

Former MP dazzles at Clan Donald meeting

By MARGARET CALDBICK

Despite the truly dreadful weather outside with cold driving winds gusting to over 90 kilometres per hour, the atmosphere inside St. Raphael's Hall for Sunday's Clan Donald Glengarry-Stormont Annual General Meeting was warm and convivial, made more so with the arrival of guest speaker Flora MacDonald.

When Flora enters a room, people can't help gazing at the trim and fit lady who celebrated her 80th birthday this summer. Attired in Dress Macdonald slacks, a fitted emerald green velvet jacket, a Cairan Gorm brooch fastened to her plaid, the former Member of Parliament for the riding of Kingston and The Islands is charming and charismatic.

Ms. MacDonald was accompanied by her long-time friend and colleague, former Canadian Ambassador Allan Sullivan of Williamstown, who introduced her to the audience as "a genuine heroine for our times and a Canadian institution." He described how, since leaving politics in 1988, she has devoted her time, knowledge and wisdom to international humanitarian work, championing and promoting dozens of causes in support of the betterment of the human family. He added that throughout, Ms. MacDonald who was born in North Sydney, Nova Scotia, has carried the standard of Clan Donald.

To laughter, he ended his introduction on this note: "I would say, with all due respect to the goodwill of those concerned at the time, that had Charles Edward Stuart (our Bonnie Prince Charlie) had our Flora rather than his Flora and sooner, he might have won at Culloden."

Ms. MacDonald's illuminating and humorous hour-long talk centred on the Scots experience



Glenda McDonnell, right, Commissioner of Clan Donald Glengarry, welcomed Flora MacDonald, former MP of Kingston and The Islands, who was the guest speaker at the Clan branch's Annual General Meeting.

MARGARET CALDBICK PHOTO

in Nova Scotia and specifically Cape Breton, "the last of the Outer Hebrides, one that just drifted a few miles further west." She described Glengarry-Stormont and Cape Breton as two quite distinct locales with remarkably similar past experiences and present practices. But unlike Glengarry, Cape Breton's geographical isolation meant that "Cape Breton Scots seldom ventured elsewhere and therefore retained their own traditions—religion, language, and even clan feuds. But, like you in Glengarry, we were proud, fiercely independent hard-working people. We had to be just in order to survive."

Ms. MacDonald is a masterful oral historian and storyteller. She recalled for the audience stories told to her, including some about her grandfather, a Nova Scotia clipper ship captain who married his love, a Methodist, unacceptable in those days, and "to save her from the harassment of both the community and the churches took his bride to sea with him where she sailed around the world and gave birth to three of

her four sons on ship."

This spring, Ms. MacDonald's memoirs will be published. Before reading a few pages, she explained that her biography "will begin with a full acknowledgment of where I came from, how my people came to Cape Breton, and what it was like to be brought up in a very strict community." She asked the audience to recall the acceptance into Canada of some 80,000 Vietnamese boat people in the early 1980s when she was Canada's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and very involved in the issue. "My sympathies for these people surely had its roots in my family's history. I have always regarded the Scottish Highlanders, my forefathers, as the first boat people."

Ms. MacDonald was first elected to the House of Commons in 1972 as a Progressive Conservative Member of parliament. She remained there, serving as Minister of Employment and Immigration and subsequently as Communications Minister until her defeat in the 1988 election. Known throughout her political

career as a "Red Tory," in 2003 she briefly reentered politics to oppose the merger of the PC Party with the Canadian Alliance. According to journalist Thomas Walkom, she voted for the NDP in the 2004 election.

Among her many awards is the order of Canada, the Pearson medal of Peace and the India's highest honour, the Padmashree Award. Last week she returned from Arunachal Pradesh in North East India in the Himalayan foothills where she visited women in 46 villages working for her current passion, Future Generations, an international school for isolated communities.

Before their guest speaker's fascinating lecture, the Clan Donald AGM offered some exciting news. Glengarry Stormont Commissioner Glenda McDonnell, who is also Clan Donald Canada's Deputy High Commissioner, announced that next year's annual Clan Donald Canada AGM will be hosted here in Glengarry. Glengarry Stormont is the largest Clan Donald branch in Canada and the event promises to be very well attended.

Ms. McDonnell and five other members recently returned from this year's national Clan Donald AGM in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. The group's visit coincided with "Celtic Colours," a successful annual festival of Scottish arts and culture in Antigonish, which offered some interesting insights into event organization. During a visit to the campus of Saint Francis Xavier University, Ms. McDonnell viewed the remarkable collection of Gaelic and Scottish historical books, some of them extremely rare, donated by the late Father Right Reverend Ewen J. MacDonald of Glengarry who died in 1972.

Originally published in the November 1, 2006 edition of the Glengarry News, Alexandria.