The Auld Alliance in Canada

“Were I not French, I would choose to be a Scot.” *Charles Wilfrid Laurier*

The Auld Alliance - La Vieille Alliance - between Scotland and France had existed since medieval times in the Old World. As early as the 16th century it was transported across the Atlantic to another home in the New World - to the Canada that was to be. The Oxford Dictionary gives the meaning of the word *"Alliance" as "a union or association formed for mutual benefit, especially of countries by treaty or families by marriage." - "Formed for mutual benefit."*

As France and Scotland were to find out over several centuries, the fruits of the Alliance were indeed beneficial. Today we think of mutual benefit in terms of commercial, trade and economic advantage. But the bonds that were forged between France and Scotland went much deeper than material gains.

They found, and still find, echoes in family names such as Fraser and Frazier, Ramsay and De Ramezay, De Brewis and Bruce, Du Glas and Douglas; in the use of the Celtic language, the Gaelic, by minority groups in both countries; in the pipes of the Highlands and the pipes of Brittany; in the lilting tunes of the fiddle and le violin.

No, the Auld Alliance between France and Scotland did not occur just because of extensive trade and commercial exchanges. Rather, it originated in a mutual respect each country had for the other, and in a coincident and profound dislike and fear of the ambitious hegemony of England.

In Scotland that dislike for England was pervasive and passionate. But it was not always thus. Shakespeare's MacBeth tells us that Malcolm, son of the murdered Duncan, fled to England for safety and remained there for years before returning to claim the throne of Scotland.

Although the precise origins of the Auld Alliance are shrouded in the mists of time, the events that led to a formal military and diplomatic agreement between France and Scotland are well documented.

The invasions of Scotland by Edward I of England, known as 'The Hammer of the Scots', precipitated the deep and prolonged estrangement between the two countries.

Towards the end of the 13th Century, Edward, having already subdued Wales, attempted to do likewise in Scotland. He declared his suzerainty over the land and placed a puppet on the Scottish throne; and to make certain that he was in control, he carried off to Westminster Scotland's most sacred relic; the Stone of Scone on which Scottish Kings had been crowned since time immemorial.

But in 1295, the Scottish nobles rebelled, raised an army to oppose Edward, and entered into a defensive alliance with the King of France who, for more than a year, had been at war with England.

And so was born the Auld Alliance ; La Vieille Alliance ; which was to be the basis of the foreign policy of France and Scotland for more than three hundred years.

With both countries arrayed against him, Edward proved he could be successful in waging war on two fronts. After sustaining some early losses in Scotland, Edward roared back, decimating the forces of the great William Wallace at Falkirk. Then, in order to carry out his severe oppression of Scotland without distraction, he made peace with France.

His next step was to appoint certain Scottish nobles to the Parliament of England, seeking to impose a union of sorts on the two countries.

His plans might well have succeeded, had it not been for the emergence of a rebel group led by the man who was to change the course of Scottish history; Robert the Bruce. Years of bitter setbacks and disappointment almost succeeded in destroying any hope Bruce had of regaining Scotland's independence, but a spider gave him the courage to struggle on.

In 1314, a year seared deep into Scottish memory, Robert the Bruce confronted and utterly defeated Edward II at Bannockburn. That victory is commemorated even today in the words of the much-loved song (sometimes referred to as the National Anthem of Scotland):

Oh Flower of Scotland, when will we see your like again,
Who fought and died for your wee bit hill and glen,
And stood against him, Proud Edward's army,
And sent him homeward, To think again.

With Bannockburn, Scottish nationalism was born.

Meanwhile, England's fragile peace with France had been shattered and the Auld Alliance re-emerged stronger than ever - its basic strategy recurring time and time again.

The Scots would invoke the help of the French when in difficulty with the English. And in return, the Scots would stir up trouble along England's northern border whenever that country went to war with France.

So it was that Scottish forces became heavily involved in the Hundred Years War between France and England - at first by continuous harassment along the border with England, later by sending large numbers of troops to the continent to fight at the side of the French army.

Scottish soldiers campaigned with and fought for Joan of Arc, remaining with her to the bitter end. Her struggle to gain freedom and independence for France found ready echo in Scottish hearts.

