# GLENGARRY REVISITED

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RALPH CONNOR'S WORKS fill a whole shelf in any Canadian library and, though worn bindings on multiple copies show that someone has pulled them down pretty often, we should not be much tempted to do so now were it not for *The Man from Glengarry*, published in 1901. It has slowly assumed the status of a minor classic, after a period of immense popularity followed by total neglect. Reprinted for the New Canadian Library in 1960, with a brief but enlightening introduction by Ross Beharriell, it can stand alone as Connor's testimony, but is usefully thrown into relief if flanked by his autobiographical *Glengarry Schooldays* (1902) and *Postscript to Adventure* (1938) and illuminated by an occasional dip into the other novels. Readers pursuing the Glengarry theme should, however, disregard *The Girl from Glengarry* (1933); it is a story of the stock market in the 1920's and demonstrates how bald and superficial Connor could be when his daemon deserted him.

"All that is set down in *Glengarry Schooldays* is true." This avowal answers for the author's entire work. There is in fact no change of persona between the Reverend Charles Gordon and the pseudonymous writer of stories. For most Canadians, the minister of St. Stephen's Church in Winnipeg, chaplain on the Western Front during the First World War and afterwards Moderator of the Presbyterian General Assembly, is quite simply Ralph Connor. Born in Ontario's eastern county of Glengarry in 1860, he looked out into the Glengarry farms and forests from the vantage point of his father's manse during the first ten years of his life. It is to this decade that we must turn for the primary pattern from which

all his works unfolded. Familiar outlines are here superimposed: the Canadian bush, the Scottish clan, the doctrines of Calvin and the archetypes of a child's dream. Connor's perception of greatness, in this life and beyond, is directed down immemorial vistas.

His Glengarry lies at the heart of the most primeval of all forests, a Schwarzwald antedating even the stories Grimm preserved. "It lines up close and thick along the road, and here and there quite overshadows it. It crowds in upon the little farms and shuts them off from one another and from the world outside, and peers in through the little windows of the log houses looking so small and lonely, but so beautiful in their forest frames." At the end of a perspective of time past, Connor sees this landscape of his childhood, simplified, stylized and lighted by a glow of warm affection. It is a fairyland, more solid and real than actuality. "A dim light fell over the forest from the half-moon and the stars, and seemed to fill up the little clearing in which the manse stood, with a weird and mysterious radiance. Far away in the forest the long-drawn howl of a wolf rose and fell. . . ." Or Spring is breaking: "The bare woods were filled with the tangled rays of light from the setting sun. Here and there a hillside facing the east lay in shadow that grew black where the balsams and cedars stood in clumps. But everywhere else the light fell sweet and silent about the bare trunks, filling the long avenues under the arching maple limbs with a yellow haze." This luminous veil belongs to *le temps perdu*, living only in memory: "The solid forests of Glengarry have vanished, and with the forests the men who conquered them."

Instinctively Connor brings his great Highlanders on stage as woodsmen rather than farmers. Salient ceremonies of this self-contained world in the heart of the forest are the sugaring-off, an annual tribute from the maple groves, and the logging-bee, a mass assault upon the brulé. The forest, moreover, is a main source of livelihood. Each winter the shanties are filled with Glengarry men who will fell the huge pines and with broad-axe square the timber ready for rafting down river to Quebec. When the scene shifts to that city or to the far West, there is a marked loss of intensity and loosening of texture. It is only in the forest world, where custom makes life sweet, that Connor is fully at home and his daemon fully functioning.

In Canada the Scottish unicorn retains his crown; compare the English coat of arms with that of Nova Scotia. Immigrants from Scotland have, from the earliest days of settlement and in all parts of the country, found Canada congenial. Connor's Glengarry takes its name from a region in north Perthshire, on the southern edge of the Highlands. The confluence of the Garry and Tummel rivers

lies just above Pitlochry, from whose streets the Canadian visitor looks northward into familiar landscapes. Glen Garry is part of the Atholl basin where a floor level of about fifteen hundred feet is ringed by mountains more than twice as high, pierced by the opposed passes of Drumochter and Killiecrankie. From this species of environment the transition to eastern Canada was an easy one. The Scottish inhabitants of Connor's Glengarry are "mostly from the Highlands and Islands" and their cohesiveness is strengthened by pressure from Irish and French-Canadian settlements bordering their territory. In Glengarry Macdonalds can comfortably coexist with Campbells although the latter have perpetrated "the vilest act of treachery recorded in any history, the massacre of the Macdonalds of Glencoe." It is as though a new Canadian clan with Glengarry as its patronymic had been, by agreement, created. Connor, as chaplain of the 43rd Cameron Highlanders of Canada, wore appropriately enough the "Glengarry" cap.

