

Catherine McAuley

Foundress of the Religious Sisters of Mercy

Her Canadian Connection

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St. John's, NL Canada
2013



Catherine McAuley did not travel outside of Europe. Yet, it is known that she had given serious consideration to taking the long and difficult voyage across the Atlantic Ocean to North America, specifically to Nova Scotia and to Newfoundland. Before exploring Catherine's plan to cross the ocean we need to look at historical and church-related events that had occurred or were taking place on the North American side of the world.

Background

The land mass which makes up Canada was first inhabited by various groups of indigenous people. The Norse had visited and explored the lands. There is a tale that St. Brendan visited the new found land in the north Atlantic. In the late fifteenth century the British and French expeditions explored and later settled along the Atlantic coast of North America. The abundant supply of fish and the huge and challenging spaces to train the navy were desirable benefits of these rugged shores. Perhaps the urgency to protect the monopoly of the English east coast merchants was even more important. At one time France ruled these lands; at another time England was the victor in the wars between the two countries. England was ultimately the victor and became the governing power. In 1763, France ceded nearly all of its colonies in North America to Britain. The residents were mostly English; the French were relegated to the west coast of the island, away from the lucrative trade routes and the fishery.

In 1867 Nova Scotia, along with New Brunswick and the Province of Canada (the land mass now known as the provinces of Quebec and Ontario) formed a federation that was called Canada. Thus began an accretion of additional provinces and territories and a process of increasing autonomy, separation from the United Kingdom, culminating in the Canada Act in 1982 which severed legal dependence on the British Parliament and by which Canada repatriated its Constitution. Since then a far-northern territory, Nunavut has been incorporated into the Canadian Federation. At this date in 2013 Canada is made up of ten provinces and three territories.

Newfoundland

A large island in the North Atlantic, located at the mouth of the St. Lawrence River on the east coast of Canada, was discovered by John Cabot on behalf of England in 1497. He called it New Found Lande. Settlement was not permitted to ensure that Newfoundland

could be preserved for the training of British sailors and be a resource (the cod fish) for hungry England. It was not until 1610 that the first settlement at Cupids was permitted. During the years of wars between England and France Newfoundland was a possession of one triumphant country or the other. In 1763 in the Treaty of Paris, France finally ceded its claim to lands in North America. Newfoundland was formally and finally claimed as a British colony, eventually given Responsible Government and became a country in its own right with its own currency and postage stamps. It was not until 1949 that Newfoundland joined the Canada federation and became its tenth province.

In the mid-1700s the Irish began to settle in Newfoundland seeking work and food and freedom from oppression. They came from south Kilkenny and Tipperary, Waterford, west Wexford, and Cork. It seems that Newfoundland was the first port of call where many of the Irish stopped; the migration of others continued on to Cape Breton and Nova Scotia.

Nova Scotia has an equally interesting and exciting history in the early formation and evolution of the dominion of Canada. While it was settled by the English and a large contingent of Scottish people it too had strong bonds with the Irish who came across the Atlantic to escape persecution and to seek a better life.

In the religious history of both Nova Scotia and Newfoundland it was the Irish Church that attended to the spiritual and temporal needs of the Gaelic/English-speaking Roman Catholic populations. Roman Catholicism in North America was ecclesiastically governed by the French clerics of Quebec until the Irish clergy came to minister to the Irish populations that began to settle and grow in Canada in the mid eighteenth century.

With this very brief history, we see that in Catherine McAuley's day, in the early nineteenth century, both Nova Scotia and Newfoundland were independent British colonies. Two men from Ireland living in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland seemed to have known Catherine very well. Both men were clerics who came to North America to minister to the Catholic Irish population in desperate need of religious and moral guidance. Thus begins the story of Catherine McAuley's connection with Canada.



Two Men from Carrick-on-Suir, County Tipperary

Michael Anthony Fleming (c1792 – 1850) was born in County Tipperary, about three miles from Carrick-on-Suir. He entered the Franciscan seminary at Wexford, was ordained on October 15, 1815 and was assigned to a friary at Carrickbeg. In 1823 he was invited to Newfoundland to serve as priest by his uncle, Rev. Thomas Scallan, the vicar apostolic of Newfoundland. It was Scallan, also a Franciscan, who had accepted Fleming to the novitiate in 1808.