Following the conclusion of the Hundred Year's War, Scotland emerged as a power in her own right under the wise leadership of James IV, the most gifted of all the ill-fated Royal Stuarts. He built up sea-power and trade, strengthened ties with France, and encouraged an exchange of students and academics between the great universities of the two countries. Scottish universities - St. Andrew's and Aberdeen - were founded on the French model, and a College Ecossais was established near the Sorbonne in Paris.

It was not long, however, before hostilities between England and France resumed. The French, in some difficulty, appealed to the Scots for assistance and James IV, loyal to the Auld Alliance, led his troops across the border into England.

Their subsequent defeat has been immortalized in the haunting strains of the great bagpipe lament, *'The Flowers of the Forest.'* At Flodden Field in 1513, the King, his nobles, and thousands of the flower of Scottish youth, were slain.

In recognition of the Scots' sacrifice at Flodden, King Louis XII of France enacted the *Concession de Lettres de Naturalite pour les Ecossais Residant en France*. This document automatically gave all Scots who settled in France the same rights as native-born Frenchmen, i.e., the right to make wills or otherwise dispose of their property as they wished. The relations between the two countries became even more deeply cemented and exchanges of military, students, clerics and nobility, multiplied.

Thus it was that the new King, James V of Scotland, married Marie du Guise, daughter of one of France's most prominent and powerful families. James' premature death in 1542 brought his infant daughter, Mary Queen of Scots, to the throne. Because of the feuding factions in Scotland, Mary was sent to France for safety, and there she was raised in the Catholic religion.

Her marriage to the Dauphin, later King, of France briefly united the French and Scottish crowns. In recognition of that union, all French citizens settled in Scotland received the same rights of naturalization that the Scots had received in France four decades earlier.

Following the death of her husband-king, Mary returned to Scotland, to a country which, in the south at least, was quickly adopting the Protestant religion of the Reformation. The ensuing struggles between Catholics and Protestants, and between France and England for the soul of Scotland, were not only to drive Mary from her throne and ultimately to her death at the hands of Elizabeth of England, but, as well, they were to convulse the reigns of all successive Stuarts.

The Auld Alliance unofficially ended in 1567 when Mary's son ascended the throne as James VI of Scotland, and later James I of England as well. It officially came to a close with the formal union of the two countries in 1707.

But the strong ties built up over three centuries between Scotland and France could not easily be dismissed or dismantled. The Auld Alliance flickered brightly again in the 18th Century when Bonnie Prince Charlie, seeking to regain the throne for the Stuarts, left the Sanctuary of the French court and landed in the Western Highlands. Raising the Royal Standard at Glenfinnan in 1745 on the most romantic period of Scottish history, the Bonnie Prince and his Highland followers marched southward, from victory to victory, almost to the gates of London. And then the tide turned and he and his faithful followers were driven back and back, to be cruelly defeated at Culloden, the last battle ever fought on British soil.

In the six long months which followed, Charles was secretly sheltered and stoutly guarded by devoted Clansmen who, under no circumstances, would betray his whereabouts. Almost trapped by the English in the Outer Hebrides, he was, as you all know, rescued by Flora Macdonald and ferried over the sea to Skye. A short time later he was smuggled aboard a French privateer to be taken to safety in France.

But the Highland Scots who were left behind were not so fortunate. The English victors, having seen their highly-valued prize slip through their fingers, wreaked their vengeance on the faithful clans, butchering the people, burning their villages, proscribing their language (the Gaelic) and their dress (the kilt and the tartan).

Many were conscripted into new regiments -- the Black Watch, for example -- which were set up to keep order in the Highlands. Many more fled to France and became a substantial component in the French army, including that of Napoleon. Indeed, before that individual was forced to abdicate and was banished to Elba, he wanted to make one last stand.

Fortified at Fontainbleau by 25,000 of his old guard, Napoleon called for his two Chief Marshals, Marmont and Ney. When told that they had fled he asked for General Étienne MacDonald, a gifted and loyal Highland warrior who had refused to leave his chieftain. Napoleon was so touched by MacDonald's loyalty that he presented him with a sword he had received from the Sultan, Selim. He had the sword inscribed simply: *MacDonald, my most faithful general*.

