

Canada's Animal Doctor: Duncan McNab McEachran

by George Thomson

*Duncan McNab McEachran (1841–1924) was an eminent member of McGill University, founder of the Montreal Veterinary College and the man responsible for introducing quarantine to Canada. After graduating in veterinary science, in 1862 he emigrated from Scotland to Canada, at a time when disease was rife amongst cattle in North America. In Canada he set up a practice, lectured, helped to establish the Ontario Veterinary College and, in 1866, moved to Montreal where he founded the Montreal Veterinary College. The College was the first in Canada to introduce the experimental study of animal diseases. In 1889 it became a faculty of McGill University, but was closed in 1903. Meanwhile, in 1867 McEachran co-authored *The Canadian Horse and his Diseases*.*

A recurring theme throughout McEachran's professional life was the danger of importing diseased cattle. He encouraged efforts to prevent the introduction into Canada of foot and mouth disease and other infectious ailments, and organized (1875) the first Canadian cattle quarantine at Port Levis, Quebec. The U.S. quarantine stations were later remodelled on the basis of McEachran's ideas.

*Duncan McNab McEachran (1841–1924), éminent membre de l'Université McGill, a fondé le Montréal Veterinary College. C'est à lui que l'on doit l'introduction de la quarantaine au Canada. Après avoir obtenu son diplôme en sciences vétérinaires en 1862, il a quitté l'Écosse pour le Canada à une époque où plusieurs maladies décimaient le bétail nord-américain. Au Canada, il a ouvert un cabinet, donné des cours, et participé à la création de l'Ontario Veterinary College. En 1866, il arrive à Montréal où il fonde le Montréal Veterinary College. Il s'agit du premier collège canadien à avoir introduit l'étude expérimentale des maladies animales. En 1889, le collège est devenue une des facultés de l'Université McGill, mais a fermé ses portes en 1903. En 1867, McEachran cosigne *The Canadian Horse and his Diseases*.*

Le danger que représentait l'importation de bétail infecté était une préoccupation constante pour McEachran. Il a déployé d'importants efforts pour prévenir l'introduction de la fièvre aphteuse et d'autres maladies infectieuses au Canada, et organisé (1875) le premier poste de quarantaine pour le bétail à Port Lévis (Québec). Les postes de quarantaine américains s'inspirent directement de ses idées.

Most of us today have developed a heightened awareness of food safety. In particular, the concern in Europe with bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) in beef and the outbreak of *Escherichia coli* poisoning in Central Scotland through meat products in late 1996, were poignant reminders. Such worries are not new and were a lifetime obsession of

a Scot who is almost unknown in Britain and has not received the recognition he deserves in his adopted country, Canada: Duncan McNab McEachran, an eminent member of McGill University, founder of the Montreal Veterinary College and the man responsible for introducing quarantine to Canada, and for effecting significant changes to procedures in the

United States.

McEachran was born in Campbeltown, October 27, 1841, the son of David McEachran and Jean Blackney. He was a direct descendant of an eminent Argyll family that can be traced, through the Chiefs of the Clan McEachran, to Toiseach Ban mac Eachairn, who settled in Killellen, Kintyre about 1150. This ancestry includes Colin, to whom a Celtic cross dating to before 1500 was erected. The family was steeped in rural matters, including farming and blacksmithing. They were also very public-spirited – three of them were bailies. This background must have shaped Duncan McEachran's life. His father was senior bailie in the town for six years.

After his school-days at the Free Church School, Duncan entered the Royal Dick Veterinary College in Edinburgh at the age of nineteen. Apparently he was not persuaded to the medical profession, deciding that doctors were already too numerous, while veterinary science was still in its infancy. Very little is recorded of his student life in the city. He graduated as a veterinary surgeon in 1861, in which year he became a Member of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, and in 1873 he was elected one of its original Fellows.

