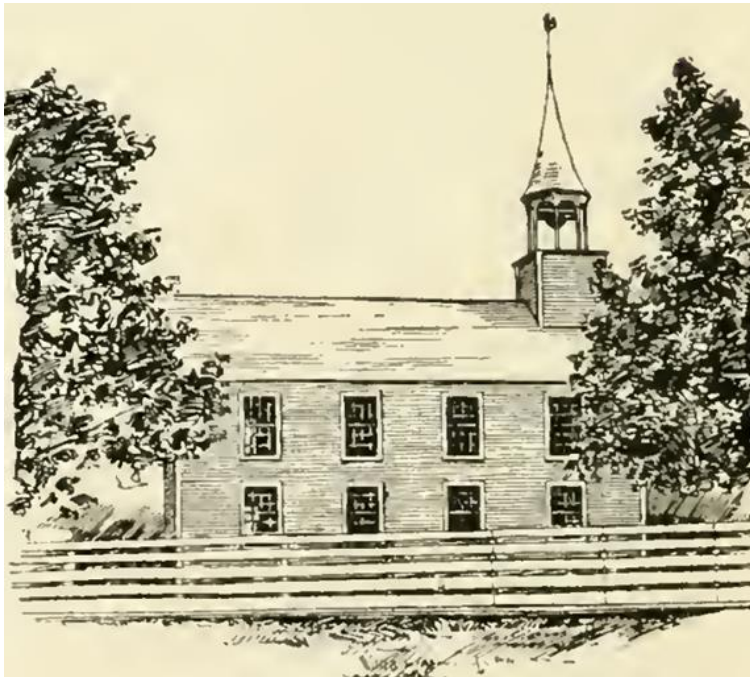


## THE GAELIC SERMON

More than two centuries after the event, it seems remarkable that a religious discourse in any language could bring a congregation of several hundred tough hardscrabble Scottish pioneers to tears, but a sermon preached at Perth in the early 1820s had just that effect. The deep attachment of those men and women to their God, Kirk and country, when expressed in their native Gaelic, proved emotionally overwhelming.

Presented here are three, more-or-less contemporary, accounts of the famous 'Gaelic Sermon' – a passing mention in the diary of Reverend William Bell (1780-1857) dated 1822; a purported eyewitness reminiscence published by the *Perth Courier* in 1885; and a passage from the 1905 biography of Reverend George Buchanan (1761-1835), *Pioneer Pastor*, written by his daughter Jessie Buchanan-Campbell (1815-1900).



*First Presbyterian Church, Perth, 1819-1867*  
(Image from 'Pioneer Pastor')

By way of background and context the following may be useful.

The man who preached the famous sermon, Reverend George Buchanan, had arrived in Beckwith Township the summer of 1822 and established a Presbyterian congregation at Franktown. His arrival in Upper Canada was the result of the efforts and encouragement of Reverend William Bell. In 1817, Bell had established himself as the Perth Military Settlement's first Presbyterian minister, but soon found he was spread too thin and helped recruit Buchanan to serve his co-religionists in the eastern reaches of the settlement.

A lowland Scot, Bell did not speak Gaelic and Buchanan spoke that day at Bell's invitation and at Bell's 'First Presbyterian Church', a wood frame structure at the corner of Drummond and Halton Streets. Bell's invitation to Buchanan was motivated in part to satisfy the longing of his parishioners at Perth to hear the word of God in their own language, but it was also calculated to help forestall a plot to replace Bell with a Gaelic speaking pastor.

In July 1822 two members of his congregation, Captain Alexander McMillan (1783-1850)<sup>1</sup> and Lieutenant Roderick Matheson (1793-1873)<sup>2</sup>, leading lights among the half-pay officer class that controlled much of the settlement's affairs, asked that Bell baptize illegitimate offspring they had sired on their housemaids. Bell refused, telling them they would have to "*first submit to the discipline of the Church*"<sup>3</sup>. As submitting to Church discipline would have involved a humiliating public confession and rebuke by Bell, and perhaps several Sabbath days sitting on the 'stool of repentance'<sup>4</sup> before the congregation, McMillan and Matheson were not pleased.

