
CHAPTER XIV

THE MACNAB SETTLEMENT

*He was a chief of high renown,
Of ancient line was he :—
But he had to leave his ain, and dree
His weird far o'er the sea.*

ONE of the most interesting and instructive episodes in the history of Scottish settlements in Canada is that of the founding of the township of MacNab by the last laird or chief of that Ilk.

This settlement, like that of Col. Talbot, was the result of the ambition, effort, and ideal of one man, and has about it, moreover, a suggestion of what some have called the feudal system of founding society in the New World. This aspect has been somewhat exaggerated by writers who had but a superficial idea of the real facts concerning the matter. It is true that MacNab's effort failed, so far as his ambition aimed. But, in spite of the amount of abuse and scorn heaped upon the founder of this settlement, the greater portion of the settlers were the gainers as the result of what some would call their chief's absurd attempt

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to transplant a Celtic feudal community into the New World. The only real loser and sufferer was the poor old chief himself, who, owing to his own impracticability and the ingratitude and disloyalty of his settlers, failed to make any profit out of his years of struggle to colonise a portion of Upper Canada. It seems that, owing to some strong prejudice, it is impossible for the average man to see anything but evil and tyranny in the attempts at colonisation made by such men as Talbot, Macdonald of Glenaladale, and MacNab. The whole idea is scouted as dangerous to what is called the democratic idea. The cry of landlordism and feudalism is raised by people who have been wrongly educated to believe that such men as George Washington and Benjamin Franklin had freed the world from such Old World serfdoms as these colonisations would suggest. So cruelly has the truth been hidden from the masses on this continent and in Britain that it is only now, after a century and a quarter of false teaching, that the public are being informed of what a few have always known, that Benjamin Franklin was the engineer of a similar scheme of colonisation, only on a far larger scale ; and that he and a few other colonists approached the British Government shortly before the Revolution with the modest request for about 2,500,000 acres of land west of Virginia, of which they were to be masters by charter, to dispose of, settle, and rule as they thought fit. Now that a century has gone by since, and men are discovering that the idols of

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the democracy are not as white as they have been painted, and that the people on the other side of the struggle were not all wrong in their endeavours to be loyal to a strong and long-tried social and political system and tradition, it may be that they may find that even men like Talbot and MacNab were not all evil and absurd in their ideals, though they have been somewhat misunderstood and misjudged by persons whose mere prejudice was stronger than their knowledge of human social conditions. The press and the average political orator had much to do in falsely educating the people into an exaggerated idea of what was wrongly called the rights of man, with an utter forgetfulness or an unprincipled ignoring of his responsibilities to others. It was this false conception—namely, that the land belonged essentially to the people—which incited thousands in the States at the Revolution, and in Canada afterward, to strive to repudiate community contracts made under sacred obligations.

Though Mr. Fraser, the clever chronicler of the MacNab settlement, and others holding the same popular views, see nothing but oppression and tyranny on the part of the chief, and nothing but heroism and love of liberty and unmerited suffering on the part of the people involved, yet, in spite of this, the very bare account of MacNab's settlement which they give shows that their attitude is an unjust and partial one.

It is not intended here to palliate or ignore any of the failings of this sturdy Celtic chief ; but it

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is not only wrong, but absurd, to see no wrongdoing or failure of contract on the side of any of the settlers.

The plain truth of the whole affair is as follows : MacNab, like many another Scottish gentleman at that day, had been ruined partly as the result of his own fault and partly owing to the times. He hoped to retrieve his fortunes in Canada, and, coming out, formed a scheme of colonisation similar to those of Talbot and Bishop Macdonell, the latter of whom encouraged him strongly to attempt the undertaking. Having first approached the Provincial Government of the day, they looked favourably on his offer to colonise a portion of the then desolate, forest-clad regions of the Upper Ottawa. They offered him a township—no great tract in those days, where the settlements were sparse, and land so far from markets and uncleared was virtually worth nothing. The next proceeding was to appeal to his brother-in-law, Dr. Hamilton, in Scotland to send out settlers who would be willing to be assisted to settle on the land on the chief's terms. While his detractors have accused MacNab of duplicity and deceit toward the settlers and the Government, they fail to remember that these people were virtually conveyed from Scotland to Canada and aided to settle by MacNab ; that they had not any means of their own ; and that it was not reasonable that any man in his senses would undertake to perform all this for such settlers and expect no return. Thousands of people have since settled in Ontario on Government lands, and, to

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enable them to do so, have placed far heavier liens on their property in mortgages than did MacNab's settlers to their chief. It is true that MacNab was often a hard master ; but the fact that the people came under his community rule as they did proves that they did not altogether resent this attitude on the part of their chief. They, on their part, were not altogether an ideal people.