Because of his close association and friendship with Daniel O'Connell, the Irish Liberator, Fleming became a strong advocate for the place of the Irish and Catholicism in Newfoundland. His influence was not only limited to the religious sphere. As Vicar Apostolic, and later as Bishop,

Fleming promoted the interest of the Irish Catholics in Newfoundland's political sphere. He furthered the rights and privileges that were important for the Irish Catholic population in the colony and worked to build up an Irish middle class. In 1832 the Emancipation Act for Catholics in Newfoundland was proclaimed due to much work and influence of Bishop Fleming. Whether in church administration, education or political activities Fleming's bold actions and attitude stood out and drew much public attention, not always popular with the social leaders and government officials of his day. He experienced strong opposition by some leading Catholics of St. John's, and this probably was more hurtful that all the other criticism and opposition he endured. At the same time Bishop Fleming gave strong leadership in the formation and growth of the church in Newfoundland. He followed Thomas Scallon as vicar apostolic and was consecrated as coadjutor bishop in 1829. In 1847 the vicarate of Newfoundland was raised to the status of diocese and Michael Anthony Fleming became the first Bishop of Newfoundland.

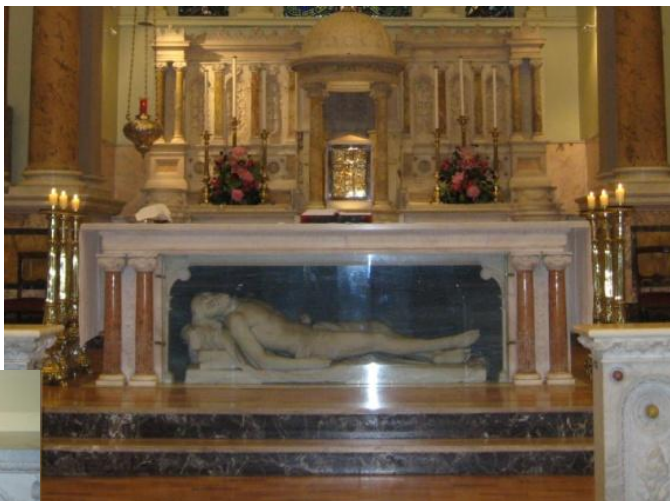
Bishop Fleming is remembered for his recruiting of two orders of Irish women religious and an order of men to work as teachers in the developing colony: in 1833 the Presentation Sisters came from Galway; in 1842 the Sisters of Mercy came from Baggot Street in Dublin, and in 1847 he established a community of monks of the third Order of St. Francis. Bishop Fleming took good care of "his protégés", the religious, and built fine dwellings for them.

One of the most historic, well known and highly valued ecclesial structures in Canada is the Basilica-Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in St. John's. Bishop Fleming, known in Ireland as a builder, undertook the monumental task in the construction of a new cathedral for St. John's - one that would tower over the town and stand out as a very visible symbol of Roman Catholicism in the town. Bishop Fleming did not witness the consecration of the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist which occurred in 1855 after his death. Yet, despite his worn out body, he determinedly celebrated Mass in the unfinished structure not long before his death in 1850.

One of the well known treasures in the cathedral is the masterpiece of Irish sculptor, John Hogan. The "Dead Christ", a full-size marble carving of Christ in the tomb, is a later version (and probably the best).



There is also a Hogan statue of the “Dead Christ” in the altar at St. Teresa’s Church, Clarendon Street, Dublin. St. Teresa’s Church figures highly in the life of the first Sisters of Mercy and in their relationship with the Carmelites. It is in the vaults of St. Teresa’s Church where thirteen of the first Sisters of Mercy to die at Baggot Street are buried.



The frontal of the altar in the chapel at Baggot Street is thought to be another of Hogan’s works and reminiscent of the figure of the “Dead Christ”. That altar dates back to 1864. These facts make connections among the Sisters of Mercy, Baggot Street chapel, St. Teresa’s, Clarendon Street and Bishop Fleming! They are certainly an artistic connection!

Two other large Cararra marble pieces sculpted by Hogan were installed on the walls of the St. John’s cathedral by Fleming’s successor, Bishop Mullock as memorials. These pieces represent the succession of three bishops. One piece shows Bishop Scallon receiving the last rites from Bishop Fleming and the second depicts Bishop Fleming entrusting the diocese to Bishop Mullock – all three men were Irish Franciscans.