In retaliation they launched an effort to replace Bell, claiming that the Perth settlement required a Gaelic speaking minister from the Established Church of Scotland. (Both Bell and Buchanan adhered to the 'Dissenting' or 'Secessionist' branch of the Presbyterian Church). A petition to that effect was circulated through the settlement and kept for many months on the counter of Matheson's store. Bell's gambit in having Buchanan as a Gaelic speaking guest preacher probably had little effect on the outcome of these machinations, however. Eventually McMillan and Matheson succeeded but when Established Church minister Reverend Thomas Clark Wilson (1806-1877) finally arrived in 1830, it was found that Wilson could not speak Gaelic either.<sup>5</sup>

The other participant in the service at which the 'Gaelic Sermon' was delivered was Reverend Robert Boyd (1791-1872), a Presbyterian Minister from Northern Ireland who served in the Kingston, Brockville and Prescott area 1820-1846.

Although these separate accounts unquestionably describe to the same event, there are some inconsistencies, most notably, the date on which the sermon was delivered.

Reverend Bell's diary records that Buchanan preached in Gaelic for the first time at Perth in 1822 "*at our communion on 8th Sepr.*"<sup>6</sup>. The Perth *Courier* account speaks of "*a Sabbath morning in June, 1823*" without giving an exact day. The Buchanan biography dates the 'Gaelic Sermon' to "*the second Sabbath of June, 1824*", i.e. June 13, 1824. Reverend Buchanan had arrived at Franktown from Scotland on August 20, 1822, and would preach in Gaelic at First Presbyterian Church in Perth many times between 1822 and his death in 1830. As such, some confusion about the *first* 'Gaelic Sermon' may be understandable. Any of the given dates is possible, but a 'best guess' for the correct date would be that of Reverend Bell's diary, Sunday, September 8, 1822.

Bell's diary entry of the time says that Buchanan's 'Gaelic Sermon' was "*the first ... ever heard in the settlement*" and Buchanan's biography states that the congregation was "*eager to hear, for the first time at Perth, if not in Canada, the Word in their beloved vernacular*". It was an event long remembered, but was it truly a "*first*"? It could have been, depending upon how soon after Buchanan's arrival at Franktown he was invited to Perth, and if one accepts that the Scots settlements in Nova Scotia were then not considered to be part of 'Canada'.

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<sup>1</sup> Formerly Captain Glengarry Light Infantry, Government Land Agent, later appointed County Registrar.

<sup>2</sup> Formerly Lieutenant Glengarry Light Infantry, Perth merchant, Upper Canada Legislative Council Member, Canadian Senator.

<sup>3</sup> *William Bell Diary – 1823*, Queens University.

<sup>4</sup> The stool of repentance (called 'furm an aithreachais, stòl an aithreachais' in Gaelic), was an elevated seat in the church used for the public penance of persons who had offended against the morality, most often through fornication and adultery.

<sup>5</sup> Rev. Wilson founded St. Andrews Presbyterian Church and preached there until returning to Scotland in 1844.

<sup>6</sup> Between 1822 and 1835 Buchanan preached in Gaelic several time each year at Perth.

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**William Bell Diary**  
**1822**

At our communion on 8th Sepr., the day was fine, and the congregation larger than the church could contain. Many stood outside, at the open door and windows. Mr. Boyd preached the action sermon, and I addressed the communicants, of whom more than 100 were present. In the afternoon Mr. Buchanan preached a Gaelic sermon, the first I believe ever heard in the settlement.<sup>7</sup>

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**Perth Courier, January 2, 1885**

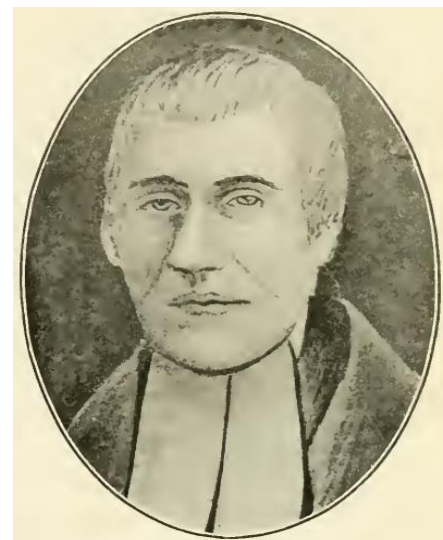
**The Gaelic Sermon**  
**A Reminiscence of 1823**

“The psalms we in our childhood sang,  
Are sweetened in our mother tongue,  
The sermons that our pastors preach,  
Best spoken in our native speech.”

