

## ST. BRIDGET'S CHAPEL

### The Miscreant Has Murder On His Head

At about eight p.m., on the evening of Friday, October 19, 1860, smoke and embers began drifting upward against the dark autumn sky over Doran's Sand Hill. Immediate fears of fire at the construction site where St. James Anglican Church was nearing completion proved unfounded; but the rapidly growing flames were, instead, found to be consuming nearby St. Bridget's Roman Catholic Chapel.

Reverend William Smart (1788-1876), a Presbyterian minister based at Brockville, conducted Perth's first religious service in the summer of 1816, co-opting the government store as his church where "*a flour barrel was the desk on which the Bible and psalm-book were placed*", but even as Smart conducted that inaugural Protestant service, Perth's first Roman Catholic Priest also reached the settlement.

Abbé Pierre-Jacque de La Mothe (1762-1847) was among 202 men who arrived in June and July 1816, immediately following their discharge at Kingston from the de Watteville Regiment of Foot, a Swiss corps that had served with the British Army in both the Peninsular War and the American War of 1812. La Mothe had been their Chaplain, and on November 20, 1816 Monsignor Joseph-Octave Plessis (1763-1825), Bishop of Quebec, appointed him "*missionary to the colonists of the Rideau River*"<sup>2</sup>. Abbé La Mothe would make Perth his home and mission from 1816 until 1820.

Born and educated in Gascony, France, and having served with a largely French-speaking regiment, La Mothe was at some disadvantage in the English and Gaelic speaking settlement at Perth. As a Frenchman, a Catholic and a half-pay officer from a mercenary regiment, he was also handicapped by the prejudices of the British officer corps controlling the military settlement - Anglicans and Presbyterians all<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, in January 1817 La Mothe secured the grant of a one-acre 'town lot' on which to build a chapel at the corner of Beckwith and Harvey Streets, across Harvey Street from a site reserved for the Church of England.<sup>4</sup>



*Bishop of Quebec Joseph-Octave Plessis (1763-1825)*

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<sup>1</sup> *History of the Presbyterian Church in the Dominion of Canada* – William Gregg (1885)

<sup>2</sup> "*... missionnaire des colons de la rivière Rideau*" – Rapport de l'Archiviste de la Province de Québec pour 1928-1929.

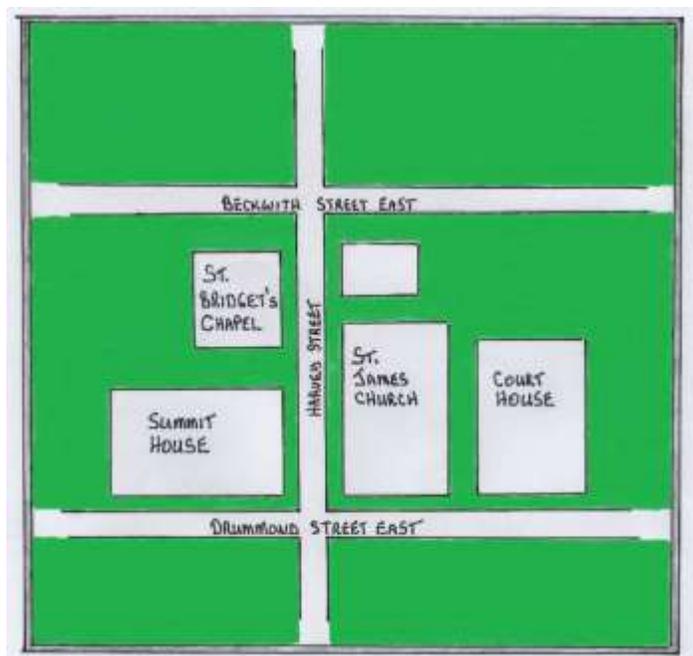
<sup>3</sup> With the exception of Ensign Daniel Daverne (1784-1830), Storekeeper, Secretary and Acting Superintendent, who was a titular Catholic, but one bound to execute the orders of senior Protestant officers.

<sup>4</sup> As a discharged soldier of the British Army, on September 17, 1817 La Mothe also drew location tickets in his own right for 200 acres of land at North Burgess Township C-7/L-8 (on the north shore of Adams Lake).