The emergence of the Auld Alliance in the New World could begin with no better story than that of Abraham Martin dit L'Ecossais. The Martin family had originated in the Isle of Skye, which even today is home to many of that same name. Abraham was a navigator of some note and for years I believed that he had piloted Cartier's lead ship on that great explorer's first memorable voyage up the St. Lawrence River.

Abraham Martin's unerring navigational skills in bringing the small flotilla safely across the Atlantic earned for him a large grant of land on the outskirts of the newly-found Quebec city. That grant, to which he gave his name, is known to every Canadian as the Plains of Abraham. The true story of Abraham Martin differs little from that tale, other than to place it in the following century.

In reality, Martin was the first of the French king's pilots on the St. Lawrence River. He lived in Quebec from 1621 until his death in 1664 and, as I have said, his work earned for him the land grant which bears his name.

As already noted, many Scots passed years of exile and study in France. One such was Sir John Ramsay whose descendant, Claude de Ramezay, played a major role in Canadian history.

Claude accompanied the newly-appointed Governor of New France to the colony in 1684. There he rose rapidly through military ranks, becoming commanding general of the troops of New France in 1699 and Governor of Montreal in 1704, a post he held until his death in 1724. Montreal's Chateau de Ramezay honours his contribution.

As mentioned earlier, in the aftermath of Culloden the gallant Highland warriors were subjugated, pressed into service in the Highland regiments set up to keep order in Scotland, or escaped to France to take service in the French army. Many who were so dispersed were to meet again, but on opposing sides in the battles between England and France for control of the colonies in North America.

One anecdote that aptly illustrates a chance encounter is related by John Murray Gibson in the battle of Carillon in 1758: *Some Highlanders, taken prisoner by the French and Canadians, huddled together on the battlefield and, expecting to be cruelly treated, looked on in mournful silence. Presently, a gigantic French officer walked up to them and whilst exchanging in a severe tone some remarks in French with his men, suddenly addressed them in the Gaelic. Surprise in the Highlanders soon turned to positive horror. Firmly believing that no Frenchman could every speak Gaelic, they concluded that His Satanic Majesty in person was before them. Rather, it was a Jacobite serving in the French army.*

But none of the confrontations so changed the course of Canadian history as did the battle for Quebec on the Plains of Abraham in 1759. In the vanguard of Wolfe's troops were the Fraser Highlanders, again restored to the kilt as military dress. Their entry to the upper heights was engineered by one, Donald MacDonald, a French-speaking Highlander who talked his way past the sentries.

With the deaths of both Wolfe and Montcalm, the leadership on the French side was assumed by a Franco-Scot, Chevalier de Ramezay, Commandant of the garrison at Quebec; and on the English side by General James Murray, a Highland Scot.

England's goal in the struggles on the North American continent, as stated by William Pitt, Secretary of State for War and Foreign Affairs, was not simply to curb the power of France in America, but to annihilate it. Given Pitt's declaration, it would not have been surprising if the English command had set out to obliterate any trace of the French fact in Quebec after 1759.

But that was not to be. It can, in fact, be claimed that Scotland's recent history affected Canada in a most crucial way. Quebec fell to the British in 1759, just thirteen years after Culloden had placed the Highlanders under the conqueror's heel. It seems that an important lesson had been learned: repression was expensive, conciliation cheap.

The Catholic peasantry of French Canada were more fortunate than their co-religionists in Scotland: State and Church worked together, and Quebec remained culturally distinct. Murray, an aristocrat, made common cause with the gentlemen of Quebec; the seigneurs. Both had it in mind to protect the Habitants from the excesses of outsiders, especially the New England Protestants, who wished to take advantage of the situation.

Murray was left to garrison the fortress of Quebec with his Highlanders that first winter. Malcolm Fraser, a lieutenant, wrote of the time: *It was a terrible winter. The men had no breeches, and the philibeg (the kilt) is not at all suited or calculated for this terrible climate.* Indeed a French Habitant, looking in some amazement at the Highlanders arrayed in the kilt, shook his head, muttering: *Too cold in the winter, and too dangerous in summer because of the mosquitos.*

With sickness in their ranks, the soldiers were tenderly cared for in the general hospital by the Ursuline nuns. And the nuns, assisted by the ladies of Quebec, knitted long woollen stockings for the Highlanders to help them survive the cold winds of Quebec.