Early on a bright Sabbath morning in June, 1823, numerous groups of men, women and children, on foot, clad in clean and homely garb, with here and there a military man on horseback, might have been seen on the main road leading to Perth, wending their way to the frame church situated in the eastern part of the town. The pastor of the church was then, and long after, the late Rev. William Bell<sup>8</sup>.

The serious respect and reverent demeanor of the intending worshippers, the subdued and solemn expression of their countenances, the unbroken stillness of the surroundings, relieved only by the joyous warbling's of the feathered songsters, which raised their silvery notes of praise at the opening of another holy day, combined to render the scene delightful to the contemplative minds, and in a striking manner suggested those pleasing characteristics which in so eminent a degree mark the observance and associations of a Scottish Sabbath.

Nor did the occasion possess merely ordinary interest; for not only was the Communion to be dispensed – an ordinance closely connected with the most sacred recollections of every Christian, and observed with peculiar solemnity in the ‘Land of the Covenanters’ – but the Highland



*Reverend William Bell (1780-1857)*  
(Image from ‘Pioneer Peacher’)

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<sup>7</sup> A misleading claim as by September 1822 Buchanan had been preaching at Franktown for several months, presumably in Gaelic.

<sup>8</sup> Bell served the community until 1854.

people were eager in their anticipation of once again, and for the first time in Canada, hearing a sermon in their mother tongue – a language which the Gael loves second only to his God, his county and his well worn bible.

And such was the interest manifested, that long before the hour of service, the building became densely crowded, while many stood around the door unable to gain admittance. At the appointed time the minister ascended the pulpit, and after praise and prayer, and the customary exhortation to intending communicants, the tables were ‘fenced’ or served, and the symbols of the Redeemer’s broken body and shed blood reverentially passed round and partaken of.



The service being fittingly brought to a close, Mr. Bell, before pronouncing the benediction, announced that the Rev. George Buchanan of Beckwith, would in the afternoon preach in Gaelic. So anxious were the people to hear once more ‘the story of the cross’ in their own beloved vernacular, that in less than half an hour after the dispersion of the forenoon congregation the church was again crowded with an eager audience – the old people especially joyous in their anticipations.

Anon the venerable servant of Christ, then hoary with the frosts of three score winters<sup>9</sup>, his face lit up with a benevolent smile, took his place in the pulpit and gave out the hundredth psalm, which the people sang with the forcible pathos which the Gaelic engenders in the hearts of Highlanders. Solemn and inspiring were the strains of the time-honored psalm, the first verse of which we quote:

Tagadh gach tìr ard-ìslach glavoidh  
Do Dhia Jehobhh mor.  
Thigibh, is deanaibh seirbhis ait,  
Na lathair-san le ceol.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Buchanan was already 61 years of age when he arrived in Beckwith Township and thus 62 or 63 years old when he preached the ‘Gaelic Sermon’.

<sup>10</sup> *You faithful servants of the Lord,  
Sing out his praise with one accord,  
while serving him with all your might  
and keeping vigil through the night.*

After the customary preliminary exorcises, Mr. Buchanan announced his text, and dilated upon the old but ever new story of 'Jesus and his love', preaching an eloquent and stirring sermon, which was listened to with wrapt attention.

'The Gaelic Sermon' was long spoken of as a blessed memento of by-gone days, and a sacred occasion to all who had the privilege of listening to the spiritual truths it contained. Even a little of that devotional fire which glowed in the hearts of our fathers, would be gladly welcomed at the present time.

