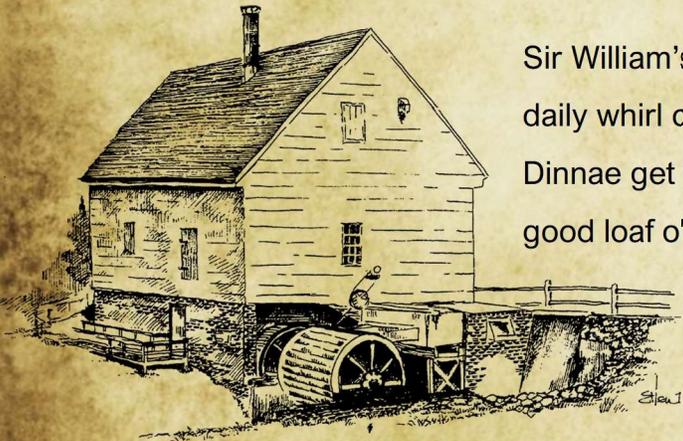


The Tale of Jacob McDonell

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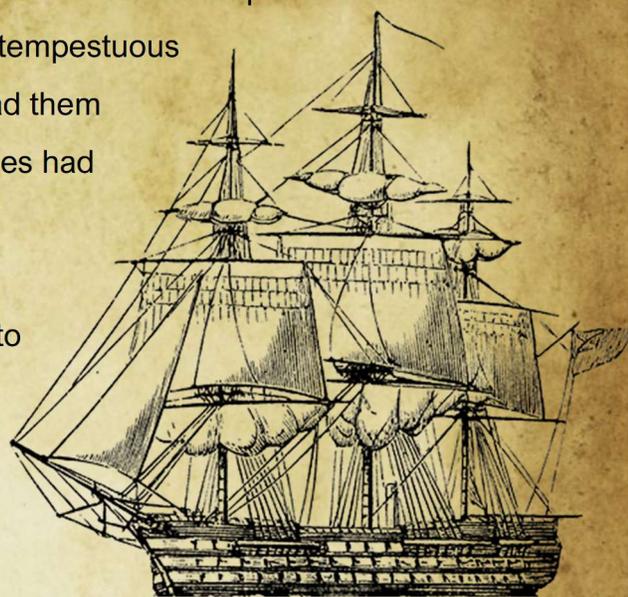


Sir William's grist mill on Old Fort Creek was abuzz with the daily whirl of the mill in full operation. "Jacob, look smart! Dinnae get yer sleeve caught in there, ye wilnae make a good loaf o' bread."

Jacob, newly apprenticed was proud of the work, and he knew he was lucky to have it so took the ribbing gladly.

Jacob's family, the McDonells, had only arrived in the Mohawk Valley in the Province of New York two years before, in 1773. His uncles had gathered 400 of their clan to make a new life in the American colonies. Having come to an agreement with Sir William Johnson, who owned vast lands which needed to be worked and protected, and the Highlanders fearless reputation being a sought-after commodity amidst the growing population on his lands, the McDonells determined this was a good opportunity to provide a future for their children, perhaps their only option. It seemed such an

adventure to Jacob at the time – being only 12 – but packed onto the ship *Pearl*, soon brought the reality of the journey of sailing tempestuous autumn seas, to bear. Until the misery of the voyage had them in its' grip, Jacob had not thought he'd miss home. Times had been hard – the clan struggled in the Highlands, much changed by war and subjugation by the English. Jacob remembered often going to bed to the sound of his hollow, aching stomach wanting for more. He thought the American colonies were a mythical place across the ocean, a place where life would be as prosperous as the men of the clan spoke of with much anticipation. As they embarked on their voyage from Fort William, Jacob and his older brothers, John, Malcolm, Rory, and Alec, acted as the other men aboard, with eyes cast ahead with resolve. He imagined the women folk, his mother and his wee sister, Jenny, a babe in arms, and the only girl in the family, would be encouraged by the bravery of the “men,” though he and his brothers were but boys. Jacob finally got his first look at the ocean he had imagined over the many weeks of preparation as the *Pearl* pulled out of Loch Linnhe into the open waters for the Atlantic crossing. Before him was an expanse of seemingly never-ending water. His life had been lived amidst the mountainous, craggy landscape of the Scottish Highlands and to see nothing but a flat surface to the horizon left him with sudden feeling of being set adrift in a foreign place. Fearful, Jacob turned back, along with many others, looking forlornly at their homeland until the last shrouded view of the Scottish shores vanished. For the next six weeks they were relegated to the bowels of the ship where all endured the desperate conditions brought on by sea sickness, close quarters, and spare supplies. The escape to the deck provided little relief, for there was nothing but the void of the open ocean, adding despair to their misery. Now instead of dreaming of the hope of what was to be, Jacob dreamt of home...



