



JOHN MCLOUGHLIN THE FATHER OF OREGON

AMERICAN CATHOLIC HISTORY #55

John McLoughlin, the Father of Oregon

In the early 1800s, Britain and the fledgling United States were in a contest to see who could control the Pacific Northwest territory. The Hudson Bay Company was Britain's main presence in the region and the man in charge of the Columbia division was John McLoughlin, a Catholic husband, father, and doctor who today is called the Father of Oregon.

The Columbia division covered a region from San Francisco Bay to Alaska, from the Rockies to the Pacific Ocean and the HBC's regional headquarters was in what is now Vancouver, Washington, on the Columbia River. And McLoughlin was in charge of it all as a fur trader, physician, businessman, peacekeeper, and administrator. At 6-foot 4-inches tall, he was a powerful man who was known both for his temper, but also for being fair and compassionate and doing the right thing regardless of the consequences.

Born in Québec in 1784, McLoughlin was born into a Catholic family, but was raised by an anti-Catholic Presbyterian grandfather and didn't embrace his faith until later in life. After training as a surgeon, John went to work for the trading company and quickly rose through the ranks until he was its chief representative in the Pacific Northwest by the age of 40.

He also married twice. His first wife died young in 1809 after having one child. He married his second wife, a Native American widow with four children already, a year later. Together they raised nine children.

While John was praised for his business acumen and honor and integrity, he sometimes clashed with his superiors who weren't pleased with McLoughlin's compassion for American settlers and the natives and his fair dealings with them. When American settlers arrived in the region from East, they would sometimes need basic assistance to establish themselves and survive their first winters.

McLoughlin seemed to sense that despite the Hudson Bay Company's profits, British control of the region was eventually going to end and that to stay he would eventually have to become an American. And yet, despite all that he had done, it was the anti-Catholicism that had spread to the region that would undermine him.

The HBC eventually pushed McLoughlin out of his job and anti-Catholic locals petitioned Washington, DC, to take away McLoughlin's vast land holdings when the Oregon Territory was established in 1848. On the other hand, McLoughlin was elected mayor of Oregon City and was

even made a Knight of St. Gregory by Pope Gregory XVI in 1847 in recognition of his humanitarian and charitable efforts.

After his death, John McLoughlin was given more of the honors he earned in life, including having schools, roads, and even a mountain named for him, and in 1957 the Oregon legislature officially designated him the Father of Oregon. One of the two statues representing Oregon in the US Capitol's Statuary Hall is dedicated to McLoughlin.

But the more important last word in the life and story of John McLoughlin were his own last words: as he lay dying, his nephew asked in French, "Comment allez-vous?" "How are you going?" John McLoughlin replied, "A Dieu," "To God."

For more about John McLoughlin, listen to American Catholic History, Episode #55.

The American Catholic History podcast, hosted by Tom and Noelle Crowe, finds the hidden gems and compelling stories of Catholic Americans who have contributed to their nation by virtue of their faith over the past three centuries. In about 15 minutes, American Catholic History will introduce you to the amazing men and women who came to these American shores and were born here and contributed in ways both great and small, celebrated and unheralded.

Send us your feedback at history@sqpn.com

To find more stories from American Catholic History and to subscribe to the podcast, please visit sqpn.com/history.