848 - 1857)

During this period McGee worked as a speaker, writer and editor for a number of different newspapers in Philadelphia, Boston, New York City and Buffalo, N. Y. He set up night classes for adults in a number of cities.

He signed his newspaper account of the 1848 rebellion: Thomas D'Arcy McGee, Traitor to Britain. He blamed the failure of the rebellion on the bishops and priests in Ireland due to the fact that they had not supported it.

This drew a stinging public rebuke from Bishop John Hughes of New York City, who wrote that the rebellion was a terrible mistake, totally unorganized and with absolutely no chance of success. The hierarchy of Ireland, he said, by not supporting the fiasco saved a bloodbath of the Irish people.

McGee found that his anti-clerical writing was being used by the No-Nothings, a nativist group who were against immigrants, as a weapon against the Irish in America. This led him to reconsider his views. He also may have been thinking along the lines of the advice given years later to the poet William Butler Yeats, that in Ireland it's tough to take on both the Church and the Fenians at the same time. (More about the Fenians later)

McGee began to alter his views from favouring armed rebellion in Ireland to a more moderate view because he thought that open rebellion would not work. This drew the ire of more militant Irish Americans and he was twice challenged to a duel.

McGee made his peace with the Catholic Church and became an ultramontane or very conservative Catholic. The Irish in the U. S. lived mostly in city ghettos as compared to the Irish in British North America who were mostly engaged in farming. McGee did not think that the Irish minority in the U. S. would ever be able to exercise effective political power. He began looking Northward and made a number of trips to both Upper and Lower Canada and the maritime colonies. He began to think that minorities like the Irish would fair better under British North American rule than in the U.S. (This must have been a surprising conclusion for McGee to reach, given his earlier views on Britain.)

When he was invited by a group of Irish citizens in Montreal to come to their city to start a newspaper (The New Era), he was happy to accept the offer. An additional personal reason for a move North was that he wanted his children to go to Catholic schools which could be more easily done in British North America.

Conditions that McGee found in British North America in 1857 (See Speech by Wm. Granville Davis)

In the East, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland were administered as separate colonies. On the West coast there were two tiny British colonies. From there East to the Great Lakes there was the vast, sparsely populated territory of the Hudson's Bay Company.

Upper and Lower Canada had been united as the Province of Canada in 1841 and each had 65 elected representatives in the Legislature for the total population of about two million in the Province. The Province was divided by language and religion, with a French Catholic majority in Lower Canada and Upper Canada being English but with a Protestant majority and a Catholic minority. (Most of the Irish who came to B.N.A. prior to the Irish Potato Famine were Protestant. Most of the Irish Immigrants during the Famine were Catholic.) Perhaps 10 per cent of Protestant Irish in Upper Canada belonged to the Orange Lodge.

Because of the various divisions that existed, the Legislature of the Province of Canada had no effective majority for any length of time and according to Davis, the general feeling at the time of McGee's arrival was that the Constitution of 1840 was a failure.

Somewhere between one quarter to one third of Montreal was made up by English speaking Irish people who felt under represented and lacking a spokesman. Some of them invited McGee to come to start a newspaper and also to represent them in the Legislature. He started the paper as soon as he arrived in 1857 and in less than a year won election as an Independent, one of three representatives from Montreal. For ten years he represented the poor Irish working class part of Montreal known as Griffintown. (For a vivid description of Griffintown, see Jane Urquhart's novel, *Away*.)

Davis described McGee as homely, short, stubby, shaggy, not well dressed but expressive, energetic, good natured and convivial, at times to a fault. He also read voraciously and was a good writer and excelled as a speaker due to meticulous research, command of the language, a melodious voice, strong eye contact and a compelling message.