The Western Scottish Celt was not a purely self-reliant person. He had for centuries depended upon his superiors to act for and to protect him, and these settlers would never have seen Canada at all had it depended on their own means and initiative.

In 1823 MacNab left Scotland, where his estates were deeply involved owing to the Jacobite movement and his own extravagance. He was the last of one of the oldest families in Scotland, and was first cousin of Buchanan, or Hamilton, of Arnproir, head of another old family of royal descent. MacNab, when he arrived in Canada, was well received by the gentry of Montreal ; but he was not to be turned from his heart's project. He proceeded to Glengarry, where he was for some days the guest of Bishop Macdonell. Then, visiting Toronto, he was offered, and accepted, his township of 81,000 acres, which had been surveyed by P. L. Sherwood. This tract of land adjoined the township of Fitzroy. MacNab gave to the district his own name, and agreed to the terms offered by the Government, dated November 5, 1823, which were as follows : " That the township be set apart

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and placed under MacNab's direction for eighteen months as an experiment ; that patents be issued to settlers on certificate from MacNab that the settling duties are well performed, and that his claims are arranged and settled, or that patents do issue to the petitioner in trust for any number of settlers ; that the conditions between MacNab and each settler be fully explained in detail ; that a duplicate of the agreement be lodged with the Government ; that MacNab may assign not less than one hundred acres to each family, or male of twenty-one years of age, on taking the oath of allegiance ; that a grant of twelve hundred acres be assigned to MacNab, to be increased to the quantity formerly given to a field officer on his completing the settlement of the township ; that the old settlers pay the interest on the money laid out for their use by MacNab, either in money or produce at the option of the settler ; and that the settler have liberty to pay both principal and interest at any time during the first seven years.

MacNab at first built a large log-house on his place as a headquarters of operation, and which he named Kennel Lodge, after his ancestral place in Scotland. Then he wrote to his brother-in-law to send out settlers. His own letter to Hamilton speaks for itself, and shows his honesty of purpose in settling the township. It is dated August 10, 1824. He states that he has already informed Hamilton of his purpose and progress. He now says that he is ready for the proposed settlers, that he desires twenty families at first ; they are

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to be provided with three months' provisions and passage tickets. But before receiving such, each head of a family is to sign a bond of agreement. Hamilton is to see to the embarkation at Greenock, and MacNab promises to meet them at Montreal and see each one located on the land, and to provide for their transport to their destination. This was no slight task for these two men to perform. One was to procure the emigrants who might be willing to venture, arrange for their leaving their places, get them and their families to Greenock on the Clyde, arrange for their passage, and provide food, passage and other supplies; while MacNab's part was to meet the emigrants at Montreal and keep them there and provide their passage, and provide for them until they could procure homes in the new settlement, which was in a remote place up the Ottawa. MacNab had also to pay for the surveying of their lands.

The bond signed by the settlers bound each man to the amount of £36 for himself, £30 for a wife, and £16 for every child, with interest in money or produce. On April 19, 1825, the settlers sailed from the Port of Greenock in the ship *Niagara*, and arrived in Montreal on the 27th of May following. Here they were met by MacNab and his attendants, and before the end of June they had reached the township and were put up at Kennel Lodge, or in camps in the vicinity.

The following list of first settlers is given in Mr. Fraser's book as having signed in the preceding January the bond which had been especially

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prepared by the Attorney-General of Upper Canada : James Carmichael ; Donald Fisher ; Peter Campbell ; Peter Drummond ; James Robertson ; Alexander MacNab ; James McFarlane ; Duncan Campbell ; James McDonald ; Donald McNaughton ; John McDermid ; John McIntyre ; Peter McIntyre ; Donald McIntyre ; James McLaren ; Peter McMillan ; James Storie ; James McFarlane ; Alexander Miller ; Malcolm McLaren ; and Colin McCaul.