In return, the soldiers insisted on giving one day's provisions a month for the support of the indigent. A number of the Highland officers had, in times past, been in France for long periods, at school or in the army, and had acquired a fluency in the French language which enabled them to communicate with the French-Canadians, a facility the English never acquired. Faced with common misery that first winter, Murray wrote: *We lived together in perfect harmony and good humour.*

The friendliness and frankness of Murray, wrote the historian Mason Wade, *did much to foster the Quebec legend that the Scots are sympathetic friends of the French Canadians, while the English are enemies.*

In many respects, General James Murray established the harmonious tone of understanding and co-operation that has characterized much of the political relationship between the French and the Scots in Canada. Murray could have easily suppressed the Canadiens, as many members of the growing Anglophone minority urged him to. Yet General Murray was truly sympathetic to the needs and condition of the French-Canadians.

He referred to them as *perhaps the bravest and best race upon the globe.* Further, Murray dismissed the Anglophones as *four hundred and fifty contemptible settlers and* *traders who were cruel, ignorant, rapacious fanatics. Unfortunately the fanatics* managed to have General Murray recalled to Britain in 1766, but his policy of reconciliation endured, and was carried even further by many of the Scots who followed him.

With the fall of Quebec, many of the soldiers returned to their own country. But many stayed, particularly the Highlanders. They quickly acquired two necessities; wives and land. The Lower St. Lawrence, so reminiscent of the Scottish Highlands, attracted many.

To La Malbaie, a valley thirty miles beyond Baie St. Paul on the North Shore went Captain John Nairne with five soldier-settlers. Nairne named his seigneury, Murray Bay; his friend, Malcolm Fraser, named his Mount Murray. The Scots, with names such as McNicol, Harvey, Blackburn, McNeil and MacLean, among others, were assimilated and their French-speaking descendants remain there in the region to this day. Many switched directly from the Gaelic to French.

The course of events in Quebec was to continue to be unsettled. Hoping to bring Canada on side in the rising revolutionary spirit south of the border, the Americans invaded Canada in 1775.

At that time the defence of Quebec, and indeed of a great part of Lower Canada, was entrusted to Lieutenant-Colonel Allan MacLean of the Isle of Mull, a veteran of the '45 and the Lowland campaigns. He was later known as the Jacobite General for leading his troops through the streets of Quebec, kilted and with a white cockade in his bonnet. On December 30th of 1775, the Americans attacked Quebec.

MacLean, leading his brigade of Royal Highland emigrants, gave the Americans a bad mauling. Among those fighting with the defenders were John Nairne, Malcolm Fraser, George Lawes, John MacDougall, all from Murray Bay. They were joined by French volunteers who shared the antipathy of the Scots towards the Americans with a singular unanimity.

No better example of the benefits of the Auld Alliance in the New World can be found than in the opening up of Western and Northern Canada. The stories of the great explorations to find a route to the Pacific, the expansion of the fur trade into the far reaches of the country, the development of the timber trade; each one of these is a recital of the combined efforts of the Scots and the French.

In 1789 Alexander MacKenzie journeyed from Lake Athabasca to the Arctic Ocean on the river which bears his name. In 1793 he successfully completed the first overland trip to the Pacific. His success was due in large measure to his support team - French-Canadian voyageurs from Quebec. The same pattern prevailed with Simon Fraser and David Thomson in their explorations of the Fraser and Columbia Rivers.

The Scots friendship and sympathy with the French-Canadians gave their North-West Company an advantage in its competition with the Hudson's Bay Company. The French-Canadians' knowledge of the native peoples, of the trade routes in the West, of pemmican, of snowshoes, and especially of the large birth-bark canoe, enabled the Scots to travel farther and faster than their competition to get to the sources of the furs.

The Canadian historian, J.M.S. Careless has written, *The vital partnership in the fur trade resulted from money and leadership in Montreal and London, combined with the skill and endurance of the Canadian voyageur who worked deep in the western wilderness.*

In the settling and securing of the country, in the opening up of its north-west, in developing its trading and industrial bases, there is a consistent pattern of co-operation between Scots and French. But it is in the realm of politics that the Auld Alliance most profoundly affected the new nation. Sometimes in the struggle for political maturity the two communities worked in parallel; sometimes in coalition.