La Mothe spent the winter of 1816-1817 away from the settlement, probably at Kingston, but the following spring he undertook to organize his flock and build the chapel. Raising the necessary funds to do so, however, proved a major challenge in circumstances where less than 20% of a population of no more than 5,000 was Catholic<sup>5</sup>, and where everyone, Catholic and Protestant alike, was so poor they were barely holding off starvation. To men and women focused on survival, the building of a chapel did not seem a priority. In a letter to Bishop Plessis, Vicar Apostolic Alexander Macdonell (1762-1840) explained that,

*Abbé de La Mothe began a subscription for the purpose but owing to circumstances known to his Grace ... the project miscarried. The Abbé and the Catholics of Perth are not, as far as I could learn, upon a proper understanding.*<sup>6</sup>

The “*circumstances*” Macdonell referred to were the settlers’ poverty, La Mothe’s disputes with the British Army authorities and his lack of rapport with local Catholics. That Perth’s Catholics and La Mothe were not “...*upon a proper understanding*” was literally true. As La Mothe spoke little or no English, and most Perth settlers spoke only English or Gaelic, they could not ‘understand’ each other at all. Moreover, men and women who had spent up to 20 years in the army had acquired less than religious habits; they drank heavily, were inclined to profanity, gambled as a favourite pastime, and were long unaccustomed to attending church, paying to build churches, funding the support of a clergyman, or living by either the ten commandments or the admonishments of a priest. Reporting on his less than successful efforts to draw Perth’s Catholic population together around construction of a chapel, La Mothe lamented that his parishioners seemed to have,



*... abandoned their faith [and wondered] if they had ceased to be Catholics, for he could see them going to Protestant prayer meetings, to the inns, abandoning themselves to vices*<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Macdonell (1762-1840), Vicar Apostolic 1819-1826 and first Bishop of Upper Canada 1826-1840, estimated that in 1819 the combined soldier and civilian settler population at Perth numbered no more than 5,000 and about 20% of those were Catholic.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Vicar Apostolic Alexander Macdonell to the Bishop of Saldae, Bernard-Claude Panet (1753-1833) - November 4, 1819.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted from an *Ottawa Citizen* article – June 11, 1938.

In response, Monsignor Plessis assured La Mothe that he well understood "... *how tiring and fruitless it is to minister to people lacking faith and religion*" and, in December 1817, in an effort to have Perth's Catholics return to the fold, he sent a pastoral letter for La Mothe to read to his parishioners. In it he expressed the hope they would abandon their indifference but, in January 1818, in the continuing absence of a dedicated place of worship, he granted La Mothe "*permission to say Mass in private houses*"<sup>8</sup>.

In addition to conducting services in the homes of his parishioners, like Presbyterian Reverend William Bell (1780-1857) and Anglican Reverend Michael Harris (1795-1856), Abbé La Mothe also made occasional use of the assembly room on the second floor of John Adamson's Craig Street Inn. Plessis' January letter seems to have had some effect, however, and by late 1818 La Mothe was making incremental progress. In a second pastoral letter Bishop Plessis commended the Catholics at Perth for,

*... at last lending your ears to the voice of the zealous pastor charged with the salvation of your souls. He has lately filled us with consolation in telling us that you have reunited and have proposed to begin the building of a chapel to hear the voice of God and fulfill the duties of your religion ...*

Included with the pastoral letter was Monsignor Plessis' contribution of £10 toward construction of the chapel.



**This watercolor of Perth, dated August 1828, shows St. Bridget's Chapel on the 'sandhill', extreme left, with St. James Anglican Church to its right, and the red brick Summit House standing between them.<sup>9</sup>**

<sup>8</sup> "En raison des circonstances particulières où se trouve M. de La Mothe Msr. Plessis lui permet de dire la messe dans la maison d'un particulier" - Rapport de l'Archiviste de la Province de Québec pour 1928-1929.

<sup>9</sup> Painting by Corporal Thomas Burrowes (1796-1866), Archives of Ontario, C1000022.

As fundraising plodded along, building materials were gathered over the winter of 1818-1819, construction got underway in the summer of 1819 and the building was completed in summer of 1820. St. Bridget's Roman Catholic Chapel was the second church to open its doors at Perth, following Reverend William Bell's Presbyterians who had occupied their new building in August 1819. The Methodists were close behind St. Bridget's, putting up a log chapel<sup>10</sup> for their first Minister, Reverend John Griggs Peale (1779-1822), who arrived in 1821. Reverend Michael Harris' original St. James Anglican Church was completed in November 1822.<sup>11</sup>

At about the same time services were first conducted at St. Bridget's in 1820, Monsignor Plessis transferred Abbé de La Mothe to duties in Lower Canada. In 1824 he became Director of the seminary at Saint-Hyacinthe<sup>12</sup> and in 1826 was reassigned as Cure at Sainte-Scholastique, Québec, where he died on October 22, 1847.<sup>13</sup>



**Father John Hugh McDonagh (1812-1866)**

Father Patrick Sweeney, an Irishman, took over the mission at Perth and ministered to local Catholics at St. Bridget's through 1822<sup>14</sup>. Scots-born Father John MacDonald (1782-1879) replaced Sweeney and served until 1838. During Father MacDonald's tenure, St. Bridget's Chapel was fully completed by acquisition of a bell for its tower; cast at Glasgow it weighed in at 2,000 pounds.

