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A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php

The Macdonnell Heresy Trial

JOSEPH C. McLELLAND

IT was September, 1875—just three months after the great union of all Presbyterian Church groups in the young Dominion of Canada. The Union had been consummated only after debate and with misgiving regarding its survival. Could Free Church and Established Church share a common creed and courts? Would not the liberal bent of the Auld Kirk mean the end of true confessionalism? Such were the questions being asked throughout the nation. And in that month of September a quiet, scholarly voice from the pulpit of St. Andrew's Church in Toronto brought them into focus and provided the first testing of the Union.

In those days the theological world—and that was the whole world!—discoursed much about Eschatology, in the traditional sense of chronological "last things" and the eternal things after the last.¹ The problem of the duration of punishment after death was the subject of a sermon (subsequently entitled "Universalism") which the noted preacher, the Reverend D. J. Macdonnell delivered on that fateful day. Touching lightly but definitely on the position of the Westminster Confession of Faith (the subordinate standard of the new Presbyterian Church in Canada, adopted officially just three months before), Macdonnell suggested that this might not be the last word on the subject. Thereafter things moved quickly—newspaper reports and ecclesiastical debate and proceedings gathered momentum in a young Church and a young nation more alive to basic issues of beliefs and standards than they are today. Two things in particular are noteworthy—the calm deliberation of the central figure and the patience of a supreme Church Court seeking the truth in love.

MACDONNELL, THE MAN²

The Reverend George Macdonnell, Minister of the Church of Scotland at Bathurst, N.B., was blessed with a son on January 15, 1843, naming him Daniel James. Raised in the manses of Bathurst, Waterdown and Fergus, D. J. Macdonnell early showed his ability as a scholar, and after graduating

1. This could be illustrated from the theology of any area during the period of Macdonnell's life, but perhaps best from our own Canadian scene. In 1886 a book of over 500 pages was published by Dr. Wm. Cochrane, Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Canada in 1882, on the subject "Future Punishment; or Does Death end Probation?" Its topics include Materialism, Conditional Immortality or Annihilationism, Restorationism or Universalism, Optimism or Eternal Hope, Probationism and Purgatory. Special Chapters were written by Professor McClaren of Knox College and Archbishop Lynch of Toronto, among others. In his Preface the author states, "In Canada and the United States, the pulpit was never more definite and outspoken regarding the Doctrine of Eternal Punishment than at the present moment."

2. The very detailed biography by Macdonnell's friend, Professor McCurdy, provides ample materials, with sermons and prayers as appendices. *Life and Work of D. J. Macdonnell*, by J. F. McCurdy (Briggs, 1879).

from Queen's, went to Glasgow in 1863 to study theology. He had met the subject at Queen's, where Butler's *Analogy* was the chief text, and now spent three years at Glasgow, Edinburgh, and Berlin, meeting the new critical theology which later caused him such trial.

Writing from Berlin to his brother George, he indicates his doubts on the subject of subordinate standards:

I suppose that most people admit that there must be a little latitude allowed in signing the Confession of Faith, and that one is hardly expected to assent to every clause absolutely; but the question comes to be, how far this latitude is to be allowed to extend. I am inclined to think that confessions, as we are required to subscribe to them, do more harm than good—that they torment conscientious men, while they do not keep out of the Church careless men, who do not care much what they sign . . . If any means could be devised of securing *piety* in intending ministers, it would be much more to the purpose, and orthodoxy on many points might be left to take care of itself. Without the piety, the orthodoxy is worse than useless.³

Ordained in Edinburgh in 1866, he was called to St. Andrew's, Peterborough, and inducted on November 20. Now he is able to confess to George:

It is a great thing to have definite, practical work to do—it prevents too much speculation, which is for me, at least, not a desirable thing.