The chance to work at the mill was the first glimpse of what Jacob's new life might be. For months after their arrival, his family and clansmen struggled to settle in. The first winter was hard, with deep snows and harsh conditions, making them want for what now seemed the temperate climate of even the most tumultuous Scottish winter. Home seemed very far away and being too young to go with his father and four older brothers to work in the fields, he felt even more disconnected. As the youngest boy, he had been relegated to stay near the house "to protect," his mother and sister, but he could hear his brothers chuckle under breath when their father said so.



As the second spring arrived, and Jacob turned 14, his uncle Ranald came to their modest home with a proposition – there was an opening for an apprentice at Sir William's mill. Jacob instantly felt a man, an equal to his kin, and he jumped at the chance. His uncle warned, "It will be solid work 'n' acting like a bairn will not be tolerated."

Jacob straightened his shoulders and took the stern look his father often showed in times of disagreement with his own brothers. "I'm no bairn, Uncle," he said sharply.

Jacob could not see the smile cross his mother's face behind him as she watched her young man puff up attempting to be the man he was yet many years from becoming.

"Ye must ask yer father if he can spare ye. If he can, then ye start t'morra."

His uncle had no sooner left the house when Jacob turned to his mother, his eyes full of wonder and excitement. Despite the big step towards manhood, he was still her boy.

By 1776, the rumblings of war grew in the Mohawk Valley, as they did throughout the American colonies. Those loyal to the rule of King George III were now marked as enemies by those who sought "liberty," and independence.



Even with the growing tensions, work continued at Sir William's mill, yet called this despite his passing in July 1774. Sir John, heir to Sir William's vast holdings, made no attempt to change the yet common reference to the mill for he knew his father's reputation held much respect among the tenants and he would do well to encourage their continued loyalty to his memory. The mill was a profitable enterprise and he wanted to keep it that way. With so much division, to keep his tenants loyal would serve to keep his lands productive and provide him with the forces he needed, should armed conflict with their "rebel" neighbours and Continental Army become necessary. His strategy would not be long in proving crucial.

As Jacob threw the heavy sack of flour down, he thought it made an odd sound. Paying little mind, he ran back for another when suddenly the source of the noise became clear.

"To arms! To arms!" his uncle Ranald bellowed in a frightening tone.

Stunned by the desperate chaos the command unleashed, Jacob stood motionless. Looking through the open window, beyond the edge of the wheat field, undulating in the wind, he saw smoke rising from the treeline.

POP! POP! The noise rang out, though nearly drowned out by the sound of the mill wheel now grinding nothing.

"Jacob, to arms! To..."

Before Ranald could utter the word, Jacob's world suddenly went silent.

"Maggie! We cannae take that, Lassie. We must go now!" Donald McDonell said in stern desperation to his wife.

Since Jacob's death, Maggie had felt she had slipped into a nightmare she could not wake from. "A dinnae know what to bring," she said almost in a whisper as the room swirled about her. She let go of the blanket she had held from their bed. It landed in a



heap at her feet and she stood motionless. Her mind suddenly went blank and the room became shrouded in darkness.

“Maggie,” Donald said gently, grasping his wife’s shoulders. “We take nae a thing.”

Guiding her to the door, Donald opened it and Maggie was suddenly thrust into the light. She could see the children gathered, five where there should be six.

“Ma?” Jenny’s timid voice brought momentary clarity.