In 1838 Father John Hugh McDonagh (1812-1866), another Irishman, was appointed pastor at St. Bridget's and went on to serve Perth and district until his death in 1866. It was during McDonagh's time that St. Bridget's was replaced by the current Roman Catholic Church, St. John the Baptist. The corner stone of the new church was laid on September 19, 1843, the first service held on Christmas eve 1848, and the church formally consecrated on August 15, 1849.

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<sup>10</sup> Located on the west side of Gore Street between Craig and Brock Streets, where Asbury Methodist Church stands today.

<sup>11</sup> Located on the same site as the present St. James Church at the corner of Drummond and Harvey Streets.

<sup>12</sup> During Abbé La Mothe's time at Perth the settlement was also probably visited by itinerant Missionary Priests Father Pierre-Joseph Périnault (1794-1821), Father Bennett and Father Labroufe.

<sup>13</sup> Abbé de La Mothe's presence at Perth is further credited with prompting Catholic settlers in the area of present-day Stanleyville to construct a log chapel near Black Lake, also in 1820, laying the foundation of a congregation that would build another St. Bridget's Church at Stanleyville in 1864.

<sup>14</sup> Father Sweeney also served Catholic congregations as far away as Richmond and Almonte.

*Bishop Phalen<sup>15</sup> of Kingston, the Bishop of Bytown<sup>16</sup>, and about 14 or 15 other Clergymen of that sect, took part in the ceremony. After the ceremony consecrating the edifice was ended, a procession was formed from the old Church to the new one, in which an immense concourse of people joined .... There could not have been less than 2,000 people in the body of the church.<sup>17</sup>*

Illustrative of religious tensions of the day, and foreshadowing events to come, the procession from St. Bridget's Chapel to St. John the Baptist Church drew the ire of the local Orange Lodge, whose own processions were, at the time, outlawed<sup>18</sup>. *Perth Courier* publisher and editor Charles Rice (1822-1901) pushed back in the name of toleration,

*It was broadly hinted to us on the day of the ceremony that, because we oppose Orange processions, to be consistent we should also disapprove the Roman Catholic procession. Now we conceive that we can be consistent and not do so. The one is strictly a religious rite, and not intended to celebrate any event calculated to hurt the feelings of anyone. The other is a political, a party, procession and not only calculated but intended to hurt the feelings of Roman Catholics. Such processions as this come under the provision of a law of the land which strictly forbids them. We oppose the one because our religion teaches us that to be 'loyal' we must be obedient to the laws under which we live and are governed. We do not oppose the other, because our Christianity as well as our political principals teach us to exercise a spirit of religious toleration towards those who differ from us in religious sentiment and form of worship.<sup>19</sup>*

The bell from St. Bridget's Chapel also moved to the new church and hangs in the St. John's steeple today.

For the next decade St. Bridget's Chapel stood abandoned and empty, until the evening of Friday, August 19, 1860, when, as the *Perth Courier* reported,

*An alarm of fire was given when it was found that the old Catholic Church was in flames. The fire engines were speedily on the ground, but the chapel being of wood, and water difficult to be got, the flames had made such headway that it was impossible to save the building, which was burned down; although good service was done in preventing the flames spreading to the adjoining houses. The new English Church<sup>20</sup> was at one time in considerable danger.<sup>21</sup>*

Lamentable as the loss of St. Bridget's Chapel was, the greater tragedy that night was the death of volunteer fireman George Miller (1811-1860) who lost his life in the struggle to keep the flames from spreading.

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<sup>15</sup> Patrick Phalen (1795-1857), Coadjutor to the Bishop of Kingston 1843-1857.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph-Bruno Guigues (1805-1874), Bishop of Bytown 1847-1874.

<sup>17</sup> *Perth Courier*, August 17, 1849.

<sup>18</sup> The Upper Canada Legislative Assembly had made several unsuccessful attempts through the 1820s and 1830s to outlaw the Orange Order altogether but did manage to outlaw Orange parades between 1843 and 1851.

