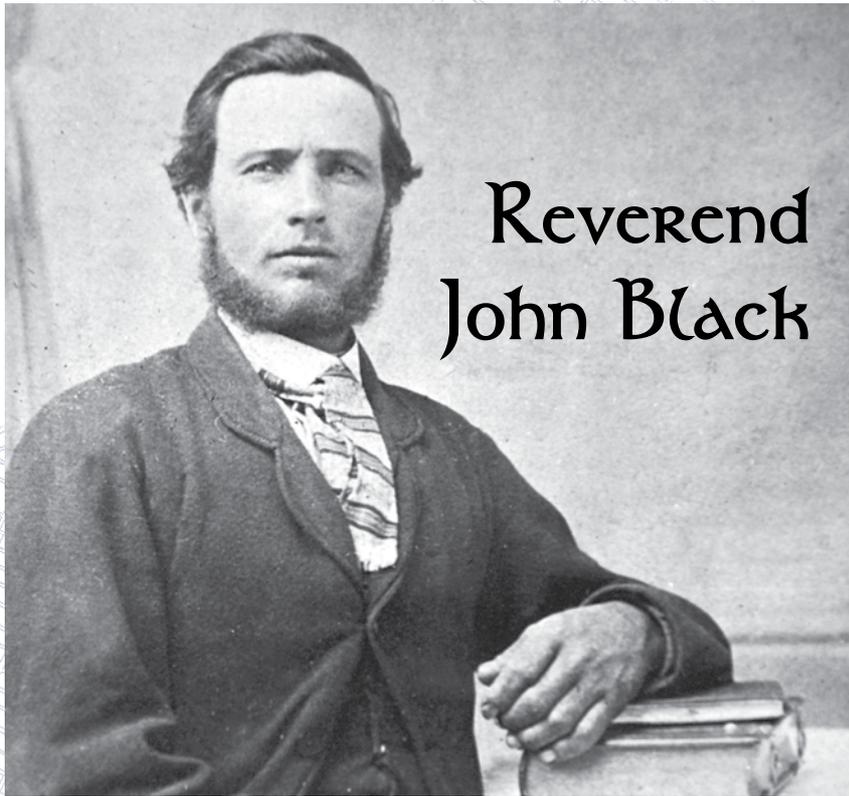


COMMUNITY HISTORY



Presbyterian minister navigates the perils of a growing country

Rev. John Black knew there was risk involved in harbouring Dr. John Schultz in his home.

Dr. Schultz, a vocal opponent of Louis Riel and leader of resistance against him, had been imprisoned by the Métis leader in December 1869, at the height of tensions during the Red River Rebellion. The following January, using a knife baked into a loaf of bread he'd been given by his wife, he cut up his bedding and climbed out the window to freedom.

Riel's men searched high and low but never found Schultz, who had gone underground, passed from refuge to refuge, ending up at the home of Rev. Black, minister of Kildonan Church.

How did this devoted cleric from Dumfries and Galloway in Scotland end up playing a part in one of the most tumultuous periods of our province's evolution?

Reverend John Black

Twenty-eight years earlier, Rev. Black's family emigrated from Scotland to New York, where he taught for a short time before entering the ministry. In 1841, he moved to Toronto, became ordained and after a grueling journey by coach and birchbark canoe, became the first Presbyterian minister in the Red River Settlement. He intended to stay for only a brief period.

Rev. Black opened a church in Kildonan in 1853 and, that same year, married Henrietta Ross. He opened a school in Kildonan soon afterward. His interest in education led him to found Manitoba College in 1871, which later became the University of Manitoba.

As a preacher, John was impressive. The... young men were inspired by sermons that came from the heart and soul, and touched the heart and soul. Whatever criticisms anyone made of his sermons, it certainly could never be said that his preaching was dull! (A Tribute to Rev. John Black, B. Williamson, 1971)

Many felt it was not surprising that a minister of such passion would feel called upon to act during a time of great crisis, such as the Red River Rebellion—even if it put him in peril.

Rev. Black worked with other clergymen to keep the peace during the rebellion and is remembered in historical documents as having counselled neutrality and advised against open resistance to Louis Riel. However, he allowed his Kildonan church to be used as a gathering point for forces against Riel.

In handwritten messages, hurriedly scratched out on note paper in 1870, James Ross, Rev. Black's brother-in-law, warned the reverend about the dangerous political situation. The last note was written just prior to the execution of Thomas Scott by orders of Riel—what some consider to be Riel's most costly political error.

Dear Rev. Black—Matters terribly critical. We will be down this evening for food. Counsel our people against any aggressive movement. They must not move at present.

J. Ross

Dear Rev. Black—Boulton, Taylor, Scott & Mair to be shot today. Bishop Archdeacon & myself gone up to intercede. Hopeful at present. Don't feel bad.

J. Ross.

The rebellion, which ended in peace, is just a brief period in Rev. Black's history in Kildonan. He sired eight children, lost one to a tragic accident and two more to illness, lost his wife and remarried. He served on the Board of Education of Manitoba and was awarded an honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity from Queen's University. Rev. John Black died in 1882 at the age of 63.

In 1852, he stood atop a rock at Stony Mountain and gave a sermon during that year's great flood. That rock now stands in John Black Memorial United Church on Henderson Highway and is a reminder of a man who intended to just visit, but stayed for the remainder of his life and created a legacy.

Broken-hearted suitor

A search of the files on Rev. John Black at the Manitoba Archives turns up bittersweet letters revealing there were two men vying for the affections of Henrietta Ross, a woman who would eventually choose John Black to be her husband, leaving John Gunn heartbroken. Accounts vary, some saying Ross had been smitten with Gunn prior to Black's arrival—at which point Black swept her off her feet—and others painting Gunn as a rejected suitor from the start. This letter, written in 1853 by Gunn to Ross's brother, reveals his despair.

I am quite well. You requested me to furnish you with a full statement of this affair between myself and your sister. It would fill a volume. My heart weeps at the thought of the matter. Last time I wrote I told you what had passed and that I had made her an offer and expected to see her and hear what she had to say. I saw her about July 25th and understood she had accepted my offer and we would be married. On August 16th down came a letter, the composition of A. Ross (her father), as I believe, in the handwriting of William (her brother) and the name of Henrietta Ross scribbled on the end. I wrote to William demanding satisfaction for the insult or we would not meet hitherto. His answer was that we would not meet hitherto. I wrote to Henrietta and your Dad, but not one word of an answer. Henrietta has torn my tenderest feelings.

John Gunn Jr. went on to give a lifetime of service to the development of both educational and civic life in Transcona. John W. Gunn Middle School is named in his honour.