Four years later, on the occasion of his call to St. Andrew's, Toronto, Macdonnell voiced his difficulties before the Presbytery of Toronto. The sympathetic counsel of the Fathers and Brethren "helped him to reach ground whereon he could stand."⁴ He was therefore inducted on December 22, 1870, into a ministry which involved the building of a new Church (the present edifice at King and Simcoe Streets), a Manse and the Institute. His Scots congregation became a centre of wide influence and of strong witness throughout the City.⁵

THE SERMON

On September 26, 1875, two budding journalists attended the morning service at St. Andrew's, Toronto, whose Minister was noted as one who tested the shorthand skill of the best of newspapermen. One of the young men, Toronto correspondent of the *Montreal Witness*, thought the sermon worthy of publication, and his summary appeared in the Monday edition. Some ten days later, Mr. Macdonnell had occasion to speak at the opening exercises of Knox College, as a member of its Senate. The *Toronto Mail* of October 7 reports:

He likened the various denominations to rays of light of various colours which required to be merged into one another to make a pure white ray . . . He liked

3. McCurdy, p. 37.

4. McCurdy, p. 63.

5. Cf. *The Book of St. Andrew's*, A Short History of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Toronto, by Stuart C. Parker, published by the Centenary Committee of the Congregation, 1930.

Presbyterianism and Presbyterian teaching. He liked its Confession of Faith, because of its tolerance . . . He could not help thinking that the men who composed that creed would rather that it was not in existence, if they could have foreseen individual members of the Church exalting the document in a way that they never intended . . . He did not believe that any one of the Professors occupying Chairs in the College regarded Presbyterianism as a finality . . . It was quite right for people to know the Confession of Faith, but they should keep it subordinate to the Word of God, and not look upon it as if it were infallible.

Two fellow-Presbyters took issue with his remarks, and in turn Macdonnell's friends in Montreal demanded justice. Accordingly, the full text of the Sermon (as compiled by the newspapermen) was printed on October 12 under the title, "Universal Salvation." The *Toronto Mail's* account was headed more cautiously, "The Hereafter," while the *Globe* contented itself with the banner "Report of the Sermon." On November 5 the Presbytery of Toronto appointed a special Committee to confer with Macdonnell, and the ecclesiastical process began.

In the sermon,⁶ based on Romans 5:12-21, Macdonnell deals with the relationship of Adam to Christ and the meaning of the terms sin, death, grace, righteousness and life. The explanations of how we get sin from Adam and righteousness from Christ are said to be "human interpretations of the Divine record"—Pelagian, Augustinian, Federal and Arminian theories. The Westminster Confession seems the most reasonable, and is a combination of Augustinian and Federal views. After quoting the Confession, Macdonnell comments:

This is a human account of the matter—it is not Gospel truth. It is as good an account as any philosopher that I have ever read anything of can yet give—for this is a matter for the philosopher as well as for the theologian. It is not started by the Bible; it is started by man's conscience.

He notes that the phrases in Romans 5 seem to teach universal salvation:

The passage seems to say, as clearly as human language can say it, that the justification is co-extensive with the judgment; that the sanctification is co-extensive with the sin . . . Plain men reading these words without any theology in their heads will say that it means that all men who became sinners through Adam, are to be made holy through Christ; candidly, this is what it does mean . . . Here is the question: can God, through all eternity, look complacently upon not only the misery but the sin of the lost? Is sin stronger than God? Is evil co-existent and co-eternal with the good? These are the questions. I don't say no to them, and I won't say yes, because if that is the case you see you have two Gods, and the evil God is just as the good God.⁷

6. No full text is available—Mr. Macdonnell was not in the habit of reading his sermons, and did not issue an authentic text at any time. McCurdy does not give the newspaper account, but this is extant in the *Toronto Globe* and in the bound papers of the Synod of Toronto and Kingston "for use of Parties and General Assembly," 1876 [Paper J (1), p. 34].