In the twin rebellions of 1837, both Louis-Joseph Papineau in Quebec, and William Lyon MacKenzie in Ontario, fought against the privileged classes, the autocracy which effectively ruled the two provinces. They wanted the Legislative Councils democratized. Papineau especially wanted more influence for French-Canadians in a province where they had little.

The two rebellions, led by a French-Canadian and a Scottish-Canadian, were to fail and both Papineau and MacKenzie were forced into exile in the United States. But in time, their cause was to receive a sympathetic hearing from the Mother of Parliaments in London, and the road towards responsible government was opened, with the assistance of the then Governor-General, the Earl of Elgin, a descendant of Robert the Bruce.

I am struck in reading the social history of that period by the similarities in the songs and poetry of the two peoples, particularly in their longing for and mystical attachment to the land. The Scots were to sing:

From the lone shieling of the misty island
Mountains divide us and the waste of seas,
Yet still the blood is strong, the heart is highland,
And we in dreams behold the Hebrides.
Fair these broad meads, these hoary woods are grand,
But we are exiles from our fathers' land.

In exile, Papineau's followers were to lament:

Un Canadien errant, banni de ses foyers,
Par courait en pleurant, des pays etrangers.
Si tu vois mon pays, mon pays malheureux,
Va, dis a mes amis, que je me souviens deux.

The years following the 1837 rebellions saw the emergence of the two key players who were to epitomize best the Auld Alliance in Canada - John Alexander Macdonald and Georges Etienne Cartier. Their collaboration began in 1854 when Cartier was able to bring a majority of members with him from Lower Canada to the Parliament of the United Canadas.

Macdonald, who could only produce a minority of members from Upper Canada, knew he had to rely on Cartier if he was to maintain office. That reliance was to continue through the years, and Cartier's influence on Macdonald was profound and abiding. As early as 1856 Macdonald, in correspondence with Brown Chamberlin of the Montreal Gazette, was to caution: *The truth is that you British Lower Canadians never can forget that you were once supreme; that Jean Baptiste was your hewer of wood and drawer of water. You struggle, like the Protestant Irish in Ireland, like the Norman invaders in England, not for equality, but ascendancy; the difference between you and those interesting and amiable people being that you have not the honesty to admit it.* And he urged with regard to the French-Canadians: *Treat them as a nation and they will act as a free people generally do; generously; call them a faction and they become factious.*

At the time of Confederation, Macdonald was very cognizant of the terms Scotland had obtained in its union with England in 1707. Scotland had kept its own church and its own legal system, but its sole security for fair play had been a guarantee that there would always be 45 Scots Members of Parliament in the combined Parliament at Westminster; a corporal's guard in a Commons of over 600.

Yet Scottish politicians used that toe-hold to defend and extend their countries interests. When Confederation came in Canada, its framers thought not of the entrenched constitutional rights of the United States, but of the practical security the Scots had won within the United Kingdom.

Quebec would be like Scotland, with its separate legal system and religious tradition, and Quebec's guarantee would be a promise that the province would always have 65 Members of Parliament in the federal House of Commons.

The Macdonald-Cartier team was to be the mainstay of the Parliament of the United Canada, it was to lead the processes to Confederation, draft the North America Act, and lock into place the plans for the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway which was to bind the country from Sea to Sea.

When Cartier died in 1873, Macdonald was devastated. Of their friendship he was to write: We have acted together since 1854 and have never had a serious difference.

Macdonald's biographer, Donald Creighton, describes his reaction to the news of Cartier's death in this fashion: *He was beaten. And he stood alone. On May 30th, the cable from Rose announcing Cartier's death reached Ottawa. Sir Georges had died in London, fighting his disease to the last with the same patient, dogged courage that he had shown in a hundred political encounters. The man whose love for Canada amounted to a blind obsession ... had gone off on a longer and stranger journey than that which he hoped and always purposed to take to Canada on May 29th. The schemes and stratagems which they had shared together, the tough battles that they had fought side by side in the House, the long convivial evenings, with Cartier robustly singing his French-Canadian songs, and the endless discussions of the entwined destinies of the two Canadian peoples which had taken shape in the British North America Act and the great experiment of Confederation --- they were all ended. He was alone now --- for there would never be anybody like Cartier; alone at a time when the burdens of solitary responsibility seemed heavier than ever.*

