

Thomas D'Arcy McGee, Volume I: Passion, Reason, and Politics, 1825-1857 By David A. Wilson

Andrew Smith

Volume 101, Number 2, Fall 2009

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065624ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065624ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Smith, A. (2009). Review of [*Thomas D'Arcy McGee, Volume I: Passion, Reason, and Politics, 1825-1857* By David A. Wilson]. *Ontario History*, 101(2), 257–258. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065624ar>

jects. Some are heroic: for instance, American Oliver Perry's victory over the British fleet during the War of 1812 in the bloody naval engagement at Put-In Bay. Rather less glorious episodes relate to the thousands of gallons of liquor that flowed from Canada south to the US during Prohibition. Still others are almost farcical, such as the comedy of errors that was William Lyon Mackenzie's rebellion, which ended in the Battle of Pelee Island in 1837.

Fraser's writing style is clear and orderly, and his narratives move along briskly. He has undoubtedly been diligent in his research, and has successfully condensed a great deal of reading into a lively recounting. This is true even for stories often told, such as LaSalle's

misadventures and the loss of the *Griffon* in the seventeenth century. Behind each story there is obviously much more information, but Fraser has selected well from the wealth of material available to him. In the end, *Lake Erie Stories* offers neither significant new insights into Lake Erie history, nor radical reinterpretations. Instead, in a style eminently suited to his purpose, Fraser moves the reader through a history of this tempestuous and contested body of water in an entertaining way that must surely leave readers wanting to visit for themselves the sites of the events he so ably describes.

John Summers
Canadian Canoe Museum, Peterborough

Thomas D'Arcy McGee, Volume I: Passion, Reason, and Politics, 1825-1857

By David A. Wilson

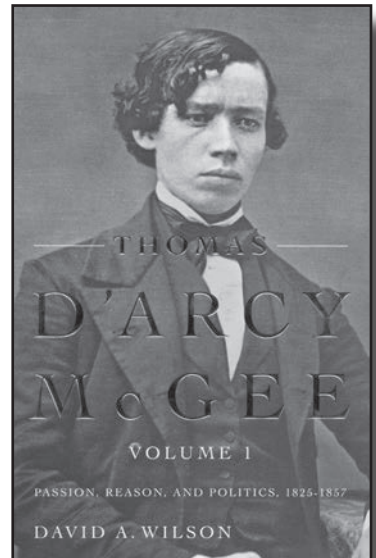
Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008. 448 pages. \$39.95 hardcover. ISBN 978-0-7735-3357-8 (www.mqup.mcgill.ca)

This book is the first installment of David Wilson's two-volume biography of Thomas D'Arcy McGee. Wilson teaches at the University of Toronto and is an accomplished historian of modern Ireland and the Irish diaspora. He has devoted much of his academic career to demolishing historical myths and, as such, is ideally suited to writing a biography of a figure whose importance in Canadian history has grown to mythical proportions. McGee is today remembered as one of Canada's Fathers of Confederation; this book reminds us that McGee was once an Irish revolutionary republican.

Wilson opens by offering extensive information about McGee's family background and formative years in Ireland, and then moves on to discuss McGee's emigration to the United States in 1842, at the age of seventeen, and

his journalistic career in Boston. By the time he returned to Ireland in 1845, McGee had become an important figure in the Irish-American community.

Wilson then discusses McGee's role in the Young Ireland movement, his response to the potato famine, and the events that led up to the failed rebellion against British rule in 1848. McGee escaped to the United States following that episode, where he edited Irish Catholic newspapers in New York, Boston, and Buffalo. Volume One concludes in 1857, when McGee relocated to Montreal. The sec-



ond volume will explore McGee's Canadian years: his role in the politics of Confederation, his opposition to Fenianism, and his assassination in 1868.

The earliest biographies of McGee have emphasized his Canadian career and contribution to Confederation, skipping over his life before reaching Canada, including those years as a revolutionary Irish nationalist. The hagiographic works by Isabel Skelton and Josephine Phelan glossed over McGee's personal failings, most notably his alcoholism. As memories of McGee's tragic death faded, biographers adopted a less reverential approach. In 1972, Timothy Slattery, a Montreal lawyer, published an entertaining wealth of anecdotes, many of them connected to the man's drinking. Slattery was a fine storyteller but not an academic. Robin Burns's PhD dissertation in 1976 went to the other extreme: a very solid work of scholarship but with an extremely limited readership. By synthesizing a vast body of primary and secondary literature into a well-written biography, Wilson has performed an important service.

The impression one gets from Volume One is that McGee was a restless man whose ideas were constantly in flux. In the 1840s, he espoused a non-sectarian Irish nationalism that sought to unite the island's Catholics and Protestants against Britain. Late in that decade he supported the efforts of Italian nationalists to liberate Rome from papal rule, a stance condemned by Catholic clergy in New York. In the 1850s, he embraced ultramontanist, a highly conservative interpretation of Catholicism, and began to equate Irishness with Catholicism. McGee's attitude to the United States also shifted. In the 1840s he had admired its republican institutions and had associated the American Revolution with the Irish struggle against British rule. However, the rise of anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic sentiment in the United States in the following decade forced him to conclude that the prospects for Irish Catholics

were better in British North America. His thoughts on slavery were inconsistent, as were his attitudes toward Jews.

Volume One is largely based on the correspondence of McGee's political associates. Wilson provides little information about McGee's personal life, his marriage and children, probably because few family papers have survived. The main flaw with this book is that Wilson assumes a great deal of prior knowledge on the part of the reader. Terms such as 'Young Ireland' and 'Repeal' are introduced without adequate explanation, unfortunate since so many of the book's readers will be Canadians unfamiliar with the political history of Ireland. More importantly, Wilson could have done a fuller job in situating McGee in his various North American contexts. For instance, the discussion of McGee's move to Buffalo could usefully have included a brief description of that city's then-booming economy. Wilson inserted portraits and short biographies of some of the individuals with whom McGee interacted (such as John Timon, Bishop of Buffalo). A more substantial discussion of the social and economic histories of the communities in which McGee lived would have been a better use of this page space. There is little in this book about the man's personal finances, and I continue to wonder how McGee supported himself and his family while he was writing poetry and giving political speeches. Despite these shortcomings, *Passion, Reason and Politics* is an important work, and many specialists in the history of this period will read it.

Andrew Smith, Laurentian University

Bibliography:

- Phelan, Josephine. *The Ballad of D'Arcy McGee: Rebel in Exile*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1967.
- Skelton, Isabel. *Thomas D'Arcy McGee*. Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1930.
- Slattery, Timothy P. *The Assassination of D'Arcy McGee*. Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 1968.