7. At the Presbytery meeting following, Principal Caven observed that Macdonnell *should* have said "no" to the questions. Nevertheless his problem here is no new superficial one: Augustine himself struggled out of Manichaeism on just such grounds.

modern commentators, such as Tholuck, Lange and Olhausen, who have done noble service to the cause of Bible truth, and who are looked upon as safe guides in the interpretation of Scripture, favour more or less distinctly the view of restoration; one does not feel that in such company he can be so very far astray.⁹

As to the Confession of Faith, Macdonnell thought that if this were being framed today, the resultant document would contain "fewer propositions" and "more room for difference of opinion." Moreover,

Most men will likewise admit that the Church has the right to revise and amend her Confession from time to time. It might have been better for the Presbyterian Church had there been a periodical revision and curtailing of the Confession.¹⁰

After a Committee had met with Mr. Macdonnell, it was able to report to Presbytery his expression of regret at speaking "in a way not in harmony with the Confession," and his engagement not to contravene its teaching in his public ministry while seeking further light. Presbytery unanimously adopted the Committee's recommendation:

That the Presbytery, taking the premisses into consideration, agrees that time be granted to Mr. Macdonnell to consider more carefully the question involved, in the hope that his views may seen be brought into complete harmony with those of the church. But the Presbytery, recognizing the fundamental importance of the doctrine of future punishment as taught in the Confession of Faith, and the necessity of maintaining in its integrity the church's testimony thereto, requires Mr. Macdonnell to report to this court as to his argument with the teaching of the Confession on the doctrine in question not later than the last regular meeting before the next General Assembly.

Thus it was that Mr. Macdonnell submitted to the April meeting of Presbytery the first of a long series of statements:¹¹

Fathers and Brethren . . . In accordance with the terms of said resolution, I desire now to submit the following statement:

9. Macdonnell later explicitly denied a doctrine of restorationism. It is strange that he does not mention Dorner, of whom he wrote during his residence in Germany as a student, "Dorner, among the theological professors, pleases me best, though he is sometimes very cloudy" (McCurdy, p. 26). Tholuck and Dorner were two outstanding representatives of the "Liberal Evangelical" school which followed Schleiermacher. Among their tenets were two that must have influenced Macdonnell during his year in their classrooms: that diversity in theological opinion is not necessarily ground for breaking fellowship; and that in eschatology, there is opportunity for repentance and faith in the future life. Thus Dorner writes (*A System of Christian Doctrine*, Vol. IV, Clark, 1882): "The gospel will be brought decisively home to all who did not in this world come to definitive decision, and all who do not shut themselves thereto will be saved" (p. 412); The word *aionios* means eternal duration with respect to blessedness but "by no means denotes everywhere an endless period, for an end of the aeons is spoken of" (p. 419); after considering restorationism and annihilationism, he concludes: "We must be content with saying, that the ultimate fate of individuals remains veiled in mystery, as well as whether all will attain the blessed goal or not" (p. 427).

10. Macdonnell would have been pleased with the present terms of reference of the Committee on Articles of Faith of the Presbyterian Church in Canada: "for the purpose of re-examining our whole confessional position as a Church, with a view eventually to stating what we believe, as a Reformed Church, in language and concepts relevant to our day and situation" (A. and P. of the 1957 General Assembly, p. 226). (His great-nephew, the Rev. Scarth Macdonnell, is its Chairman.)

11. Synod Papers, E; cf. *British American Presbyterian*, April 28, 1876.

1. So far as the language of the Confession of Faith on this point is concerned, I find that it is almost entirely borrowed from Scripture, and I declare my adhesion to it, understanding the phrase "eternal torments" to have the same meaning as "everlasting punishment" in Matthew xxv. 2.

2. While I do not consider myself debarred by the teaching of Scripture from *hoping* that God may in some way put an end to sin and suffering, I am satisfied that it is not a part of the message with which I am entrusted as a minister of the gospel, to hold out any hope of future pardon, to those who have in this life rejected Christ. "Now is the accepted time." What God *may* do hereafter is apparently not among the things revealed or intended to be known.

I hope that this statement may prove satisfactory. I am, Fathers and Brethren, Yours respectfully, D. J. Macdonnell.

The friend and supporter of Mr. Macdonnell, David Mitchell, moved that this statement be accepted "as a sufficient response to the requirement" of Presbytery. But an amendment of Prof. McLaren's prevailed, that a Committee should again consider the matter and report to a later meeting.

The work of this Committee, convened by Prof. McLaren and including Mr. David Mitchell and Principal Caven, constitutes the chief theological critique of Macdonnell's position, and will be noted at length. To its meeting on April 17 Macdonnell had presented some Notes, at the Committee's request.