At the time of Macdonald's death in 1891, his colleague, seat-mate in the House of Commons, and life-long friend, Sir Hector Langevin, paid this tribute: *I remember how devoted he was, not only to the old Province of Canada, but how chivalrous he showed himself to the Province of Quebec, and especially to my French-Canadian countrymen. In 1854, he had only to say a word, and instead of being at the head of a small band of seventeen Upper Canada members, he would have had all the representatives of his Province behind him. But as he told me several times, he preferred to be just to his French compatriots and allies, and the result was that when Confederation came, the Province of Quebec had confidence in him.*

Back in the year 1642, one, August Nobert, came to Quebec as an emigrant, bringing with him forty other settlers. His grand-daughter, Jeanne, married a soldier named Francois Champlaurier. In 1841, the Champ long since dropped from the name, Henry Charles Wilfrid Laurier was born, a descendant of artisans, soldiers and explorers. He was named Wilfrid for the hero of Walter Scott's novel, Ivanhoe. He was to serve Canada as Prime Minister for 15 years.

When he was eleven years of age, Wilfrid's father decided that his son should learn English. Accordingly he was sent from his village of St. Lin to the neighbouring community of New Glasgow, seven miles away. There he boarded with the family of John Murray, a Scotch Presbyterian. Their influence on his English was such that throughout his lifetime, Laurier spoke English with a Scottish burr. On his graduation, Laurier gave the valedictory address in French at McGill University, an institution founded by James

McGill, a Scot. Laurier was to declare in 1893: *Were I not French, I would choose to be a Scot.*

The Auld Alliance flourished in other regions of the country as well as in Upper and Lower Canada, notably in the Maritime provinces. In Cape Breton, after the fall of Louisbourg, the French settlers and soldiers were dispersed to other parts of the Island, to Chéticamp, Arichat and Isle Madame. The breakup of the clan system and the Highland clearances brought 25,000 persecuted Highlanders to Cape Breton in the early years of the 19th Century. Primarily of the Catholic religion and Gaelic-speaking, they fitted in well with the French communities, both groups trying to eke out an existence from the rocky mountainous terrain.

In 1934, a Highland Scot from Cape Breton, the much-beloved Angus L. Macdonald, long-time Premier of Nova Scotia, gave the toast to Canada at a banquet in Montreal. He paid tribute to the various peoples who had come from other countries to build the Canada that he loved. And he continued: *And then we have the Scottish race, breaking away 150 years ago 'from the lone shieling of the misty island', from the mountains and glens of Scotland, parting from the chiefs whom they followed with such undying devotion; bringing to this country the stern and rugged character that they drew from their native hills; coming here, colonizing, exploring, developing this land, ever pushing on and on with the restless fire that flames in the Scottish blood.*

And he goes on to the contribution of the French: *If any of you have ever visited the picturesque town of Annapolis Royal, you may have observed a monument amid the ruins of old Fort Anne. It stands as a memorial to the first European who ever settled in Canada - ot that intrepid Frenchman, DeMonts. On that monument you will observe this inscription in Latin - Genus Immortale Manet - The Immortal Race Remains. The Immortal Race remains, and it will remain so as long as Canada is Canada, so long as time is time. The Immortal Race remains in Nova Scotia, it remains in Quebec and elsewhere in this Dominion, and it is a constant reminder of the debt that Canada owes to France....*

And he concludes with this injunction:*The greatest asset of any country is the people, and I think that as Canadians, we may well take pride in the character of our citizenship. We are a composite people, we are not all of one stock. Each group has its elements of strength and its elements of weakness. The problem for us to solve is the development of the strong points of each, and the elimination of the elements of weakness.*

The words of the Hon. Angus L. Macdonald, speaking in Montreal in 1934:*We do well to remember the greatness of our history and consider what has been achieved; in large measure because two great peoples - the French and the Scots - worked together to build Canada in the best traditions of the Auld Alliance…*

“Many thanks to the Hon. Flora MacDonald, to the St. Andrew's Society of Ottawa for her help.” Pierre Louis de Monclars.

Jehan L’Ascuiz in memoriam

Compiled by Pierre Louis de Monclars from different sources.
(For more details please send an email)