
David Wilson, in the first volume of his biography of Thomas D’Arcy McGee, leaves us with the phrase: “In Ireland, McGee had been an extreme republican; in the United States he had been an extreme Catholic; in Canada he would become an extreme moderate.”¹ In volume two, we see McGee make the transition to the man that he was at Confederation. The book describes McGee’s person, in all its complexity, during his eleven years in British North America, as his political views became defined in his adopted nation. It also offers an extensive and detailed examination of the trial of Patrick James Whelan, the man convicted of McGee’s murder, as well as a description of the permutations of the McGee icon in a chapter titled “Mutations.”

The overarching argument is that McGee “came to embrace Burke’s emphasis on compromise within a liberal-conservative consensus” during his time in Canada, along with “Burke’s uncompromising attitude to all forms of religious and nationalist extremism.”(7) The narrative follows this design effectively, as we see McGee positioning and repositioning himself on a number of political questions of the day. Wilson makes it clear that previous historians have overemphasized McGee the poet and dreamer, and not sufficiently examined his pragmatic political behaviour.

Wilson has no qualms about writing a political biography, despite history having shifted “in the academy away from political history.”(10) In order to understand McGee’s contribution in Canada, Wilson says, historians must consider issues such as separate schools

and rep by pop—representation by population— as “they are fundamental to the question of minority rights and of what it meant to be Canadian,” and were central to debates in which McGee took part. The author states: “The process of bargaining, brokerage, accommodation, and compromise in which McGee participated was essential to the construction of Canada.”(10) The biography therefore shows that McGee’s Canadian political personality was transforming under British North American ideas, just as the colonies themselves were also undergoing an important transition. It effectively handles the minutia of nineteenth-century politics, with ease and with captivating prose.

The book is organized into four parts, each covering a period of the McGee era. Part one examines the growth of the alliance between McGee and the Reform Party. Here we see Thomas D’Arcy McGee forge an alliance with George Brown in May 1858, despite the anti-Catholic rhetoric of the reformers, as McGee became convinced that the rival Liberal-Conservatives would be unwilling to concede separate schools because of the party’s Orange Order component.(57) Wilson writes that, by the early 1860s, McGee came to think beyond the issues reformers were willing to address, and began considering the formation of a new northern nationality.(140) When it became clear that Brown would not budge on the separate schools debate, the alliance he and McGee had forged began to crumble significantly. Wilson’s depiction of McGee’s divorce from the reformer camp, though, shows that, while Sandfield Macdonald, Oliver Mowat, and Brown began to see McGee as “a political liability,” both as a result of the often-forgotten Aylward affair and because McGee had tied himself to federalism, it was McGee who came to see his place with the reformers as “a false position.”(158-162) Wilson therefore contends that McGee began to feel that “the Reform alliance had become an obstacle” to his own political goals.(161) The section ends with McGee considering his place between the Reform and Liberal-Conservative factions.

Part two describes the way in which McGee epitomized the “extreme moderate” position, as he balanced his choice to sit with
John A. Macdonald in 1863 with the later need to compromise in order to achieve Confederation. Wilson shows that McGee helped to begin the talks between Macdonald and the reformers by writing to convince Brown to form a coalition with the Conservatives. (201-202) Though not all of McGee’s ideas on Confederation would be implemented, such as his desire for Canada to have its own monarch, (171) McGee himself is described as instrumental to the process by helping to forge a sociable atmosphere at the Charlottetown Conference, and by putting forth an amendment to guarantee the continuation of separate schools as they stood at union. (206-7) In Wilson’s words, McGee’s contribution to the separate schools question prevented a “potential deal-breaker,” should minority education be trampled under the new constitution. (207)

But McGee’s compromising attitude could only go so far. In part three of the biography, we see his militant side re-emerge as he fought Fenianism, which he interpreted as an expression of extreme nationalism. His opposition to Fenianism, of course, resulted in McGee’s assassination. This section ends with his last speech in April, 1868.

Wilson’s writing of part four is exquisite. He describes McGee’s assassination, and the subsequent trial of James Whelan, while fitting the episodes within the Canadian and international context. The description of the investigation and punishment of Whelan reads as a riveting courtroom drama, while of course maintaining its historical integrity. This section of the book also contains a discussion of the adoption of the McGee icon by different groups, beginning with its service as the muse of the Canada First circle, and on into the twentieth century. The image of McGee is so adaptable, Wilson says, because within his own writings many are able to find support for their position, as McGee has been “resurrected as a symbol of good relations between Ireland and Canada, a spokesman for national unity, and a scourge of revolutionary republicanism.” (404)

Although McGee was only in British North America for a little over a decade, the “McGee era” witnessed the transformation of the province of Canada from a society with old-world quarrels to the
nation it became at Confederation. David Wilson’s biography relates this history, and McGee’s own within the process. The book is a remarkable piece, and is therefore fit for the man who was Thomas D’Arcy McGee.

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