1. I substitute the words 'everlasting punishment', or rather the Greek words *kolasin aiōnion* (Matt. xxv. 46) for 'eternal torments', because the former is in Scripture applied to the punishment of wicked men and the latter is not. There is an obvious distinction between 'punishment' and 'torments'.

2. The word *aiōnios* may, of course, mean *absolutely endless*. I do not deny that there is strong ground for assigning to it that meaning in the passage quoted. But it has often in Scripture a more limited signification, and if there is room for even a shadow of doubt as to whether the Saviour intended to teach that evil would be endless, there is room to 'hope', however vaguely, that God may in some way put an end to sin and suffering.¹²

The Committee reported to Presbytery that "Mr. Macdonnell's paper, without accepting the doctrine of future punishment as taught in the Confession of Faith, declares a qualified adhesion to the language in which it is embodied." Three questions concerning Macdonnell's statement, in the light of his Notes and verbal comments, guided the debate. (1) Does the Statement embody views which Presbytery can accept as satisfactory? (2) If there is deviation from the received doctrine of the Church, is it "of such

12. Macdonnell's comments are far from being superficial. In the verse at issue, Matthew 25:46, the two phrases are apparently parallel: "everlasting punishment—everlasting life." However, the word rendered "punishment" (*kolasin*) comes from the root "pruning", and suggests corrective rather than vindictive punishment. Moreover, the key term *aiōnios* means "age-long" (belonging to the aeon) rather than "endless." Modern research has recovered the apocalyptic doctrine of the Two Ages, which is a thoroughly Biblical idea, yet would interpret this to mean that the *aiōnios* of the Coming Age partakes of the divine "everlastingness." E.g. Kittel's *Wörterbuch z. N.T.* (Vol. I, pp. 197–209) deals with *aion* in terms of *Ewigkeit* and *Weltzeit*, but in regard to *aiōnios* in Matthew 25:46 stresses the primary meaning of "never stopping, endless" (*zunächst nur niemals aufhörend, endlos*). As Macdonnell later pointed out, the argument does not stand or fall with one word!

a nature as can be tolerated in one holding the office of a gospel minister?"

(3) What action should Presbytery take?

The first point is that only the *duration* of future punishment is in question. It is "a punishment which is of limited duration," and this view is unsatisfactory, for it deviates from "the well understood and historical meaning." This is why Macdonnell feels bound to explain Matthew xxv as he does—he accepts the Confession's teaching only as its language coincides with "the manner in which he is accustomed to construe Scripture." Indeed, "few Universalists would object to the eternity of future punishments, if they were only allowed to understand eternal punishments as having the same meaning as they attach to 'everlasting punishment' in Matthew xxv." From the concluding part of his statement, Mr. Macdonnell evidently understands "everlasting punishment" in a sense not traditional or "in its ordinary meaning," but "as equivalent to a meaning which it is assumed the original Greek *aiōnion* may bear." Since Mr. Macdonnell confirmed this view of the Statement, there is no doubt that it "covers and was intended to cover a deviation from the doctrine of the Confession of Faith and the Creeds of Christendom and from what your Committee believes is the teaching of the Holy Scriptures."

Presbytery adopted this finding on the first Question on motion of Principal Caven, and proceeded to the second: is the deviation intolerable in a Minister of the Gospel? Since the doctrine of the eternal punishment of the wicked is Scriptural—not by one phrase but by "a great variety of representations"—the Committee declared that this is not one of "those minor deviations from the truth which the Presbytery is at liberty to overlook." It weakens the sanctions of God's law and the "power of those appeals by which the gospel is urged upon men." Mr. Macdonnell's position is "inconsistent with the acceptance of the integrity of that system of doctrine which is embodied in the standards of the Presbyterian Church in Canada," nor is a subordinate Court of the Church competent "to entertain the question of granting, by their own authority, a relaxation of the terms of Ministerial Communion."