Richard Baptist O’Brien

Richard Baptist O’Brien (1809 – 1885) was also born in Carrick-on-Suir. Like Bishop Fleming he was a Home Rule Nationalist and was an advocate for Catholics in the advancement of their religious interests. By the 1830s the Irish middle class had expanded considerably. In 1838 some of the Catholic population in Halifax, Nova Scotia, asked Archbishop Murray of Dublin for priests for a seminary/college. In 1839 Fathers Richard Baptist O’Brien and Lawrence Dease arrived from Dublin to re-open St. Mary’s College in Halifax. Fr. O’Brien was the first President and helped the college to obtain a charter of incorporation which gave St. Mary’s degree-granting rights and an annual grant from the government. He was recalled to Dublin in 1845.



Relationship between Fleming and O'Brien

There is no doubt that Fleming and O'Brien would have had communication with each other. Ships would stop in St. John's and Halifax to drop off and pick up passengers and goods before and after crossing the Atlantic. The two priests would have common interests and connections in Ireland having been born in the same locale within 17 years of each other. They would certainly have common interests in family and place in Ireland, and then again in Canada where most of the Irish Catholics had settled in Newfoundland and Nova Scotia.

The Roman Catholic ecclesiastical structures in the early 1800s in the eastern coast of Canada were originally tied to the parent diocese of French Quebec yet the clergy who ministered among a largely Irish population were usually from Ireland. In 1817 the mainland of Nova Scotia was erected as a Vicariate Apostolic under the Right Reverend Edmund Burke, this being the first partition of the parent diocese of Quebec. In 1847 Newfoundland was erected as a Diocese with direct accountability to Rome.

Fleming and O'Brien were advocates for Irish emancipation and were living among the struggling Irish in two major Irish settlements in Canada. Both could be considered contemporaries of the great leader for Irish freedom, Daniel O'Connell, and worked tirelessly for the same rights for the Irish on this side of the Atlantic. They consulted O'Connell in the struggle and modeled his example in dealing with the powerful British governors. It is known that Bishop Fleming called on O'Connell to fight for Newfoundland in the British Parliament. It is possible that both O'Connell and Fleming might have attended events at Baggot Street – like religious ceremonies of reception and profession of Fleming's niece, Annie Fleming, or of his Newfoundland protégé, Marianne Creedon!

Relationship of Fleming, O'Brien and Catherine McAuley

It should not be a revelation that Bishop Fleming and Fr. Baptist O'Brien would be part of the circle of friends and acquaintances of Catherine McAuley. They were well acquainted with others who figured prominently in Catherine's world including Archbishop Murray and Fr. Blake, not to mention the liberator, Daniel O'Connell.

In one of her letters, Catherine refers to Bishop Fleming as "her bishop". Their connections have to do with geography, their similar and contemporary Irish life, their common religious, social, cultural and political concerns, their faith, and their desire to build a free and better Ireland (and life for the Irish abroad), especially for the poor and oppressed. The Irish living on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean were related to or closely connected with each other. The ties of blood and association had not yet been diminished by time.

Fr. O'Brien was connected to the Sisters of Mercy for 30 years or more. He seems to have known Catherine fairly intimately from his detailed description of her in his introduction to one of the primary historical resources of the Sisters of Mercy: *Harnett's Life of Catherine McAuley - Foundress and First Superior of the Institute of Religious Sisters of Mercy*, published in New York in 1896. Fr. O'Brien was very poetic and adulating in his description of Catherine, her Mercy companions and their works of mercy.

If he were the one to do it, he would have had Catherine canonized by the end of the 19th century!

On one occasion when he was delayed in Dublin awaiting opportunity to cross the Atlantic he describes a meeting with Catherine in which she expressed interest and a desire to join him in a mission of charity to Nova Scotia. Fr. O'Brien did not encourage such a move at a time when the Mercy Institute had just been formed. Catherine rebutted him that her companions were more than able to supply her place and that she felt very fit for the rough work to be encountered in a new region. She supposedly dared him to try her and to make the experiment.