<sup>19</sup> *Perth Courier*, August 17, 1849.

<sup>20</sup> St. James Anglican Church.

<sup>21</sup> *Perth Courier*, October 26, 1860.

*He was exerting himself to save property, when a heavy piece of burning timber fell out from the building and struck him on the head, crushing him to the ground; and he died the following afternoon in consequence of the injuries he received.*

*He was one of our oldest citizens and was universally respected and esteemed. In losing him, Perth has lost a valuable member of society, and his untimely and melancholy end cast a gloom upon our citizens generally.*

*The funeral took place on Tuesday and was one of the largest we have ever witnessed in Perth. The Firemen (deceased being a member of No.2 Company) appeared in mourning badges, and places of business generally were closed, out of respect for the deceased, while the procession was passing.<sup>22</sup>*

Miller was a partner in Murray, Miller & Co., a Perth foundry, and he left a widow, Charlotte Donaldson (1813-1903), and 11 children.

More disturbing still, the blaze at St. Bridget's Chapel proved to be no accident, but the result of arson.

*The building had been locked up and unoccupied for some time, and there can be no doubt but the fire was the work of an incendiary, as a pile of pine boards or rails was found inside by those who first entered, in which the fire had been kindled; and an old door was found leaning up against the wall of the building, under one of the windows, which was raised, and through which it was evident the incendiary had made ingress and egress.*

*An investigation was held by C. G. Sache Esq.<sup>23</sup>, Coroner, and a jury of citizens, but up to the time we write no information had been elicited calculated to lead to the discovery of the guilty party.*

*Setting fire to old and unoccupied buildings has been practiced in this town for several years back<sup>24</sup>, until at length the destruction of property has been followed by the destruction of human life. The miscreant who fired the Catholic Chapel has murder on his head.<sup>25</sup>*

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Charles H. Sache (1793-1862), former Deputy Clerk of the Crown and Pleas, County Court Clerk and the Clerk of the 1st Division Court at Perth, Bathurst District (and later of the United Counties of Lanark and Renfrew).

<sup>24</sup> Seven years later First Presbyterian Church, which had opened just a year before St. Bridget's Chapel, suffered the same fate in the early morning hours of August 25, 1867. The *Perth Courier* reported that fire too "... was the work of an incendiary, and for the miscreant who could thus wantonly destroy an edifice around which centered so many associations of Auld Lang Syne, we know of no punishment too severe".

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.



**St. John the Baptist Roman Catholic Church, constructed 1843-1849**

The culprit or culprits were never arrested, and the motive remains unproven but, in 1963, an article by local historian W. Clyde Bell (1914-2005) pointed to the most likely suspects.

*Some of the old residents of the town told me that it was the result of a 12<sup>th</sup> of July dispute, others say that it was caused by a political row".<sup>26</sup>*

Bell further related that, on the same night St. Bridget's burned, the new St John the Baptist Church had also been threatened with destruction.

*An attempt was also made to burn it during the fire at the old church. The priest [Father John McDonagh] and some others thought of the new church and running towards it saw two men running into the fields but were unable to capture them. Rags and tallow had been forced into an opening of the church but those responsible had been frightened away before a fire could be started.<sup>27</sup>*

In placing responsibility on the Orange Lodge and political extremists, Clyde Bell's informants were, with little doubt, correct on both counts. An essentially Irish institution dedicated to sustaining the Protestant ascendancy over Ireland's Catholic majority, the Orange Order had been outlawed in England and Ireland from 1823 to 1845 but over the same years had taken firm root in Upper Canada (Ontario). In the autumn of 1860, when St. Bridget's burned, and when St. John the Baptist narrowly escaped the same fate, the Order was in a high state of agitation, prompted by the intersection of two events.