Consideration was deferred until the third Question could be discussed, as to what action was necessary. Another Committee was appointed, "with a view of ascertaining whether there is any prospect of his sentiments being brought into harmony with those of the Church." Prof. McLaren was named Convener, with Principal Caven, Dr. Carmichael of King, David Mitchell and others as members. After consultation with Macdonnell, they asked permission to sit again. This was granted, and Presbytery adjourned to meet on May 2. The time was shortening, since Synod was to meet on May 4th and the General Assembly on June 8.

Meanwhile, the press appears quite confused about things. On April 7 the *British American Presbyterian* reported happily that Mr. Macdonnell "seems to have succeeded in dispelling the mist which surrounded him some time ago"—news "most gratifying to the rev. gentleman's many friends in

this city and throughout the country." But the Toronto *Mail* made editorial comment about a more sinister aspect of the entire proceedings: "It is not pleasant to think of, but it is a fact that has already provoked much comment, that in the Toronto Presbytery the dividing lines between those for and those against Mr. Macdonnell have very nearly coincided with those between the two Churches lately united. Evidently church union has its drawbacks as well as its advantages; and evidently, too, the strengthening of Christian charity and brotherly forbearance is not among the latter."

The Committee worked hard, despite many problems. On one occasion a mistake of the messenger who carried the notice of meeting caused a wait of one hour and then adjournment. A sub-committee of McLaren, Caven and J. M. King (later Principal of Manitoba College) dealt with a new statement submitted by Macdonnell. This runs in part as follows:¹³

The doctrine of the eternity of punishment is still to my mind involved in great difficulties, arising partly from certain texts of Scripture, the most obvious interpretation of which seems to be that sin shall at some time or other close, and partly from general considerations of the character of God, as revealed, of His infinite righteousness, in all His moral creatures; His infinite wisdom, whose plans cannot be baffled; His mercy, which endureth forever—considerations, which, taken by themselves, would form a ground for hope that God would find out some way of putting an end to sin and suffering.

On the other hand there is one way of deliverance, and one only, pointed out, and concerning those who reject this way there are awfully severe statements, especially from the lips of Christ Himself, which seem to shut the door of hope, and which lead me to say that I do not consider it a part of my message as a Minister of the Gospel, to hold out the hope of future pardon, to those who deliberately reject Christ.

I have arrived at no conclusion at variance with the doctrine of the Church. I do not conceal that I have some doubt whether the Church is absolutely correct in her interpretation of the statements of Scripture referred to; but I admit that they point with almost irresistible force in the direction of the endless punishment of the wicked. I have no intention of making this doubt a part of my preaching.

Having made these statements, I have no difficulty in declaring my adhesion to the teachings of the Confession of Faith on this point, the more especially as the language used is almost entirely borrowed from Scripture.

I am, yours respectfully,

D. J. MACDONNELL

The Synod meeting sisted procedure at the Presbytery level. A dissent of D. Mitchell and W. Mitchell from the action of the Presbytery of Toronto, on the grounds that Mr. Macdonnell had answered satisfactorily the requirements of Presbytery, came before Synod of Toronto and Kingston. Agreeing that it had insufficient time to deal with this matter, the Court transmitted *simpliciter* to the General Assembly the "Dissent and Complaint, Mitchell *et al.* against the Presbytery of Toronto."

13. Synod Papers, I, pp. 31 f.

In the brief period left to it, Presbytery resumed its struggle with Macdonnell's doubts. On May 30 it accepted his final statement, resolving to transmit it to the Assembly, along with an expression of hope that it might be found "a satisfactory basis for the settlement of the case," and requesting the Assembly to issue in the matter. The statement reads,

Notwithstanding difficulties which I have regarding the eternity of future punishment, I continue my adhesion to that doctrine, as implied in my assent to the Confession of Faith formerly given.

2. *The General Assembly*

Meeting in Knox Church, Toronto, from June 8 to 23, 1876, the Second General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada considered the Dissent and Complaint at its Eighth Sederunt.¹⁴ Mr. Mitchell "craved leave to fall from his complaint." All parties being agreeable, permission was granted and Assembly proceeded directly to deal with the reference from the Presbytery of Toronto.

Principal Caven and J. M. King presented the case to Assembly, but were judged by Macdonnell himself to have spoken too favorably in his behalf. His qualifications prevented any speedy issuance of the matter, and now began a debate during nine sederunts which produced, among other notable items, over twelve amendments (nine surviving until the vote was taken).