Staring down upon the sweet face of her youngest, but four years old, Maggie saw such fear and confusion in her little one’s eyes she felt a deep and sudden ache in her heart. “Wee one, tis’ a long journey we shall make, but yer father will keep us safe.”

The instinct to protect and comfort her children gave her a peculiar sense of reprieve from her own impossible dread.

The plan to flee had been made only days before when news arrived that a regiment of the Continental Army was to round up the “Loyal Highlanders” on Sir John’s



lands and remove them to Albany. The rebel prisons in Albany were infamous for their horrendous conditions and they had seen men, once strong and proud, return as but shadows of their former selves. Donald and the men of the clan had decided the

opportunity for escaping such a fate, and the unknown fate of families that would be left behind, slipped away with every passing hour. As the last vestiges of day slipped beneath the horizon, the glow of the setting sun filling the sky in hues of orange and purple, the family walked single file towards the blackened treeline. Maggie, holding Jenny in her arms at the front, suddenly flew past Donald, roughly depositing her in his arms.

“Maggie!” Donald immediately handed Jenny, now crying at the confusing scene, to his oldest boy, John, warning him, “Keep the others here. Dinnae move!” Donald easily gained on Maggie, catching her by the arm and swinging her around. Her wild

eyes were filled with tears. It was a look he had only seen once before...and not but a few weeks ago.

“I cannae leave Jacob,” she sobbed crumpling into Donald’s arms.

“Maggie, we must. He is gone, Lassie.” She looked into Donald’s eyes searching for any inkling that his words were untrue. “He is gone, Maggie.”

She let out a deep sigh, as though reality washed over her. “But who should tend his grave?” she said softly, a tear streaming down her flushed face.

“We will be back, then ye will.”

“How cannae I leave without him?” Maggie said, as if to herself.

Donald knew they needed to leave immediately if they were to meet the larger group before night set in, yet the pity he felt for his wife, and the sting he too felt in Jacob’s loss, gave him pause. “Let us bring an item o’ Jacob’s to carry with us,” he said. Maggie’s eyes widened at the idea.

“His shirt, get his shirt.” Since Jacob’s death, Maggie had secretly hugged his shirt each night as the rest of the family slept. She begged him to come back through silent whimpers. At times she found she had fallen asleep clutching it.

Donald did not need to ask where to find the shirt for he had often followed Maggie and kept an eye on her from the shadows. In the darkened hallway, watching Maggie mourn their boy, Donald had taken strange solace in doing so as well, unseen, but connected to Maggie and Jacob in their shared grief. “Ye go and get Jenny, 'n' I will get it.”

Donald ran to the house and within minutes they were nearing the woods; Maggie now holding Jacob’s shirt in one arm and Jenny in the other as the dark forest swallowed them up.



The long and arduous trek north had taken nearly three weeks, though most in the group had lost count with each awful day and miserable night running one into the other. The dense forest and mud-filled virgin trails they hacked from it took a toll. Not all in their group of dozens of clan and kin made it the refugee camps along the Richelieu River in Quebec, where they would finally stop.

Though Maggie cherished Jacob's shirt, taking extra care to keep it safe, it had become necessary to use some of it for bandages to dress the wounds sustained in falls and scratches from hidden branches protruding in the undergrowth. By the time they were settled in their simple canvas tent at the refugee camp, Jacob's shirt was only a strip of fabric. Yet, after the journey the family had all thankfully survived, Maggie was glad of even this small piece. It gave her hope of returning home, of being closer to her boy, even if only to tend his grave, until she would see him again in the next life.



By the time the American Revolution ended in 1783, the “rebels” gaining their independence, the McDonells had already lingered for nearly six years in squalid conditions at the refugee camps in Quebec. While the men fought the war, the hundreds of women and children existed in a form of limbo, neither knowing if their men should come back at all – leaving them destitute, if the war would be won and they could go home, or if they had to start over...again. It was to be the latter. Never again would the McDonells go back to the Mohawk Valley, never again would Maggie tend Jacob's grave.

Once land was surveyed for settlement, a reward for their loyalty, the McDonells set out with many others to settle near the St. Lawrence River, west of Montreal. They had left their homeland, Scotland, to start anew only to be swept up in the chaos of war once more, and now but a decade later, they were forced to begin again. They hoped this time they would be able to create the foundation of a new life for their children and generations to come.