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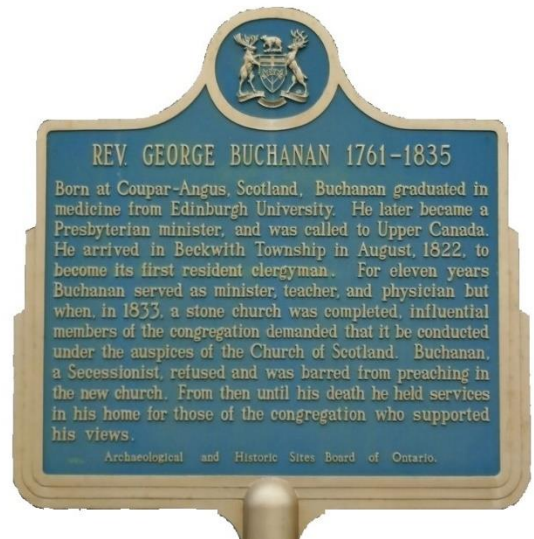
## PIONEER PASTOR Biography of Reverend George Buchanan (1761-1835)

By Jessie Buchanan-Campbell  
Published 1905

Rev. William Bell, the first settled minister in Lanark County, came to Perth in 1817. A dozen log-houses in the woods, occupied mainly by officers of the war of 1812, comprised the embryo town. The earliest settlers arrived in 1816, three years prior to the first settlement in Beckwith. Mr. Bell, then and for 40 years pastor of the Presbyterian church, wrote to father to assist him at the communion, on the second Sabbath of June, 1824<sup>11</sup>.

Father and mother walked to Perth, crossing a swamp a mile long on logs set end-wise and not always within easy reach. Had there been any horses in the township they could not have traveled on such roads in summer. At the service on Saturday Mr. Bell announced that Mr. Buchanan would dispense the sacrament in Gaelic. The communion, an ordinance observed with peculiar solemnity by Scotch Presbyterians, attracted a large congregation on Sunday.

Groups of people on foot, with here and there a man or woman on horseback, thronged the roads leading to Perth. The church could not hold them, and scores stood around the door and the open windows. Father preached in the morning from the words: "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved". He then served the first table in Gaelic and Mr. Bell served the others. At that period communicants left their pews and sat at long tables -- rough boards covered with white cotton -- in the aisles to receive the sacrament. The ministers would address each set, which was called "fencing the tables", and hand the bread and wine to the elders to distribute to the members. After another short address, those at the tables would return to their seats to make room for the next lot, continuing in this way until all had communed who wished.



*Rev. George Buchanan Historic Plaque  
Franktown, Beckwith Township*

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<sup>11</sup> June 13<sup>th</sup>

Everything was "done decently and in order", with no unseemly haste, communion services generally lasting several hours. Usually, five or six tables were served at Perth and four or five in Beckwith, in a manner that impressed the most careless spectator with the devoutness of those who obeyed the command of the Master: "This do in remembrance of Me".

Gaelic service in the afternoon drew a host of people eager to hear, for the first time at Perth, if not in Canada, the Word in their beloved vernacular. Mr. Bell not knowing Gaelic, father conducted the entire service, which opened by singing the ever-dear One Hundredth Psalm -- "Togadh gach tir ard-islach ghlavidh, do Dia Jehobah mor."

He preached with great effectiveness from the text: "All power is given unto Me in heaven and on earth". The discourse extolled the Saviour of the world, who shed His blood to redeem our lost race. Tears flowed down the furrowed cheeks of hoary listeners, to whom the service and the language brought back vividly the scenes of their youth in Scotland. Heads white with the snow no July sun could melt bent low to weep silently.

Every heart was stirred and every eye moist. The story of redeeming love and triumph had lost none of its wondrous power and beauty. When he had pronounced the benediction, hundreds pressed forward to clasp father's hand and beg him to come again. Although three-quarters of a century have passed away since that glorious day, and although he who spoke and all the adults who heard have crumbled into dust, its influence still remains, and a few fond hearts cherish lovingly their early recollections of 'The Gaelic Sermon'.

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- *Ron W. Shaw (2024)*