A strong family likeness marks the forest people, the Canadian clan. The hero, Ranald Macdonald, remains "the man from Glengarry", individualized only by the intensity with which the common flame burns in him. Connor's life and works in general abound with evidence that he shares with his hero this incandescence. In *The Doctor*, we see the Southern belle Iola Lane, "possessed of a fatal, maddening beauty" which works destruction among her lovers, closing her brief life by Loch Fyne in the West Highlands, where the sacredness of the soil and the scene are conducive to an edifying end. Connor's own feeling of rapture when first he visited Scotland is brilliantly captured in *Postscript to Adventure*. The loyalty, strength and seriousness of Connor's heroes; their pride, élan and willingness to stand on a point of honour; their instinctive implementation of the Scottish regimental motto "Nemo me impune lacessit!": everything shows them to be Highlanders at one remove, their clan feeling intensified rather than diminished by the migration.

Other matters such as the virility and patriarchal authority of the men, the purity and noble compassion of the women, are perhaps best considered in the context of Glengarry religion, for it is hard to know where the clansman ends and the Calvinist begins. Connor's own degrees of emphasis should be taken note of: "The men are worth remembering. They carried the marks of their blood in their fierce passions, their courage, their loyalty; and of the forest in their patience, their resourcefulness, their self-reliance. But deeper than all, the mark that reached down to their heart's core was that of their faith, for in them dwelt the fear of God." Gradually we come to agree that it is the third strand, of religion, which twisted against the other two produces the magic thread, fastened to some

archetypal bole in the depth of Connor's dream forest and giving him in all subsequent times and remote places a sure tug of orientation toward his centre of reference.

REGION, RACE AND RELIGION: this is Connor's perpetual trilogy. We see Ranald (clearly Connor's alter ego), become a successful business man and sportsman, idol of the Albert Club in Quebec, encountering the minister's wife, Mrs. Murray, who is there on a visit. "Then they began talking about Glengarry, of the old familiar places, of the woods and the fields, of the boys and girls now growing into men and women, and of the old people, some of whom were passed away. Before long they were talking of the church and all the varied interests centering in it, but soon they went back to the theme that Glengarry people everywhere are never long together without discussing — the great revival."

As we enter and re-enter the closed world of the forest we become aware that the little clearings, hewed out by a physical labour not less than heroic, are ruled by heads of households, each a tower of strength in his own domain. We listen to old Donald Finch when he learns that his son has resisted the schoolmaster: "Woman, be silent! It is not for you to excuse his wickedness. . . . Your children have well learned their lesson of rebellion and deceit. But I vow unto the Lord I will put an end to it now, whatever. And I will give you to remember, sir," turning to Thomas, "to the end of your days this occasion. And now, hence from this table. Let me not see your face till the Sabbath is past, and then, if the Lord spares me, I shall deal with you." The close association of parental and divine authority is no accident. Calvinism and the clan were two concepts upon which rested the whole fabric of Glengarry society. They were naturally complementary.

"Religion in Glengarry in those days was a solemn and serious matter, a thing of life and death." Calvin's conception of God as beyond reason, inexplicable, omnipotent and requiring no justification of his ways to men, suited perfectly the Highlanders' psyche. But the individual's reaction to so overwhelming a presence is not simple or single. God was viewed, rather remotely, as ruler of the universe, author and disposer of every man's being; predestinating some to heaven, leaving others for damnation; all this for causes which no discussion of foreknowledge could ever render acceptable to human reason. More immediately, God appeared as a super-ego, demanding all but impossible physical and moral effort from the elect — primarily from the minister of each presbytery — "He

must be a man to whom God is more real than his universe." And since we tend to ask of others what has been asked of us, the same demanding quality, the same intention to dominate, possessed all relationships. "The Glengarry folk were a fighting people. The whole spirit of the school was permeated by the fighting motif. Every recitation was a contest. The winners went joyously to the top, the failures remained ignominiously at the foot... The gravest defect in our educational system was the emphasis laid upon feats of memory.... In all my Glengarry school days I never drew a map." What need of maps when purpose runs in linear progression from one point of decision to the next? Bunyan's Christian was given no map to show his way to heaven, only the directive, Keep to the straight and narrow path!