When McGee's Griffintown constituents sent him to the legislature they gave him two clear mandates:

First, to fight for better legal status for Catholic schools, i.e., so that the Catholic minority in Upper Canada would have the same rights as the Protestant minority of Lower Canada had in education. Because McGee thought that he would be unlikely to achieve this goal with the help of the Conservatives, who were led by John A. Macdonald, an Orangeman, he initially supported the Reformers, led by George Brown. Eventually when the Reformers formed a government under John Stanfield Macdonald, McGee was in the Cabinet. However after being ejected from the Cabinet in what he considered to be an underhanded way, he crossed the floor and joined the Conservatives, having decided that although Macdonald was an Orangeman, he was politically moderate. In 1863, McGee had the satisfaction of having legislation passed which gave the desired legal rights to Catholic schools.

The second mandate given McGee was to fight against the movement in Upper Canada for representation by population. In 1840 there were more people in Lower Canada than in Upper Canada but the constitution gave each 65 seats in the Legislature. But by 1857, Upper Canada had grown much faster than Lower Canada, so there was a strong call for representation by population in Upper Canada.

Within a few months of his election McGee came to the conclusion that, as it was constituted the Legislature was hopelessly deadlocked, making an effective ruling majority impossible, so he supported representation by population as long as there were constitutional safeguards for the Lower Canadian minority. His changed position set off a firestorm of protest among his constituents in Montreal.

McGee stood his ground and remained true to his Burkean principles. (Edmund Burke had written to his constituents in Bristol: "Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement. And he betrays instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.") This would not be the last time that McGee would risk unpopularity by maintaining a position that he considered right.

As Davis said, "McGee would fight to the finish for a principle he himself believed in, but he would not take a position he considered false because of pressure from his constituents."

(A more recent example of this attitude in a politician occurred when as a Senator, John Kennedy supported the American decision to join Canada in building the St. Lawrence Seaway even though his constituents in Boston protested that the Seaway would hurt their port. Kennedy saw the decision to be in the national interest so he did not cave to local opposition.)

Ten Ways that McGee Contributed to the Success of the Movement to Confederation

1. Vision. The first editorials in McGee's Montreal newspaper, *The New Era*, called for the unification of the British North American colonies. The following statement from a speech he gave in Parliament sets out the vision:

I see in the not remote distance one great nationality, bound, like the shield of Achilles, by the blue of the ocean.

I see it quartered into many communities, each disposing of its own internal affairs, but all bound together by free institutions, free intercourse, free commerce.

I see, within the round of that shield, the peaks of the western mountains and the crests of the eastern waves. The winding Assinaboine, the five-fold lakes, the St. Lawrence, the Ottawa, the Saguenay, the St. John, the Basin of Minas, by all those flowing waters in all the valleys they fertilize. In all the cities they visit in their courses, I see a generation of industrious, contented, moral men, free in name and in fact - men capable of maintaining, in peace and in war, a constitution worthy of such a country.

(Wilson notes that McGee had used the figure of "the shield of Achilles" in an earlier speech about Ireland, so that it now seems that he saw Canada as his "new Ireland.")

2. Communication. McGee was the best speaker in British North America and traveled the length and breadth of the country giving political speeches and lectures on literature and other topics. He was an advocate for a Canadian literature and was a prolific writer. A seasoned judge of the Canadian political landscape, Bill Davis, observed, "Many men contributed to Confederation, but it was McGee who mobilized the popular enthusiasm that made it possible."

3. The Essential Networker. Even before moving to Montreal, McGee had traveled extensively in Upper and Lower Canada and the Maritimes and as a result knew most of the leaders in all parts of the country. After 1857 he organized trips for leaders from Upper Canada to go to the Maritimes to meet the leaders there and also excursions of Maritime leaders to Upper Canada for the same purpose.

4. Railroads. McGee supported leaders from the Maritimes in their efforts to have a railroad built from Halifax to Quebec City to join with the existing railroad from Quebec City to Toronto.

