

A THEORY ABOUT GLENGARRY HISTORY

by Royce MacGillivray

During the second half of the 19th century, and the early decades of the 20th century, there were certain towns in the United States where so many Glengarrians lived, that they were especially marked in the Glengarry mind as places "associated" with Glengarry, as being some sense Glengarry towns. In the lumber-woods state of Wisconsin, Glengarrians could point to Ashland, Chippewa Falls, Ermatinger Falls (Jim Falls), Fond du Lac, Green Bay, Peshtigo, Rib Lake, and Superior. In the adjoining lumber-woods state of Michigan, there were Bay City, Ironwood, and Saginaw. Among mining towns, Glengarrians had an especial affinity also for Leadville in Colorado, and for the famous Butte ("the Richest Hill on Earth") in Montana.

The names of these places appear again and again in the Glengarry and Cornwall newspapers of the period named. To this very day, they reappear with remarkable frequency in the ALS columns of the Glengarry News. Nor will they, to put it mildly, be unfamiliar to Glengarry genealogists! I want to discuss a geographical pattern that these names seem to belong to. But before that, let us take a look at another, related body of evidence about the activities of the Glengarrians in the United States.

In the period already mentioned, that is to say the second half of the 19th century, and the early decades of the 20th century, an extraordinary number of Glengarrians were highly successful in the United States. Until I began work on my Glengarry Biographical Dictionary some years ago, I hardly realized just how many there really were! The story of Glengarry success in the American republic was far from a myth! Newspaper editorials had often celebrated this success! And the editorials were right! Most notably of all, there were the great Glengarry railroad contractors: the many Grants and Macdonalds, the Cashions, and so forth. And to these we may very fairly add, as being Glengarrians in everything but name, and sometimes called Glengarrians in the newspapers, the no less eminent contractors who came from the St. Andrew's and South Branch area of Stormont immediately to the west of Glengarry. Then there were the eminent Glengarry-born lumbermen, operating first in Michigan and Wisconsin, then moving on to Minnesota and Washington State. And to these may be added the people who achieved fame as land developers, mining men, bank presidents,

however, it is remarkable how very often they made their careers in the undeveloped, western parts of the United States. Their golden land of opportunity was the great empty South West especially, but more generally, the whole tempting, new, open-for-development area west of the Mississippi. Obviously, some Glengarrians won fortune also on the eastern seaboard and elsewhere in the older, more densely settled areas of the eastern United States. One (William F. McLennan 1836-1909) was even a dominating figure in the U. S. Treasury in Washington, D. C., for many years. But in some way, the new regions of the United States fitted the Glengarry entrepreneurs. That was where they were at home--and knew how to succeed.

How does this success story, then, fit in with the place names from Wisconsin and so forth with which I began this article? There seems to be a pattern here, but what is the pattern? The pattern seems to be that of people following a pioneer way of life, doing the "pioneer thing" in the United States.

On this basis, I suggest a theory about the mentality of the Glengarrians of the 19th century and early 20th century. People grew up in pioneer conditions in Glengarry, and amid the stories and traditions there about the great pioneer days. Then influenced by this upbringing, they sought out a pioneer form of life for themselves in the pioneer regions of the United States. Being often very successful in doing so, they spent their lives reliving the pioneer experience! Thus the attraction of the primitive lumber regions of Michigan and Wisconsin, and further west. Thus the attraction of the South West--where the Glengarrians built so many of the first railroads. Here people could be pioneers all over again. Could a man no longer be a pioneer in Glengarry? Why then, he could be a pioneer in Colorado. For some, reliving the pioneer experience in another country brought them fame and fortune. For others it brought, more modestly, a form of life they could be comfortable with.

We find something of the same rediscovery of pioneer life in the very large involvement of the Glengarrians in the Yukon from 1897. And we find it likewise in the early 20th-century surge into the prairies and Northern Ontario. And we find it no less in the whole strange, wide-ranging exotic tale of the Glengarry prospectors, who from Confederation till the Second World War probed every wilderness they could find from Mexico to Alaska.

Theories should have names, otherwise they slip easily ought of sight. Let us find for

the Reclamation of the Pioneer Process. Sorry about this! All apologies, and let us proceed! By all means treat the title as a joke! I have no objection. Anyway, it is the theory that matters. The title only marks its place, like a red flag marking something covered in a snowbank.

Obviously, there were many Glengarrians both at home and abroad to which the theory did not apply. It is, properly, only one among many explanations of why people acted as they did. But “kept in its place” in this way, it does seem to have some limited value as an explanation of the mentality of several now vanished generations.

The topic leads us finally to Ralph Connor, North Glengarry’s most famous son. Growing up in pioneer conditions at St. Elmo, he was a missionary in the primitive lumbering regions of the Rockies before settling for life in the proudly “pioneer” and proudly “frontier” city of Winnipeg, a place of powerful attraction, indeed, for many Glengarrians of his generation. In 1901 and 1902, he published his two great classics of Canadian pioneer life, The Man from Glengarry and Glengarry School Days. Both set in the St. Elmo area, they quickly became North American best sellers. It would seem then that in life and in literature, Ralph Connor had followed the same pioneer trail that had entranced so many who were his exact contemporaries as ex-Glengarrians.

Butte, Montana, has already been mentioned as a place to which Glengarrians were attracted. Strangely, the artist the American publishers chose to do the illustrations for Glengarry School Days was a celebrated painter of American frontier life, Edgar S. Paxson, who lived in Butte. Paxson is best remembered today for his vast heroic painting of Custer’s Last Stand. He also gave North American readers an impression--as he saw it--of how Glengarrians looked. Perhaps he was thinking of some of his neighbours.

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