Counterbalancing the imperious paternal figure is the female ideal, whether virginal or maternal, filling the roles of Beatrice and Our Lady of Perpetual Help. Here Connor's very limitations become strengths. Sexuality rises into an immense romantic sublimation, completely convincing because it must have corresponded to Connor's deepest experience and firmest belief. Mrs. Murray, the minister's wife, and Kate, the girl whom the hero wins at the close, are essentially the same. Spirited, radiant, resourceful, devoted, they are without weakness or lapse, but true to the experience of the idealist. Watching the sun set behind lofty crests of the forest, which gleam like spires against the light, it is easy to believe that "the streets of the city are pure gold" and to know toward what city Mrs. Murray is directing the gaze of her son. Connor's intensity of vision makes his stereotypes convincing; they reveal themselves as embodiments of some Platonic or Christian reality of an ultimate kind.

His conception of excellence is single and closely focussed. For those who fall outside its narrow range there is little comprehension. English, Irish and American characters are not denigrated; they simply and visibly fail to measure up to Scottish standards. Methodists, Baptists and Roman Catholics are not evil; they are denied the Calvinistic virtues. But what he lacks in breadth is made up in his capacity to rise to an O altitudo! The schoolmaster, Craven, is telling of the death of old Mrs Finch: "... but believe me, sir, that room was full of glory.... There were no farewells, no wailing, and at the very last, not even tears. Thomas, who had nursed her for more than a year, still supported her, the smile on his face to the end.... I had no need to fear. After a long silence she sat up straight, and in her Scotch tongue she said, with a kind of amazed joy in her tone, 'Ma fayther! Ma fayther! I am here.' Then she settled herself back in her son's arms, drew a deep breath, and was still. All through the night and the next day the

glory lingered round me. I went about as in a strange world. I am afraid you will be thinking me foolish, sir."

For reasons hard to formulate but lying deep in his own experience, Connor's stories are shot through with the idea of violence. From past generations of wild Highlanders the Glengarry men inherit a fighting spirit. And their pride as clansmen is strengthened by their sense of being among the elect, predestined to victory. From strength of will, to intense individualism, to boastful competitiveness, to open violence is an easy progression. Connor's imaginative involvement is complete, though his attitude is necessarily ambiguous. He may be a minister of the gospel but his delight in violence is almost ineradicable. He relates, in *Postscript to Adventure*, how "the tales of the fierce old days survived down into my time, stirring my youthful heart with profound regret that deeds so heroically splendid should all be bad. For in spite of the Great Revival we were of the same race, with ancient lust of battle in our blood." He records with pride how his brother, "stripped to his shirt on a winter day", dared any man from the next settlement to step out. "He had the strength of a bull."

How does this pride in primeval strength, barely out of touch with primeval ferocity, square itself with Connor's vocation as a servant of Christ? One searches for answers on several levels and amid some confusion of ideas. Macdonald Dubh, crippled by a dastardly blow from the Frenchman LeNoir and slowly dying as a result, not only forgives his enemy but persuades Ranald to forego the idea of vengeance. Each renunciation is arrived at after long inward agonies of father and son. The moral glow which ensues leaves certain shadows undispelled. LeNoir repents, after being saved from death by Ranald, but can we assume all scoundrels will do the same? And, initially, are we to believe that a straightforward blow delivered by an aggressor does no harm, least of all to a Highlander? And how are we to reconcile the God of vengeance, inhabiting the recesses of Connor's creed, with forgiveness of enemies, when Connor's own sentiments of Christian mildness are neighboured by his delight as, after a hockey game, the foul player is knocked senseless by one splendid retributory blow? The fact is that violence and competitiveness are instinctive and therefore inexplicable: "Glengarry folk, being mostly of Highland stock, love a fight." Connor's autobiography records how he could not refrain from striving to beat his own brother as a binder at harvest time and how for ten years after his overstrained heart showed the effect. The competitiveness at all levels appears meaningless and even the violence has an air of unreality, like the combats of Milton's angels. Connor's effort to take the sting out of vengeance by Christian forgiveness succeeds only in one exemplary

case, where vengeance would mean murder. His tacit assumption that the good, like Milton's Abdiel, are basically invulnerable fails to convince. His concept of muscular Christianity finds us wondering with De Lacy, the Englishman, "Ye gods! psalms and hymns; and how the fellow knocked those Frenchmen about." Or we remain poised like the dialogue between Kate and Mrs. Murray: "But isn't it awful, Auntie? They might kill him." "Yes, dear, but it sounds worse to us perhaps than it is."

Connor's plot is a string on which to thread significant incidents. His characterization is of significant types, with some variation within a type. These combine within an intensely realized physical and ethical setting, a boyhood memory preserved with that shining intensity of which the Victorians alone seem to be capable. "We will always be thinking of you," says Macdonald to his nephew, "and more than all, at the Bible class and the meetings she will be asking for you and wondering how you are doing, and by night and by day the door will be on the latch for your coming." For all its quality of dream, this is also the realistic record of a particular period and locale of Canadian sensibility. The more one reads the Glengarry trilogy, the less separable do fact and fiction appear. "The tales of the lumbermen in *The Man from Glengarry* are from real life."