5. Zeal for Immigration. McGee wanted to be the Minister of Immigration when he served in the Reform Cabinet and was the Minister of Agriculture and Immigration in Macdonald's Conservative Cabinet. When the Americans purchased Alaska from Russia in 1867, he thought that they had done Canada a favour since it would inspire greater Canadian efforts to settle the West.

6. Support for a Canadian Militia. McGee wanted Canada to be able to defend itself and not have to depend on Britain to do so. This was important given the large American army after the civil war and the desire of some Americans to annex British North America.

7. The Extreme Moderate. This is the title Wilson gives to the second volume of his biography of McGee, which covers the time from his arrival in Montreal in 1857 to the time of his death. Wilson notes that while McGee's emotions sometimes led him to extremes, his reason usually brought him back to the centre. This is another instance of McGee following Burke's lead, "The possible best is the absolute best."

One example of moderation is McGee's concern for minorities, whether the French in Lower Canada or the Catholic schools in Upper Canada which helped make Confederation more viable.

In Toronto in 1858 when he spoke at a meeting on St. Patrick's Day in 1858, Orangemen stormed the hotel crying, "Get McGee, Get McGee." In 1860 when he went to Bradford to lecture on literature, he was forced at gunpoint to cancel the lecture. (See Davis.) Yet McGee tried to avoid controversial topics and urged his fellow Irishmen to refrain from St. Patrick's Day parades so as not to supply a pretext for violence.

Around the end of the American Civil War, a new threat emerged for British North America. In Ireland, the U.S. and Canada an Irish political movement called the Fenian Brotherhood favoured armed revolt against Britain to free Ireland from British rule. Because it was a secret society, it was not known how many Fenians there actually were in Canada. In 1866 American Fenians, who numbered in their ranks many former Northern soldiers, actually invaded New Brunswick and the Niagara Peninsula. The invasion of New Brunswick turned out to be a harmless fiasco, but in Ontario, the Fenians took control of Fort Eire before being routed by 5000 British and Canadian troops with an number of deaths resulting. The American authorities took a dim view of the Fenian adventures and helped dispel the threat.

However, the Fenians represented a real threat to British North America for a number of years, In McGee they had a fierce, articulate and steadfast enemy. In fiery speeches and newspaper articles he warned his fellow Irish Catholics not to fall in with the Fenians. His concern was that the Fenian menace would foment a negative reaction from Protestants against all Irish Catholics in the country and the enmities of the old country would be transplanted here. In spite of political unpopularity that almost cost him his seat in Montreal, the need for police protection and repeated death threats, he never relented in condemning the Fenian movement.

McGee was not one to mince words, and this led many Irishmen to consider him a traitor to their cause, e.g., in his speech at Wexford in May, 1865, speaking about the rebellion of 1848, he said, "Politically, we were a pack of fools." The very ferocity of McGee's attack on the Fenians may have inspired them to greater efforts, hence the term "extreme" in the title of Wilson's second volume.

8. Confederation Cabinet Crisis. After Britain passed the British North America Act, John A. Macdonald, newly elected Prime Minister, was going to have 12 members of Cabinet, four for each of Upper and Lower Canada and two each for New Brunswick and Nova Scotia., including French and English, Protestant and Catholic. It was assumed that McGee would be the Irish Catholic in the Cabinet. But quite late in the game, Upper Canada demanded an extra spot in the Cabinet to reflect the larger population in Upper Canada. This created a crisis.

At first McGee refused to withdraw since he believed the Irish Catholics should be represented. Macdonald threatened to resign and the whole process seemed endangered. At that point Charles Tupper, a Protestant from Nova Scotia told McGee, that if McGee would withdraw in favour of an additional Protestant from Upper Canada, he, Tupper, would withdraw in favour of an Irish Catholic named Edward Kenny from Halifax.

McGee agreed, and the constitutional crisis was averted.

9. Residual Powers. Originally McGee favoured giving them to the provinces. However, like most Canadian politicians, after witnessing the American Civil War, he favoured a strong central government who retained residual powers.