Lodge members had been insulted in early September when, the Prince of Wales, Albert Edward (1841-1910), Duke of Cornwall, Rothesay and Saxony (later King Edward VII), had declined to accept their addresses of welcome and loyalty during his royal tour of Canada. Orangemen deeply resented the role the Catholic Church had played in that decision. As the *Perth Courier* later explained,

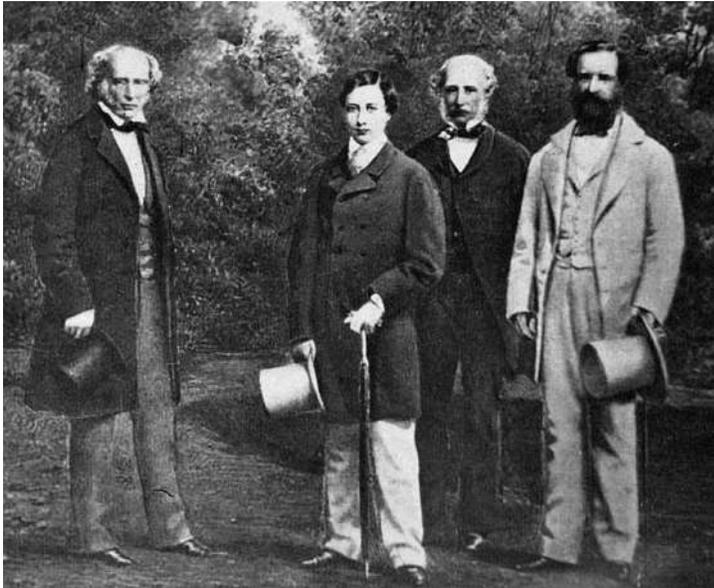
*... when it became known that the Orange Society intended turning out [at Kingston] on the arrival of the Prince, a number of Roman Catholics met together and passed a series of resolutions containing remonstrances against the proposed course of the Orangemen, which they forwarded to the Duke of Newcastle.*

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<sup>26</sup> *Perth Courier*, August 8, 1963.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

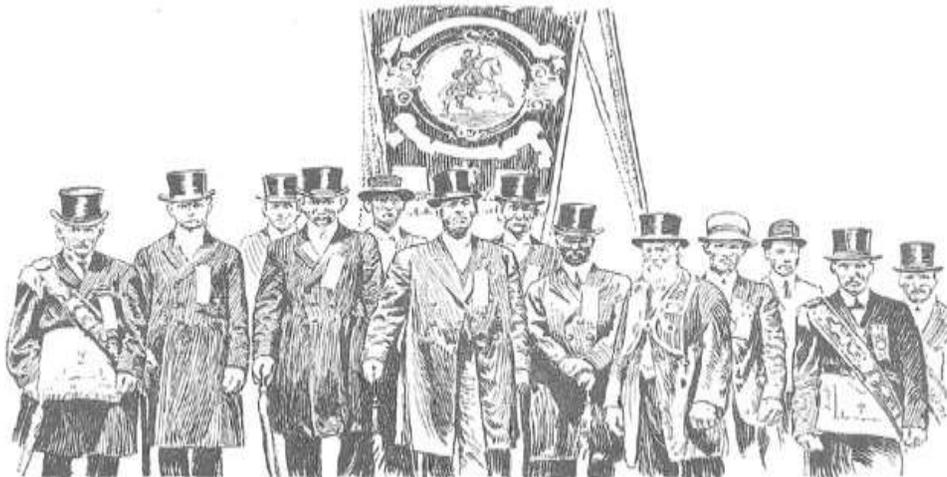
Letters were received in reply from the Governor General and from the Duke. The latter stated that the prince would not land [from the Steamer Kingston] in any place where there were party [i.e. sectarian] demonstrations.<sup>28</sup>



L to R – Governor General Sir Edmund Walker Head; Albert Edward, Prince of Wales; Major General Robert Bruce; Henry Pelham-Clinton, Duke of Newcastle. Photo taken at Montreal, August 1860.

When the royal party steamed into Kingston harbor on September 4th, they found a large body of Orangemen, including a good number from Perth, Smiths Falls and area, dressed in full regalia, carrying their banners and accompanied by their marching bands. They also found that ceremonial arches had been erected over streets along the Prince's planned route to a municipal reception. The arches were decorated with orange bunting and carried slogans such as *Faith Of Our Forefathers* and *1688 – No Surrender – 1690*, alluding to the 1688 overthrow of Catholic King James VII&II by Protestant King William III and James' defeat at the Battle of the Boyne on July 12, 1690<sup>29</sup>, events central to the mythology of the Lodge.

Eighteen-year-old Prince Edward was accompanied by British Colonial Secretary, Henry Pelham Fiennes Pelham-Clinton (1834-1879), Duke of Newcastle, serving as his principal aid, and by Governor General Sir Edmund Walker Head (1805-1868). On their advice he declined to disembark and shortly continued on his way westward. On reaching Bellville the following day he found most of the Kingston Orangemen had arrived ahead of him. Once more he declined to acknowledge them and refused to come ashore.



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<sup>28</sup> *Perth Courier*, September 7, 1860.

