



Courtesy of Regiopolis-Notre Dame High School

# A Proud Tradition

*Regiopolis-Notre Dame High School is Canada's oldest Catholic English high school; our author traces its interesting history*

By Peter Rajchert

**T**AKING a drive through the Kingscourt neighborhood in the north of Kingston, Ontario, one will notice comfortable homes from the second half of the 20th century and many parks with mature, broad-canopied trees. Near the intersection of Stephen and Division Streets, an expansive school campus might only draw a passing glance from a traveler. The many buildings resembling geometric forms certainly do a fine job in bringing together teachers and students. In the northeast corner of Stephen and Division a large burgundy sign announces that Regiopolis-Notre Dame High School is 'Canada's oldest Catholic English High School'. Its roots reach back to 1837.

In Ontario families have a right to send their children to Catholic schools. When Bishop Alexander

Macdonell, the founder of what is today Regiopolis-Notre Dame High was alive, Catholicism was illegal. Macdonell, a native of Glen Urquhart, Scotland, was born in 1762. The Reformation Parliament had banned Catholicism in the 1560s. Countless people across the country, especially in the Highlands, where Glen Urquhart is located, held on to their Catholic faith. Alexander Macdonell was among them. His family sent him to a secretly-run minor seminary in the village of Morar in the west of Scotland to begin his education. As Alexander approached adulthood he understood that the priesthood was his calling. Since there was no place on the British Isles for him to prepare for the priesthood, he traveled to continental Europe and ended up studying at the University of Paris' Scots College and at the Royal Scots College in Valladolid, Spain.

## Highlander regiment

Alexander Macdonell's ordination took place in 1787. The Roman Catholic Church sent him back to his native Scottish Highlands to work as a missionary, mostly with Gaelic-speaking crofters. Macdonell began preaching and celebrating Mass in the region around Badenoch and Lochaber, where impoverished locals faced eviction in the clearances.

Macdonell did not abandon those who found themselves without a croft on which to farm. He found for many of them employment in the cotton industry in Glasgow, where he continued his missionary activities. When the French Revolution negatively impacted the processing and sale of cotton, Macdonell's fellow Highlanders lost their jobs. With the assistance of Scottish chieftain Ranaldson Macdonell of Glengarry as well as the support of the government in London, he formed a Highlanders regiment that among other missions guarded the island of Guernsey. Alexander Macdonell served as its

chaplain. It should be noted here that he never hid his Catholicism from others.

## Move to Canada

When peace returned to Europe Alexander Macdonell's regiment disbanded. The priest reached out to the government in London once again, imploring it to grant parcels of land to the former soldiers in the province of Upper Canada (today's Ontario). The government eventually agreed to this request. In September 1804 Macdonell set off for British North America, settling, with permission from the Roman Catholic Church, in the community of St. Raphael's (not far from the St. Lawrence River in the far east of the province). It was at this time that he began ministering to and caring for Upper Canada's Catholics.

Macdonell's commitment to Catholic life was complete. He ensured that his former regiment members received land plots on which they could build their lives. He advocated with the government of Upper Canada on behalf of Catholic teachers and priests, arguing that they needed financial support from the authorities. Likely remembering the challenges he faced in obtain-

### An 1823 portrait of Bishop Alexander Macdonell, who founded Regiopolis College in Kingston in 1837



Wikimedia

ing a Catholic education, Macdonell founded a school and a seminary in St. Raphael's. When he became the first bishop of Upper Canada in 1826, which required a move to Kingston, his commitment to Catholic education remained unwavering.

## Hard beginnings

Macdonell incorporated the College of Regiopolis with the government of Upper Canada in 1837. In 1841 a newly-constructed building on Sydenham Street welcomed its first cohort of male students. That same year two Sisters from the Congregation of Notre Dame arrived in Kingston from Montreal upon Macdonell's request from several years before, and started teaching Catholic girls in what became the Notre Dame Convent on King Street. The priests at Regiopolis and the Sisters at Notre Dame were the torchbearers of Macdonell's legacy. The first bishop of Upper Canada had died in 1840.

Circumstances were not always easy for the two Catholic institutions in the decades that followed. Financial problems in the late 1860s even forced Regiopolis to close temporarily; both schools also faced space limitations in their previous buildings when enrolment was high. Notre Dame built an addition to its facility; Regiopolis constructed a new campus in Regiopolis-Notre Dame's current location.

In 1967 Archbishop J.L. Wilhelm combined Regiopolis and Notre Dame into the coeducational Catholic high school that we know today. This move strengthened Catholic education in the Kingston area by uniting the region's educational resources on one campus. The wider Catholic community in Kingston supported Regiopolis-Notre Dame's mission.



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### Regiopolis-Notre Dame High School continues to fosters a foundation of faith in today's secular society

When school authorities realized in the 1970s that the old campus buildings just could not be refurbished to continue serving staff and students, they decided to build the campus that exists today. A community fundraising campaign as well as financial support from the Diocese of Kingston and the Congregation of Notre Dame turned the dream of a new campus into a reality that students and staff enjoy today.

## Spiritual legacy

Paul Melim, Regiopolis-Notre Dame's current principal, knows the school's history not simply because he works for the institution. He actually graduated from it. He too is carrying forward the legacy of Catholic education that started with Bishop Alexander Macdonell. In an interview he spoke about Regiopolis-Notre Dame's commitment to fostering a foundation of faith in students so that it is there for them when they confront the triumphs and challenges of life. Indeed, many of the school's alumni stay in touch and work together, celebrating those triumphs and confronting local challenges through various campaigns, including fundraisers for cancer. Alexander Macdonell would be relieved to know that Catholic education is flourishing today. He would, however, surely not rest easy, but continue to build on his work so that future generations could also benefit from a Catholic education. **MSA**