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Ted Schmidt

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The quiet fire of Neil McNeil

Ted Schmidt

In 1958 the Spiritans opened a high school in the east end of Toronto. They had good reason to name it Neil McNeil. Here is his forgotten story.

They asked about Jesus, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:45), the presumption being that this rural backwater had nothing to offer. A similar question could have been asked about arguably the greatest bishop Canada has ever seen, Neil McNeil, who hailed from a small hamlet named Hillsborough (Mabou) in Inverness County, Cape Breton.

The McNeils, like many on Cape Breton, were Scots-Irish. Neil McNeil, the bishop's great-grandfather hailed from a small island in the Hebrides named Barra. His mother's family hailed from Kilkenny, Ireland. Neil's father Malcolm and mother Ellen had eleven children. The eldest, born in 1851, was the future bishop.

*"There's nothing as hot
as a slow burning fire."*

The Skydiggers (1999)

In reading about McNeil's early years one is struck by a number of things, the first being his high intelligence and close family relationships. Among those were his cousins, the Meaghers, with whom Neil lived for a while. Here he was mentored by Nicholas, a younger brother of his mother. A life-long friendship developed between Neil and Nicholas who in time became a Justice of Canada's Supreme Court. These people had brains to burn and integrity to match.

On to higher studies

Because he was by nature quiet, Neil was thought to be not academically inclined, so his father groomed him to follow him into his blacksmith forge. Dan, Neil's more extroverted brother, was considered brighter and hence slated to go to university. The local teacher intervened. Amazed at Neil's extraordinary mathematical ability, he told Mr. McNeil that

"he should be driven out of Mabou" if he did not send Neil on to higher studies.

Neil McNeil entered St. Francis Xavier University (St FX) in September 1869. His natural ability was evident to all and in 1873 he was sent to Rome to study for the priesthood.

Two observations present themselves here. The first was Neil McNeil's deep grounding in social reality. His work at the forge servicing a general population schooled him in the sacred work of craftsmanship. It also made him abundantly aware of community: "Even as a young man in Hillsborough I worked in my father's forge ... even then the individualistic side of religion didn't satisfy me." From the earliest time, Neil McNeil was a justice man.

Before returning to become a professor at St FX, Neil, ordained at twenty-eight in 1879, was sent to the University at Marseilles to study math and astronomy. He became fluent in several languages.

Championing the rights of the poor

At St FX Dr. McNeil, as he was now styled, not only taught every subject but he helped construct the buildings on the growing campus. He also became rector of the seminary and started a local newspaper, the *Aurora*, where the plight of poor fishermen ("fast in the talons of voracious vultures") was first noticed and railed against. The *Aurora* also championed the rights of miners. It was probably in these pages that he ran afoul of the local bishop and in 1891 the former dean of the seminary and professor was sent off as a curate to an Acadian community, Arichat, at the foot of Cape Breton Island.

Good soldier that he was, Neil enjoyed his four years in





Photo courtesy of the Archives of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto

Acadia but it became obvious that the Canadian church needed his abundant talents as a bishop-builder on the west coast of Newfoundland. For 15 years he used his construction skills to literally help build schools, convents and rectories. His letters of the time are stunning testimonies to his tireless and versatile work. By 1900 he had worked himself into exhaustion and needed a year abroad to recover. In 1901 he returned as bishop to Newfoundland's west coast where he continued on much as before. Then out of the blue, in 1910 he was sent to the other coast of Canada: Vancouver!

By this time McNeil's extraordinary talent had become abundantly clear to Rome and while Vancouver had its missionary challenges, it was the heart of English-speaking Canada, Toronto, which needed his leadership.

Archbishop of Toronto

Education became McNeil's major focus. St. Augustine's seminary had just begun. For the next 22 years Bishop McNeil not only turned the new seminary into Canada's prime educator

of priests, but he became a passionate champion of Catholic schools which were routinely discriminated against. Another great challenge was to provide religious services for the immigrants streaming into Ontario.

Next on his agenda was finding a progressive editor for the Catholic newspaper, the *Canadian Register*. When fellow Cape Bretoner and social reformer, Fr. Jimmy Tompkins, was in England looking for educational ideas, Bishop McNeil asked him to look out "for a man who can come here to Toronto and promote social studies in the interest of the working class." In this, McNeil was similar to Pope Francis whose commitment to the poor and workers is now well-known. Tompkins found just the man, a brilliant working class journalist named Henry Somerville, who became a self-educated

*"Holy Communion is a banquet
not an individual lunch,
a banquet designed
for the common benefit
of all who partake."*

Archbishop Neil McNeil (1931)

factory worker at the age of thirteen. He turned the *Canadian Register* into a forum for progressive causes. On their regular Saturday walks together Somerville and McNeil shared ideas. Biographer George Boyle writes about his friend Somerville, "He didn't mind the silences as some did."

Neil McNeil's 22 years in Toronto were incredibly effective. His passion for Catholic education, his love of the poor, his promotion of a dynamic Christianity, broadly ecumenical and centred on justice, his love and care for the immigrants were legendary. At his funeral on May 29, 1934, 15,000 people crowded around St. Michael's Cathedral to pay homage. No Catholic bishop was ever so mourned, loved and feted by all sectors of society.

The quiet, taciturn lad from Hillsborough (Mabou), noted for his "eloquent and evocative silences", let his totally engaged life speak for itself. Those silences were fueled by the intense inner flame we call the Holy Spirit. Neil McNeil's entire life was "a slow burning fire" which regularly burst forth in personal kindness and the building up of God's reign. His 1929 statement could have been easily uttered by the present pope: "There's no room in the 20th century for a cloistered bishop." ■

Ted Schmidt taught at Neil McNeil for 18 years.