Even with the passage of time, and all they had endured, Maggie held the tattered strip of Jacob's shirt near, for despite the boys growing to adulthood, and even young Jenny now being 10, Jacob would always be her young man of 15.



When the family arrived at New Johnstown* with their few supplies atop a cart, Donald and the men set about pulling for allotments. Of course, the bartering, buying and selling of land commenced almost immediately. If the family had to start over, they wanted to do so with their kin by their side.

Donald and the boys finally returned to where the family had put up their tent just as Maggie was ready to serve their meagre soup. "We have our land," Donald announced victoriously with his sons now standing shoulder to shoulder with him. John, Malcolm, Rory, and Alec, were now men, having pulled lots in their own right as soldiers. Through tough negotiations, they were able to ensure they would set up their

homesteads as neighbours, which made Maggie smile, something they had not seen her do so naturally in many years. "We are on the Riviere aux Raisin, so we will have the means to make our farm bountiful. We set out at first light for it will nae be much time to both build our house 'n' clear the land afore winter."

Ever precocious, Jenny said, "Reever o' Razoon?" They all smiled broadly at her exaggerated mockery of the strange name.

"Tis' French for Raisin River, called so by the French for ye will find wild grape vines upon its banks. Ah suspect ye will find them in short order upon yer explorations," Donald said with a hint of feigned frustration, for he knew Jenny was not easily tamed.



Having been raised in the strange, sometimes unruly, conditions of the refugee camp, Jenny had been made a bit wild and adventurous. Despite the vexation and worry she sometimes caused her mother, Donald was glad to see such spirit for it made her seem untouched by the tragedy that surrounded them since the war had broken out.

The family quickly build a small house, which was not much more than a shelter, but they were glad for it. All but John and his young wife, Catherine, lived at home, though his homestead was but a short walk away. Even with all the cooking and household chores, Maggie worked each day pulling stones from the newly cleared fields. No woman or child was spared the strenuous work, all needed to help if they were to be ready for winter...to survive.





At the end of the long day, Maggie welcomed going to the river where she would cup the cooling water into her hands, putting it to her face, which instantly revived her. One early autumn day, only a few short months since they had started over again, Maggie sat by the river's edge admiring the rich red and brilliant golden hues of the maples changing colour. She felt quiet – the turmoil of many long, hard days...many years...disappearing in this moment and she simply basked in the peaceful sounds of the leaves rustling in the gentle breeze. Feeling the cool, damp evening air settling upon her, she untied her apron and wrapped it about her shoulders, not quite ready to retreat into the house. Captivated by the glints of light from the setting sun, peaking through the leafy trees, she did not notice the tattered strip of Jacob's shirt release from her skirt pocket. As Maggie closed her eyes to savour the moment, the cherished memento of her precious boy floated away from her, carried on the gentle current of the Raisin River.

As the seasons, and years, passed, the small strip of fabric clung to the tip of one of the wild grape vines, from which the river took its name. The McDonnell family grew and Donald and Maggie came to know the joy of grandchildren. Jenny, too, married. Having been the last at home, she saw the deep sadness her mother suffered upon discovering Jacob's shirt piece missing. She had been too young to remember her brother, or to understand the devastation of his violent, senseless death, but she came to know it all too well as she watched her mother mourn him anew after the loss of the final tangible piece of her boy. Maggie seemed to age suddenly, and the sparkle in her blue eyes when she smiled, noticeably dimmed after that day. There was little Jenny could do to help ease such pain, but to be her mother's companion in their daily work. She attempted to ease the workload where possible and toned down her own precocious nature so as not to add to her mother's troubles. She heard her mother sometimes crying softly in the night and could hear her father's deep voice comforting her in hushed tones from their room. In hearing this private tenderness between her parents,

Jenny felt she had been privy to something beautiful and sacred and hoped she too one day would find such a deep connection with someone. By her 18th birthday, she would have her wish realized.

