Presentation

About Thomas D’Arcy McGee

to the 185th Annual St. Patrick’s Society of Montreal Luncheon

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By J. Peter Shea

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Good afternoon. My name is Peter Shea and I am a past-president of St. Patrick’s Society and its current historian.

Next month marks the 150th anniversary of the assassination of Thomas D’Arcy McGee. The Society has asked me to say a few words about McGee.

McGee moved from the United States to Montreal in 1867. Shortly after McGee and his family arrived in Montreal, he was invited to be the guest of honour at the annual Prize Day of St. Mary’s College (which was the predecessor institution of Loyola College). There, McGee listened to a student debate about the future of Canada. Little did the gathered audience know at the time how important the contributions that the guest of honour that day would make to the future of Canada. McGee was only 32 years old at the time, but his short well lived life had already taken him down many different paths.

At the age of seventeen McGee emigrated from Ireland to the United States to work as a journalist at the Boston Pilot, and became that newspaper’s editor by the age of nineteen. He then moved back to Ireland to join the Young Ireland movement and was on the revolutionary council that started the Rising of 1848. Returning to the United States as an exile in 1850, his revolutionary republicanism mutated into Catholic Ultramontanism over the next seven years, which religious phase of his life ended in his disillusionment with the American way of life. After receiving invitations from prominent Irish-Montrealers, including Bernard Devlin, (who would become a president of St. Patrick’s Society), McGee was invited to emigrate to Montreal to start a new publication and to run for Parliament in the Montreal West riding.

McGee began his Canadian political career as an independent, then aligned himself with George Brown’s Reform Party, then became a cabinet minister in the Reform government, then switched parties, and then became a cabinet minister in John A. Macdonald’s Liberal-Conservative coalition that brought about Confederation in 1867. He is fondly remembered as the most eloquent voice for Confederation, particularly for his work in convincing Nova Scotia and New Brunswick to join Canada, as well as his efforts to protect minority religious educational rights in Ontario.

McGee’s toughest fight was not Confederation, however or minority educational rights, but rather his stance against Fenianism. The Fenian Brotherhood in the United States (which had a much more limited presence in Canada) was a clandestine military organization whose main purpose was the overthrow of

British rule in Ireland, by means of attacking Canada and holding the country ransom for Ireland’s independence. In 1865, the U.S. Civil War, during which over 150,000 Irish-Americans had enlisted in the Union Army, had just ended. Fenian Brotherhood members and sympathizers had infiltrated or taken control of many U.S. and Canadian Irish organizations, including the St. Patrick’s Society of Montreal. In the fall of 1867, St. Patrick’s Society expelled McGee from its board of directors for ostensibly slandering members of the Society. McGee, a sitting member of Parliament, had accused certain members of the Society of being members of the Fenian Brotherhood, which had been outlawed in Canada. When he refused to come before the Society to offer proof of his accusations, he was expelled, with only one dissenting voice. McGee would not divulge the source of his evidence because it would seriously compromise undercover Canadian government agents.

It was shortly after 2 a.m. on April 7th, 1968, after a late night session of the House of Commons in Ottawa, when Thomas D’Arcy McGee bid good night, or rather good morning to his parliamentary colleagues and walked the short distance from Parliament Hill to his boarding house on Sparks Street. Just as he was about to enter his house, an assassin’s bullet fired through the back of his head instantly ended his life, just six days short of his 43rd birthday, leaving his wife, Mary Caffrey, widowed with two young daughters, Mary and Agnes.

Patrick Whelan, a tailor, a known Fenian sympathizer and card- carrying member of St. Patrick’s Society of Montreal, who had recently moved to Ottawa from Montreal, was arrested, tried and convicted for McGee’s murder, largely based on circumstantial evidence. His execution by hanging on Feb. 11, 1969 was one of the last public executions to take place in Canada. Two days before he was executed, Whelan told officials that he was present when McGee was shot but that he did not pull the trigger. If Whalen’s statement was true, he would still have been found guilty of murder, not as the assassin but as a principal to the crime. But that would mean that McGee’s actual assassin was never apprehended.

An amazing 15,000 people participated in Thomas D’Arcy McGee’s funeral procession in Montreal on April 13, 1868, which procession was watched by an estimated crowd of over 80,000 people- for a total of 95,000 people. It was the largest funeral procession ever witnessed in Canada, made more outstanding by the fact that Montreal’s population at the time was only about 105,000.

On June 19, 2012, at the Annual Meeting of the Members of the St. Patrick’s Society of Montreal, a special debate took place between McGee biographer David A. Wilson and myself, as the Society historian, regarding the possibility of a posthumous reinstatement of McGee as a member of the Society. The initiator and moderator of the debate was Patrick Shea, the Society President at that time.

After a lively debate, well over 90% of the members in attendance voted for reinstatement. A very old wrong was finally righted.