<sup>29</sup> New calendar.

<sup>30</sup> Illustration by C. J. Jeffreys

While the Royal Family and most of the British ruling class disapproved of the Orange Order and its antics, and needed little prompting from Catholic leaders to snub Orangemen, the decision not to land at Kingston and Bellville was primarily an attempt to avoid involving the royal party in domestic Canadian politics, especially in the midst of campaigning then underway for a parliamentary election set for October 10th<sup>31</sup>. Because, however, the Prince of Wales had accepted addresses from various orders of the Catholic Church a month earlier at Montreal, turning his back on the Orange Order at Kingston and Belleville put the Orangemen in a particularly belligerent state of mind that fed into an already contentious election campaign.



*Robert Bell (1808-1894)*



*James Shaw (1798-1878)*

In the constituency of Bathurst District, that included Perth, the election contest was between Reform Party candidate Robert Bell (1808-1894) of Carleton Place and Tory candidate James Shaw (1798-1878) of Smiths Falls. Neither men showed much restraint or subtlety in playing off Protestant against Catholic and vice versa, but the campaign literature of Orangeman James Shaw, a native of County Wexford, Ireland, illustrates how the incident at Kingston was exploited.

*The sage nobleman [the Duke of Kent] with the greatest condescension, permitted the people composing the Roman Catholic majority of Lower Canada to parade [at Montreal] before the presence of his illustrious charge [Prince Edward] every heathenish device appertaining to the ceremonial system; when every monkery was allowed to empty itself of drones; every priestly organization to muster its forces appavelled in all the ecclesiastical state and pomp so repulsive to the Church of the Reformation ... From the secret Society of the Jesuits, down to the Union of St. Michael; from the exclusively Romish St. Patrick Society, down to the various Temperance Associations superintended by the Friars; all were allowed to daunt their robes, their regalia, banners of Saints and images in the face of our uncomplaining Protestant fellow citizens.*

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<sup>31</sup> Election of the 7th Parliament of the Province of Canada 1861-1863.

*... The marked and hideous fact stares us in the face that the Duke of Newcastle has not been belied by the English press when they accuse him of Roman Catholic tendencies. Into worse hands the honor of the Heir Apparent could scarcely have been committed. Time and again we have heard of Roman Catholic domination – we never credited its full extent until now. Well may the Romanish chuckle with glee while Protestantism and Loyalty lie bleeding at the hands of priest craft<sup>32</sup>*

The pundits expected Robert Bell to carry the day<sup>33</sup> but, on October 10th, tensions reached fever pitch when James Shaw was elected by a margin of only 140 votes (2,538 vs. 2,389). When news of Shaw's victory reached Perth the following day, it set off a spasm of wild celebration on the part of Orangemen.

*... the rowdies led by H. D. Shaw<sup>34</sup> and D. Kerr Jr.<sup>35</sup> proceeded to the residence of the widow<sup>36</sup> of the late Rev. Mr. Bell<sup>37</sup> (the defeated candidate's mother), an old lady of upwards of 80 years of age, entered her garden, trampled down her flower pots, knocked at the doors and windows [and] saluted her with any amount of hideous groans.<sup>38</sup>*

A week later, amid festering resentment over the Prince's insult at Kingston, on the one hand, and celebrations of the Orange election victory in Bathurst District, on the other, St. Bridget's and St. John the Baptist Roman Catholic Churches at Perth were attacked by 'unidentified' arsonists.

Numerous histories of Perth purport that St. Bridget's Chapel was, at some unspecified date in the 1850s, burned as part of a local fire company training exercise or demonstration. As the local newspaper's contemporary report, published just seven days after the fire, clearly demonstrates, the loss of the chapel and the death of volunteer fireman George Miller were no more part of a drill than they were an accident.

- Ron W. Shaw (2020)

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<sup>32</sup> James Shaw campaign literature quoted in the *Perth Courier* September 28, 1860.

<sup>33</sup> James Shaw had been defeated in 1857. In 1867 Shaw was appointed to the Senate of the new Dominion of Canada where he sat until his death in 1878.

<sup>34</sup> Henry Dowsley (1833-1886), fourth son of winning candidate James Shaw (1798-1878).

<sup>35</sup> Dawson Kerr Jr. (1834-1915).

<sup>36</sup> Mary Black-Bell (1773-1861).

<sup>37</sup> Reverend William Bell (1780-1857), had been a long-standing vocal opponent of the Orange Order.

<sup>38</sup> *Perth Courier* October 19, 1860