THE ULTIMATE QUALITY of Connor's writing, which puts him almost in a class by himself among our novelists, is his capacity for transcendence. It absorbs his absurdities, renders innocuous his irresolution about violence, and lifts him above the ranks of regionalists and deployers of local colour. His vision of greatness is compelling because he was himself compelled. The immense dignity of the homeward coming of Big Mack Cameron, drowned while trying to save a Frenchman among the logs, is in danger of being dissipated by an anxious sway of opinion among the mourners keeping the wake, as to their dead friend's calling and election, when Macdonald Bhain, grown calm and looking intently into the darkness, has a vision — "And yonder is the lad, and with him a great company, and his face is shining, and oh! it is a good land, a good land!" Abrupt but authentic, this surge of insight dispels all doubts. For Connor there is a dynamic even in memories of the departed. Ranald finds in Mrs. Murray "a friend whose influence followed him, and steadied and lifted him up to greatness, long after the grave had hidden her from man's sight." These solutions are typical of Protestantism, in that enormous stress is laid on the salvation of the individual, on

his integrity and moral effort; of Calvinism, in that all action on the part of the elect is ipso facto portentous and determining; and, supremely, of primitive Puritanism, in that insoluble problems are transposed into a higher stratum, an eternal world, an ultimate vision. It has been recalled that among hymns sung in St. Stephen's, in Winnipeg, "Fight the Good Fight", "There were Ninety and Nine" and "Onward Christian Soldiers" held pride of place. And with reason there was appended to Connor's autobiography the familiar envoi Bunyan wrote for Mr. Valiant-for-Truth: "So he passed over, and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side."

Connor's story, whether presented as fiction or related as personal experience, finally opens out into the expanse of the Canadian West, a mundane equivalent of his drive toward transcendence. "Wherever there was lumbering to be done, sooner or later there Glengarry men were to be found, and Ranald had found them in the British Columbia forests." Connor's imagination gives them a role beyond that of felling timber on the Pacific slope. They are the visible link between East and West, which have been politically united in Confederation and now, through the building of the C.P.R., will become one society. They are the bearers of an ethos of truth and honour without which Confederation is meaningless, "a common loyalty that would become more vividly real when the provinces had been brought more closely together by the promised railway." Such is the theme of Ranald's speech to a mass meeting in New Westminster and the crowd hails him, "Glengarry! Glengarry!"

It is natural to ask whether Connor's conception of life is relevant to an understanding of Canada. Without question he interprets reliably the dynamic of the four or five decades following Confederation, with special reference to Ontario and the opening West. His own role was not inconsiderable; his concepts of Christian truth, personal loyalty and political responsibility were shared, in varying degrees, by unnumbered Canadians. He did more than provide a locus classicus of the forest image, a uniquely Canadian *recherche du temps perdu*, and a synoptic view of the Scottish-Calvinist ethos. He rose above the particulars of his creeds into a vision of Canadian domain and destiny. The little world of rural virtues and rural violence, of skills learned in forest and farm, of individualism strengthened by clan loyalty, was precisely — in historical fact — a microcosm which could expand to become the larger world of Western Canada society and enterprise, before the pattern was again modified by rising immigration. Physical strength and adeptness played an overwhelming role in a world of railway construction, homesteading on prairie quarter-sections, and felling of great trees on

mountainsides. The drive toward violence was absorbed in labour, deflected into hunting and field sports, transposed into construction, and sometimes, as Connor hoped, channeled into an assault upon wickedness in low places. It is worth remembering that our westward expansion was, in historical fact, accomplished with incredibly little open violence. The record of territorial acquisition, of Riel's suppression, of the Pacific gold rush and the opening of communications, is one of confused moderation, a collective desire to remain innocent of outrage and excess.

To the latent issues of French-speaking versus English-speaking cultures and of Catholic versus Protestant Connor turns an unseeing eye. Readers of *The Man from Glengarry* may make what they will of the opening scene where the Irish-French gang is blocking the mouth of the river but gives way to the demands of the Glengarry gang for free passage of their logs. They can, if they wish, read significance into LeNoir, the French-Canadians' leader, who moves from murderous hostility to outright co-operation with Macdonald. Connor's own emphasis is on western expansion as absorptive of all energies, a cure for all enmities. The imperial theme of the dominion fills his imagination, transcendence enters as his solution, and "Glengarry forever!" becomes more than a cry to rally a clan: it is the talisman, all suggestive and all sufficient, of Connor's sense of greatness.