In spite of the condemnation of MacNab, the whole proceeding on his part seems to have been a particularly hazardous one. He had gone to all the expense referred to, besides providing each settler with three months' provisions after leaving Greenock ; and there was little chance of his ever getting any compensation. In the end he was virtually ruined. He had undertaken an impossible task to establish a community in the New World wherein he would be the leader and intermediary between them and the Government.

He was accused of having pretended to settlers that he owned the township. But as Judge Jones, who presided at the trial for libel brought by MacNab against Mr. Hincks, of the *Examiner*, remarked : " The chief gave the settlers location tickets, in which he promised to procure them patents from the Crown, which proved that he never claimed the township at his own property." The reply to this was that poor ignorant emigrants such as these were could not know the difference

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between a patent and a title-deed. Such a statement is a sad reflection on the class of settlers, and does not hold good, as there were persons in the community, one of them a schoolmaster, who from the first were hostile to the chief, who could read and did know better. No doubt MacNab naturally felt that he had a certain power in the township under the superintendency granted him by the Government. It must be remembered that he felt a responsibility to the whole community, even if he exercised it in the feudal manner.

The great mistake was his attempting such a scheme at all. He might have known that so soon as the settlers who came out under his guidance and at his expense came into contact with others who had made no such agreement, that dissatisfaction would ensue ; and, as is ever the case, the settlers would be persuaded that they were justified in repudiating all obligations. He, on his part, was no doubt exacting and arbitrary, and played the laird overmuch in a community which fancied that Jock was as good as his master. Then there were the demagogues and the reformers, who were only too glad to show up the idiosyncrasies of such a conservative as the exacting old chief probably was ; who would exaggerate all his demands into tyrannies, and proclaim his rights as wrongs against the people. In this world there are always the two sides to a question, and the historian should strive to do justice to both sides.

The real difficulty in MacNab's case was that only the first settlers were brought out to the

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country by him, and that the more recent settlers came in under different terms. In all cases, however, the laird lacked judgment in exacting terms which were never carried out, and only hurt his reputation and prevented his finally recovering what was his own by right. In 1830 MacNab met a band of emigrants in Montreal, and persuaded them to become settlers in his township. They were from Isla, in the Campbell country, and were MacNabs, Camerons, Campbells, McKays, and McNe vins. These he agreed to settle and to procure their patents, but demanded a feudal quit-rent—for him and his heirs as Chief of MacNab for ever—of three barrels of flour, or their equivalent in Indian corn or oats, for every two hundred acres.

We are not told what expense MacNab went to in getting them from Montreal or in settling these peoples; but they accepted these terms, which were never fulfilled. It is not fair to be too hard on the old laird. He was no more peculiar than his settlers, who at first were willing to be assisted and promise anything, which afterwards they did not perform. The whole miserable succession of after-troubles was but a translation into the New World of what has often been repeated in the Old. It meant the relations existing between a Highland chief and his people or dependants, and there were faults on both sides.

In 1834 a large party of Stewarts, Fergusons, Robertsons, McLachlans, and Duffs arrived from Blair Athol, in Scotland, and settled in the town-

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ship, accepting the same terms as the last emigrants, with the addition that all the pine timber was reserved for the Arnprior Mills. We are told that these people accepted these terms without a murmur, because "all this time they believed that the land was MacNab's own property." And yet we are told that the location tickets were the same as those of others, which promised that MacNab would procure their patents from the Crown.

It seems that there was something wrong on both sides ; and while MacNab was no doubt improvident, impractical, and somewhat of a tyrant, who, by heredity, thought his will the only law, yet what sort of people were these who would go blindly into such a bargain as we are told they made during several years? There is a strong suspicion of either crass stupidity on their part or else a feeling that they could afterwards do what many of them certainly did, namely, avoid or ignore the obligation made, and thus, in their turn, play the part of dishonour. No one wants to palliate any attempt to rob or oppress the poor of any land or clime, but the mere abuse of so-called landlords in the Old Land, and of colonists on a large scale in the New World, has gone too far, and too many writers have painted the picture of pretended or fancied oppression in far too glaring colours. Even a man like MacNab deserves the justice due to him for his well-meaning, if impractical and narrow, attempt at providing a home for his peasant countrymen in the wilds of the New World.