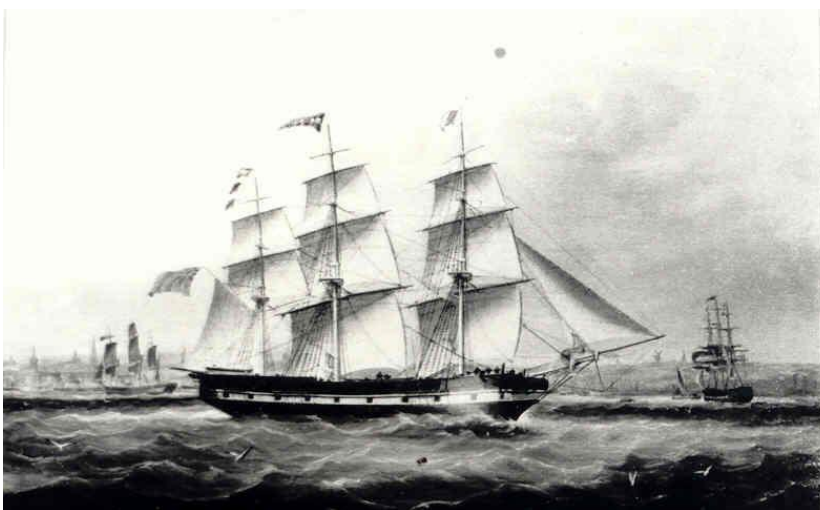
Bishop Fleming also seemed to know Catherine fairly well. His niece, Mary Anne (Annie) Fleming (in religion Sister Mary Justina) was one of the early members of the Sisters of Mercy at Baggot Street with Catherine McAuley. Catherine seemed to have great care and concern for Justina because of her bouts of serious illness and perhaps because of her relationship with her uncle, the bishop. Catherine was very solicitous for her and mentioned her in some of her letters. Justina died in December, 1841 a month after Catherine and was the second sister to be buried in the cemetery at Baggot Street.

Around the same time of Justina's entrance to the novitiate Bishop Fleming, then living in Newfoundland, arranged for an Irish girl, Marianne Creedon (who had been living in St. John's since 1833) to make her novitiate under Catherine in Dublin and to return to St. John's with others who should be inspired to accompany her to establish the Sisters of Mercy in his diocese. Marianne Creedon, an accomplished young woman who had been teaching in St. John's, was received to the novitiate and given the name Sister Mary Francis. Both Justina and Francis were professed in August 1841. Whenever Bishop Fleming travelled to Ireland he visited his protoge at Baggot Street and paid the required fees. There is evidence in some of Catherine's letters that he spent time with Catherine McAuley and the

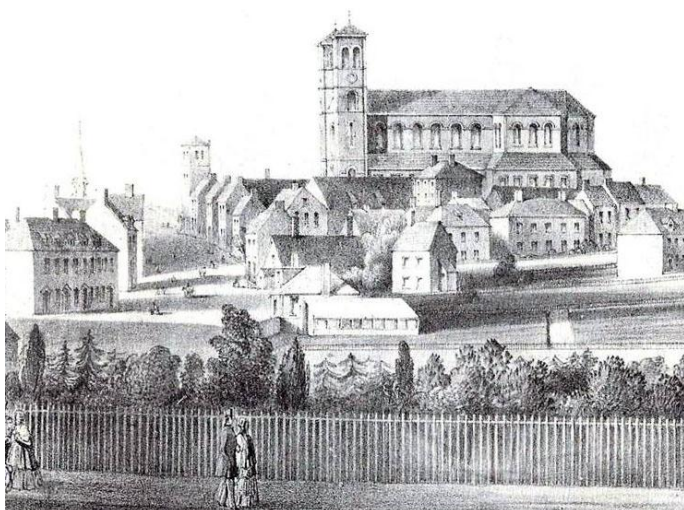


other sisters there. All during this time Bishop Fleming was building the cathedral in St. John's which required that he make frequent visits across the Atlantic Ocean for rock and other supplies. There is no doubt: Bishop Fleming had big investments on both sides of the Atlantic!

It was not long after her profession and just about six months after the death of the foundress that plans were made for Francis Creedon to travel back to Newfoundland. The sailing ship **Sir Walter Scott** would carry them across the ocean. Francis' travelling companions were Sisters Ursula Frayne and Rose Lynch and Maria Supple, a postulant. (Maria decided to join the Presentation Sisters instead of Mercy in St. John's but did not stay long.) The three Sisters of Mercy arrived in St. John's harbour on June 3, 1842, thus establishing the first foundation of the Sisters of Mercy in North America. As was her custom, Catherine McAuley would surely have come to Newfoundland with this new foundation, but her health had failed her. She died just months before the founders of Mercy in the new world set off across the Atlantic. It could be imagined that if she had come she surely would have made a visit to Nova Scotia too as she had discussed with Fr. O'Brien!