Macdonnell's own speech¹⁵ explicitly rejected doctrines of restorationism and annihilationism. He sought rather a reconciliation of varying Scriptural emphases, by applying the limited use which the word *aiōnios* enjoyed elsewhere to its use in Matthew 25. Yet he recognized that "the whole question did not turn on the meaning of the word." His point was that the Westminster Confession does not answer the question, but finds it "more reverent to use the language of Scripture than to define what was undefinable in human language." He appealed to the order of questions put to an Ordinand, in which Scripture alone was supreme, the question about adherence to the Confession being a weaker one.

The debate was interrupted by two periods of Committee meetings with Macdonnell, and reached its climax at 11.00 p.m. on June 16. Ten different possibilities were open to the Assembly, based on an original motion of Dr. Cochrane of Brantford. Principal McVicar's amendment finally prevailed in the voting by 263 to 101. Ninety-six commissioners recorded their dissent. The motion as amended read:

That this Assembly sustain the reference for judgment, and find that in the statement made before this Assembly, Mr. Macdonnell has declared that he does not hold the doctrine of everlasting punishment in the sense held by the Church and formulated by the Confession of Faith; nevertheless, that he has adopted no doctrinal views contrary to the Confession of Faith; therefore

14. The Acts and Proceedings of the Second General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, Toronto, 1876.

15. McCurdy, pp. 101-114.

Resolved,—First, that the above twofold statement is not satisfactory to this Assembly; Second, that a Committee be appointed to confer with Mr. Macdonnell, in the hope that they may be able to bring in a report as to Mr. Macdonnell's views which may be satisfactory to this Assembly.

Macdonnell immediately requested that the matter be remitted to his own Presbytery "to proceed regularly by libel"; but the Assembly reasoned that it must fulfil its own decision.

The special Committee's report was anti-climactic. It asked for more time for Macdonnell to resolve his doubts since his attitude was "one of *doubt*," as distinguished from belief on the one hand, and denial on the other," according to its Answers to Dissent. The motion read that Macdonnell was to report to the next Assembly through his Presbytery, "whether he accepted the teaching of the Church on the subject." Again the accused requested that his presbytery be granted permission to proceed by libel; again the request was refused. Macdonnell's Auld Kirk tradition of the sovereign right of the Court of Presbytery—along with his insistence that a regular charge be brought—was thus overruled as the Assembly sought to deal less formally with its erring child.

So began a year of self-searching, of countless conversations, of hundreds of letters and dozens of books received from friends and foes. Yet when the Assembly met again, at Halifax in June, 1877, he had reached no new decision, and reported simply that he held no opinion at variance with the teaching of the Church on the eternity of future punishment. This was deemed insufficient, and Dr. Topp, the past Moderator, moved that "a categorical answer" be prepared for a fixed date. Prof. Mackerras, joint-Clerk of the Assembly, held that this motion went beyond the stage reached in the Presbytery and was therefore *ultra vires*. This appeal to Established Church principle was outvoted by 174 to 82, and Macdonnell was given forty-eight hours to answer.

He could not comply. A motion instructing his Presbytery to serve a libel upon him was brought before the Court. Principal Caven led the opposition, and through amendment and counter-amendment the debate proceeded. At last Dr. Cochrane secured the position, on an amendment to refer to yet another special Committee. This was to be the last of Macdonnell's many meetings with committees. To all three of its suggested statements he gave his assent, which was presented to Assembly in the following terms:

I consider myself as under subscription to the Confession of Faith in accordance with my ordination vows, and I therefore adhere to the teaching of the Church as contained therein on the doctrine of the eternity or endless duration of the future punishment of the wicked, notwithstanding doubts or difficulties which perplex my mind.

A standing vote proved unanimous; the days of tension gave place to an hour of excited elation; and the Assembly joined in the Psalm:

Pray that Jerusalem may have
Peace and felicity . . .