10. The Big Picture. In his final speech in Parliament, on April 7, 1868, McGee spoke in support of Charles Tupper who was fighting an anti-confederation movement in Nova Scotia. In keeping with his Burkean view that public representatives must place the general good of the country before the immediate interests of their constituents, McGee said:

“I speak here not as the representative of any race, or of any Province, but...as a Canadian, ready and bound to recognize the claims, if any, of my Canadian fellow-subjects, from the furthest east to the furthest west, as equal to those of my nearest neighbour, or the friend who proposed me on the hustings.”

Criticisms of McGee

1. That he changed his views too often and was inconsistent.

His reply: “Consistency, while circumstances are consistent, is a duty; but when circumstances change, consistency to the past is a crime against the present.”

The following words from Theodore Roosevelt’s 1910 speech in Paris might also serve as a fitting response to this criticism: “...The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds, who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause...”

2. That he had been a rebel.

His reply: "If Ireland was as fairly ruled as British North America, I would have supported Authority there as much as I do here."

3. That he was selfishly ambitious and without principle.

Answer: he relinquished a Cabinet seat to pave the way for the success of Confederation.

4. That he was an alcoholic.

The facts: This was undeniably true. There were many jokes about McGee and John A. Macdonald's love of "jollification" e.g., when their drinking was serious enough to be brought up at a Cabinet meeting, Macdonald said, "Now look here McGee, this Cabinet can't afford two drunks and I'm not quitting.!"

McGee's long-suffering wife Mary, who at times was called to the Legislature to try to get her husband to stop drinking, was probably not amused.

In the Fall of 1867 McGee suffered from an ulcerated leg which was so serious that he had to go home to rest and recuperate. With his wife's care he managed to stop drinking entirely and remained sober for the rest of his life.

Assassination

Among the three hundred poems published by McGee in his lifetime was the following:

In the time of my boyhood I had a strange feeling
That I was to die in the noon of my day,
Not quietly into the silent grave stealing,
But torn, like a blasted oak, sudden away.

About two a.m. on April 7, after giving a speech in Parliament, McGee was shot and instantly killed just as he reached his nearby boarding house. A Fenian sympathizer, Patrick James Whelan, was tried for the crime, found guilty and put to death before 5000 people in Canada's last public hanging. Whelan maintained his innocence but shortly before dying said that he knew who had shot McGee. Whether the right man was executed for the crime has been a subject of controversy ever since. Wilson concluded that either Whelan shot McGee or was part of a group who did it.

A measure of how much McGee's fight with the Fenians cost him can be gauged by the differing reactions among Canadian Irish to McGee's murder. An Irish woman named Nora Day related how, when news of McGee's death reached her grandparents, her grandmother said, "May the Lord have mercy on his soul."

Her grandfather did a step, waving the paper over his head, saying, "Hell's flames to your soul, Thomas D'Arcy McGee." (Wilson)

Funeral - April 13, 1868

80,000 of Montreal's 90,000 citizens crowded the streets and 15,000 took part in the funeral procession. It was the largest burial in British North America to that time and Montreal did not see a larger funeral until the time of Maurice Richard and Pierre Trudeau.

In Parliament, Prime Minister John A. Macdonald said, "If ever a soldier who fell on the field of battle deserved well of his country, Thomas D'Arcy McGee deserves well of Canada and its people."

After two weeks of mourning, McGee's friend, Archbishop Connolly of Halifax, said, "By Herculean labour, he succeeded to a large extent, in tearing up, root and branch, senseless and inveterate prejudices, and blending all hearts in one common effort to one common weal... And this I confess, is the secret why I myself esteemed, loved and admired him, as the Catholic Irishman, with all his failings, of whom I am most proud."

Last Word

"...Perhaps McGee's greatest contribution of all was the example he gave, not to Canada, but to all free countries, of a public man prepared to do what he considered right, regardless of unpopularity and the danger of death."

William Davis

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