Bishop Fleming provided great support and had much solicitude for the sisters as they set about their works of mercy in education and care for the poor and sick. He housed them in his own home for a short time while their convent was being built in the shadows of the cathedral which itself was also under construction. In an early sketch of that area of St. John's it looks like Bishop Fleming designed the Mercy Convent to fit the architecture of the Cathedral. (See tower at center of photo below and left of the Cathedral)



Indeed, Bishop Fleming was building a church in the new world, not just of stone but of flesh and bone.

Fallona of Canada



photo Sheila stands at the foot of the stairway with David Lexner, Sharon (Lexner)Kirsch, Mary Catherine Fallona, Paul Lexner, Fr. Michael Fallona,CSB and James Fallona.

The Fallonas hold a very long-standing narrative of Catherine McAuley in their family circle from the earliest years. Stories of Catherine and her work in Ireland have been passed through the generations as well as a tradition of naming the first-born girl Catherine. Catherine McAuley is known among the Fallonas and the earlier generations as St. Catherine of Dublin. They have a very warm regard for Catherine McAuley and for many of the Sisters of Mercy whom they have met over the years. As they speak of their lives they describe a family and individuals who live the charism of Catherine especially in their attentiveness to the poor and their care to protect the dignity of the poor at the times that a family was assisted by them. Members of the family have a very gentle, soft-spoken and attentive presence. They proudly claim Catherine McAuley as their family member and are very honored to be her descendants.

It was in 1978 that the family first made contact with the Sisters of Mercy in Canada (Newfoundland). Philip Fallona (husband of Lillian) saw an advertisement for the Sisters in

One more connection is made between Catherine McAuley and Canada! A family in this country and living in Ontario has claimed relationship with Catherine McAuley.

James, Michael, Mary Catherine and Sheila Fallona are the descendants of Catherine McAuley's brother James. According to their family tree James' son, Bryan, his wife Catherine Hayden and their first born, Daniel, came to Canada from Ireland in the early 1840s and eventually opened an inn in the centre of Toronto, Ontario. The inn was called Red Oak Inn. A Holiday Inn was later built at the site of the Red Oak.

The Fallona family and their cousins, Paul, Sharon, and David Lexner (USA) are the children of two sisters Lillian and Mary(Marion) Duggan who are the great granddaughters of Bryan McAuley and therefore the great, great grand nieces of Catherine McAuley. The picture at the right shows the seven children of the two sisters. The four Fallonas lived in Toronto area while the Lexners lived mostly in Buffalo, New York. Since this photo was taken two have died: Sheila (Fallona) Thorsley and most recently, Paul Lexner. In the

the Canadian Register and wrote to Sister Marie Michael Power, rsm, the Superior General. It was arranged that Sister Angela Bolster, rsm, vice postulator for the cause of canonization of Catherine McAuley, would come to London, Ont. to visit Lillian who was very ill. Unfortunately Sister Angela was unable to come in time and Lillian died August 1, 1978. However contact had been made and Mary Catherine Fallona and Sister Marie Michael began to keep in regular contact, a practice that continued until Sister Marie Michael's death in December 2010.

Some members of the Fallona family had the opportunity to visit Dublin and Baggot Street. In 1992 James, Fr. Michael, and Mary Catherine visited St. John's to celebrate with the Sisters of Mercy 150 years of their arrival in St. John's. It was a very special opportunity for the Newfoundland sisters to meet kin-folk of their foundress, Catherine McAuley. Having the Fallonas present for the celebration of the Newfoundland foundation was deeply appreciated.

Conclusion

It is unfortunate that Catherine McAuley was too sick to cross the Atlantic and to come to North America with the founding group, Sisters Ursula Frayne, Rose Lynch and Francis Creedon. Catherine was so faithful to all other foundations in Ireland and England and desired to be with the sisters as they ventured to new places of ministry. She most likely would have come to Newfoundland for the new foundation and on to Nova Scotia as she had discussed with Fr. O'Brien. Eventually she would surely have gone to Australia and to any new foundation as it was being established. Catherine McAuley was so caring of the sisters that she would not ask them, or expect them to go somewhere or take on any tasks that she herself would not do. Such was the greatness of the founder's heart and soul!

References

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Consultation with James Fallona, September 2013