POSTLUDE OF PIETY

After the Trial, Macdonnell was free to pursue that "piety" or doing of the truth which he considered of higher value than subscription to theological creeds. His work on behalf of the Augmentation Plan of the national Church, as well as his civic and congregational interests and labours, form an unforgettable chapter in the history of Canadian Church and society alike. This is not our story here, but is one well worth knowing—the part that St. Andrew's played in such pioneer experiments as the Penny Banks, the "Nelson St. Institute," and the formation of the Forty-Eighth Highlanders, whose first Chaplain was D. J. Macdonnell.

In the year 1889, Macdonnell had occasion to comment further on what had been the most critical issue in his life. On March 3 he preached a sermon entitled "Death Abolished," in connection with the decease of his close friend George Paxton Young, LL.D., Professor of Logic, Metaphysics and Ethics in University College, Toronto. Paying tribute to the remarkable qualities of Professor Young, Macdonnell said:

It was his inability to give to the Westminster Confession the sort of assent which was expected by the Church that led to his resignation of his position in Knox College, and, subsequently, to his withdrawal from the ministry of the Presbyterian Church.¹⁶

Then Macdonnell quoted some verses (omitted from the version in *The Book of Praise!*) from Whittier's 'The Eternal Goodness', a favorite of Young's. Among them are the stanzas:

I trace your lines of argument;
Your logic linked and strong
I weigh as one who dreads dissent
And fears a doubt as wrong.

But still my human hands are weak
To hold your iron creeds:
Against the words ye bid me speak
My heart within me pleads.

Who fathoms the Eternal Thought?
Who talks of scheme and plan?
The Lord is God! He needeth not
The poor device of man.

I walk with bare, hushed feet the ground
Ye tread with boldness shod;
I dare not fix with mete and bound
The love and power of God.

Who can doubt that the preacher that day was describing his own experience as well as his friend's?

Two days after this sermon, at the Presbytery meeting, he submitted a Notice of Motion which he failed to carry at the April meeting:

16. The sermon is given in full in McCurdy, pp. 474-489.

Whereas, the Church of Christ should be careful not to exclude from the ministry any man whom the Lord of the Church would receive; and

Whereas, the desired union of the several branches of the Church would necessarily involve the adoption of a common standard for a admission to the ministry; and

Whereas, the present terms of subscription in the Presbyterian Church of Canada have the effect of excluding from the ministry men who are acknowledged to be true ministers of the Gospel in other branches of the Church;

It is humbly overtured to the venerable the General Assembly to take such steps as it may deem best in the premises, in the way of altering the relation of ministers to the Confession of Faith, or of substituting for said Confession some briefer statement of the truths which are considered vital.¹⁷

The resolution lingered through later meetings of Presbytery in other forms, and was never finally rejected; but Macdonnell did not press the point.

The story of the man continues until his last illness during the years 1895-6, when he sought his favorite 'haven of rest', at Fergus, Ontario. Staying not at his former home, St. Andrew's Manse, but at the old Free Church Manse, 'Kirkhall', where his wife had been born, he fought a losing battle with the disease that brought his untimely death. This one chapter we have described was the most notable of his life, for it formed the clearest expression of his life-long conviction and of his deepest principles. His clash with the terms of subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith arose from his emphasis on "piety" as greater than "orthodoxy," and from his understanding that the human mind is not sufficient for the deep things of God. The stature of the man may be judged from the closing words of his last pastoral letter to his congregation, written from his sickbed:

What the coming years will bring, which of us can tell? The future is in the hands of Him who sees the end from the beginning, and whose name is Love. 'The Lord hath been mindful of us; he will bless us!'

'The Lord bless you, and keep you: the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you: the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace!

Yours faithfully,

FERGUS, December, 1895

D. J. MACDONNELL

17. McCurdy, ch. 27, 'Question of the Confession'. I wish to acknowledge a debt of gratitude to Mrs. W. L. Findlay, now of Kirkhall, Fergus, a daughter of D. J. Macdonnell, who graciously assisted in my research. Thanks are due also to my friend, Professor A. L. Farris of Knox College, Toronto, who suggested this line of research as relevant to contemporary Presbyterian work in revising the Ordination vows in regard to subordinate standards.