Not only had Jenny found an industrious husband in Duncan Grant, but he was kind and gentle with her. Even in marriage, she worried about leaving her mother. Though Maggie busied herself with her work on the farm and the many grandchildren, family and friends who often visited, Jenny knew the dark, quiet nights would bring the loss of Jacob into sharper focus. In delivering a son only two days after turning 18, Jenny hoped the gift to her mother would bring joy – even if the sadness remained. Upon entering the room to meet her newest grandson, Maggie smiles sweetly at Jenny. A mix of pride and private knowing passed between them. They now shared an experience that deepened their bond. Handing her mother the baby, swaddled in a blanket knit by Maggie, Jenny had asked Duncan to give them privacy when her mother arrived.



“Och Jenny, he is a sweet bairn,” Maggie said, unable to release her gaze from his soft, peaceful face.

Jenny slowly pulled the blanket from his head to reveal a hint of red hair. The women smiled at each other – the evidence of red hair seeming to confirm him a good and true Scot. “His name is Jacob.” Jenny’s tone was akin to a child’s shy offer of a gift, unknowing if it would be welcomed or not. She had struggle with trying to figure out if the name would bring joy to her mother or wound her more deeply in hearing the name spoken once more. None of her brothers had named their children after their lost brother and she had assumed it was to not revive the pain in his loss, but Jenny, having spent so much time at her mother’s side knew that simply not speaking his name had not dimmed her love for him, nor the pain in his loss. Jenny prayed she was doing the right thing and had only confided her reasons for the baby’s name to Duncan who sweetly assured her it was a beautiful gift she was giving.

Maggie gazed intently at the baby, who moved slightly, making the contented murmurs of a newborn. Maggie's silence weighed heavy on Jenny. She silently prayed she had not done the wrong thing.

"Jacob..." Maggie whispered still staring down at the baby.

Jenny saw a tear fall onto his cheek, which made him squirm. Looking up at her daughter, Maggie smiled, the sparkle in her tear-filled eyes answering Jenny's prayers. Jacob, her brother lost to them would live on in his namesake.



The spring melt of 1803 brought flooding along the Raisin River that few had seen since their settlement along its banks in 1784. As land was swallowed up, all the families could do was pray it ceased to rise before reaching their homes and communities. The water rushing downstream roiled like an angry storm, violent and swift. Nothing swept up in it would be spared, including the small tattered remnant of cloth that had clung many years to the grapevine. The rising water dislodged the fragment of Jacob's shirt sending it rushing down the wild river along with other debris, but unlike so much that got caught up in jams along the course, the small slip of fabric continued until it caught on the mill wheel at Malcolm McMartin's grist mill, now partially submerged in the flooding. Caught on a sharp wooden splinter on one of the paddles, it withstood the strength of the water rushing through it. As the river subsided, the tattered cloth became even more tightly wound on the wheel as it roared back to life once more.



The jumbled voices had a familiarity to them, but were muffled, making it impossible to hear what they spoke of.

“Mind yer step, Lad!” The almost recognizable, booming voice came out of the darkness. “See that the wheel is nae full o’ weeds,” again called the large silhouette. But before becoming any clearer it slipped back into the void.



The snippets of conversation came more frequently but those who spoke always seemed to linger in the shadows. The familiar hum of the mill wheel, propelled by the river was now steady, even as glimpses of where it came from faded in and out – just beyond knowing.

As each day passed the grinding of the mill pulverizing corn and wheat, of mens’ heavy boots rushing across the expanse of wood planked floors, the *THUD!* of sacks of flour being piled one atop the other, and the *WHOOSH!* of the mill wheel were the clearest sounds...but the often indistinct voices yet came from those only barely seen through a dense fog.

“Ye laddie, pile the sacks on the cart!”

The sights and sounds of the mill rushed at Jacob in a torrent, bewildering him momentarily, then the fog suddenly lifted, and he knew where he was... “Aye, Sir!” Jacob called out, as he rushed to resume his work at the mill.



Though Malcolm McMartin’s grist mill, built in 1801 along the Raisin River at Martintown, was replaced with a stone one, build by his son Alexander in 1846, Jacob can still be seen there from time to time, carrying on the work that brought his so much pride in life...and death...

*New Johnstown is now known as Cornwall, Ontario