

ATTEMPTED MURDER ROCKS VILLAGE

by Lewis Zandbergen

Stirling in the mid-1800s was a quiet town; its inhabitants (1858 population 790) were for the most part God-fearing people, disposed to hard work and mindful of the Sabbath. Churches in Stirling were a fact of life almost from the beginning. As early as 1828 Methodist "saddlebag" preachers were busy sowing the seeds which would rise to organized religious services by the 1840s and 1850s. Prior to 1837, the year in which Weese's School was erected on the northeast corner of what is now Front Street and the highway to Campbellford, church services were held in private homes. By 1850 some church services were being conducted in the newly built Rawdon Township Hall which stood at the corners of Edward and Mill Streets. (Stirling was not an incorporated village until 1858 and until that year municipal business was conducted on the township level.)

In 1851 Presbyterianism was taking root and in succeeding years a congregation was formed largely thanks to the preparatory work of the Reverend John Lindsay and his brother. In the following years ministers from Belleville and Seymour Township (west of Rawdon Township) filled in.

By 1856 village Presbyterians could worship in a new building and services were led by a new minister. Land for a brick structure had been donated by Edward Fidler who was a staunch Presbyterian. The new church seated 200 and stood on the same picturesque site which is occupied by the present church building on the north side of Mill Street across from the mill pond.

The new minister, the Reverend Alexander Buchan, a native of Perthshire, Scotland, was born in 1795. He was an ordained minister of The Church of Scotland and first came to Canada as a missionary to the Presbytery of Quebec from 1842 to 1844. He returned to Scotland in 1844 but in 1855 the Reverend Buchan immigrated to Canada and settled in Stirling, becoming the minister at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church; he lodged with Dr. George H. Boulter, who was a strong supporter of Presbyterianism, in the doctor's home at 29 North Street (across from the present post office). The Reverend Buchan was formally inducted into the church on Wednesday, November 12, 1856.

Life in Stirling suited Alexander Buchan. Even in what was by all accounts still a pioneer settlement, Victorian-era social niceties were practised. Calling cards were de rigueur and maids and servants did most of the menial labour; it was a genteel existence. The

good reverend soon had a housekeeper, Mrs. McAvoy.

Late one evening in December of 1860, while the Reverend Buchan lay in his bed sound asleep, someone stole into the bedroom and clubbed him on the head with what was later determined to be a meat tenderizer. Buchan immediately sat up and attempted to subdue his attacker and was again hit on the head. He succeeded in getting out of the bed, however, and grabbing his walking stick which lay nearby, laid a blow neatly on his assailant's head and knocked the person down; in falling, Buchan's attacker uttered a loud groan. It was then the reverend heard a familiar voice.

"My God! Mrs. McAvoy. Is that you? What do you mean?"

"Yes. The devil tempted me," was all Mrs. McAvoy said.

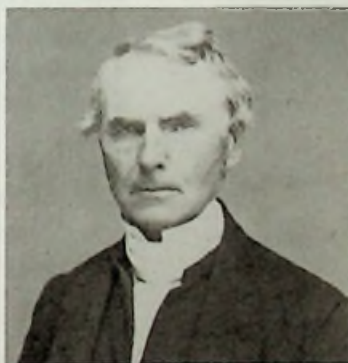
Buchan went downstairs, perhaps to find a bandage and summon assistance, and left Mrs. McAvoy lying on the floor. By the time he returned, with the authorities it is presumed, Mrs. McAvoy was in her own room and in her own bed. She pleaded complete ignorance of the affair, however, a search of her trunk uncovered articles which belonged to the minister. Speculation led the authorities to believe Mrs. McAvoy had intended to kill and rob Buchan and then set fire to the house. She was indicted and ordered to stand trial.

On March 20, 1861, the *Hastings Chronicle* newspaper reported that Mrs. McAvoy had appeared in court. The short piece reads: "Queen vs Mrs. McAvoy

- Our readers will remember that the prisoner was indicted at the last Quarter Sessions on two Counts; first for a mere assault upon the Rev. Mr. Buchan, of Stirling, second, for an assault with intent to kill; upon both of which Counts she was found guilty. The punishment or sentence of a criminal found guilty of the crime last mentioned is death—a sentence which Quarter Sessions could not pass; therefore the matter was referred, we understand, to the Supreme Courts, and an order was received, to pass sentence on the prisoner, as for a mere assault. The Court sentenced her to 3 months imprisonment in the common gaol, at hard labour."

Several mysteries haunt this case.

McAvoy was a good Catholic name in Victorian Stirling. Why would a person of the Catholic religion be working for a Presbyterian minister? In the words of one colleague: "They [Catholics and Presbyteri-



The Reverend Alexander Buchan