Nobody knows why he left his native land, but he did so in 1862. He settled in Woodstock, Ontario, where he practised as a veterinary surgeon for about three years. North America was in the midst of a plague that was destroying animals, especially cattle. About 1860, Adam Ferguson, Chairman of the Board of Agriculture for Upper Canada, sent George Buckland, a lecturer in Agricultural Science at Toronto University, to Scotland to talk with Professor Dick of Edinburgh. The consequence of this meeting was that Andrew Smith, a recent graduate of the Dick College and college friend of McEachran, was recommended as a desirable person to lecture in Canada. Smith began his lectures in Toronto in 1862. During the foundation of the Ontario Veterinary College, Smith called on McEachran to assist. McEachran rapidly built up a reputation, lecturing on professional subjects. He talked at farmers' meetings, published in the agricultural press and, together with Smith, wrote *The Canadian Horse and his Diseases* (McEachran and Smith, 1867). It is said that McEachran and Smith had divergent opinions on veterinary education and that this was the reason for his move to Montreal in 1866. Either this conflict was not as great as supposed or the

collaboration on the book contributed to the split. Whatever the reason, McEachran's loss to Ontario was strongly felt. The Board of Agriculture passed a resolution expressing regret at his departure, and he was entertained by a large number of friends at a public dinner.

Almost as soon as he arrived in Montreal, McEachran acquired a circle of influential friends, knowledgeable of his reputation. Under the auspices of Dr. George Campbell, President of the Board of Agriculture and Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at McGill University, then a college, and Sir William Dawson, Principal of the University, McEachran established the Montreal Veterinary College on September 26, 1866 with a grant of \$300 from the Provincial Government. This college was initially situated at the corner of Craig and Bleury Streets, but in 1875 was moved to a new building, built by McEachran at his own expense, at 6-8 Union Avenue. By then, the importance of the college was being recognised and it was awarded a grant of \$1800 for ten years to accommodate thirteen French speaking and six English speaking students for free education. The college was unique in having separate French and English speaking sections and was the first to introduce the experimental study of animal diseases in Canada. In 1889 it became a faculty of McGill University with the title, *The Faculty of Comparative Medicine and Veterinary Science*. University documents show that "Professor McEachran lectures on Veterinary Medicine and Surgery." Curiously, they also record that "Professor C. McEachran lectures in Veterinary Obstetrics and Pathology." However, there are no known members of the family that joined Duncan in Canada. In its time the college and faculty were very successful. The *Montreal Gazette* of March 30, 1877 reported:

The report of the Montreal Veterinary College is very favourable to that institution, showing the animals who had received surgical aid to be 1664 horses, 50 cows, 1 sheep, 1 pig, 116 dogs and 5 cats. It is recommended that a grant of \$2000 be asked from the Government for the appointment of a French Lecturer in the College.

The faculty survived until 1903 when it was closed, largely because of the lack of financial support, having only three candidates in its last year. Cameron (1938) believed that its downfall was due to it setting standards that were too high for its time.

McEachran retired at the age of seventy to Ormstown, District of Beauharnois, residing at Ormsby Grange, a substantial Quebec mansion where, according to the *Huntingdon Gleaner*, he lived quietly sorting out his records of 60 years and watching the results of his labours.

Duncan McEachran appears to have been quite a social personality, although he never achieved the international reputation of his colleague Sir William Osler, the great American physician, whose overall achievements were less than those of McEachran. Osler and McEachran became very close social and professional friends, although their characters were quite different. Osler wrote to McEachran:

You are one of my closest and best friends and I owe a great deal to you for your kind encouragement in my early days.

Osler was introduced to Montreal social life by McEachran who wrote:

On my suggestion he became a member of the Microscope Club. This Club was of a combined scientific and social character.

An item in the *Montreal Gazette* of 30 March 1877 reported:

Mr. McEachran entertained the examiners, successful students and professor to supper in the evening, when a very pleasant time was spent, and Dr. Osler was the recipient of a very complimentary address, accompanied by a purse of \$100, to aid him in scientific research.

Apart from his practice and professional teaching, Duncan pursued many other activities. In 1875, he founded the Veterinary Medical Association, of which he was president in 1877 and later ex-officio Honorary President. For ten years he was Veterinary Surgeon to the Montreal Field Battery of Artillery. He pioneered large scale ranching in Canada, together with Senator Cochrane, establishing the Cochrane Ranch in 1881 of which Duncan was Vice-President in 1883. In that year he became general manager of the Walrond Cattle Ranch Company, of which Sir John Walrond was President. This was one of the largest and most successful ranches in Canada. Duncan was made a Justice of the Peace in 1886 with jurisdiction over the entire Province of Quebec. He acted as an expert judge of hackneys at the National Horse Show, New York in 1891 and 1892 and judged thoroughbred horses at the World's Columbia Expo in Chicago in October 1893. He was the promoter of

the Ormstown Exhibition from 1909. Politically he was a liberal/conservative, but was not active in this respect. Duncan is listed as a subscriber to Cuthbert Bede's *Argyll's Highlands* (Bede, 1902).

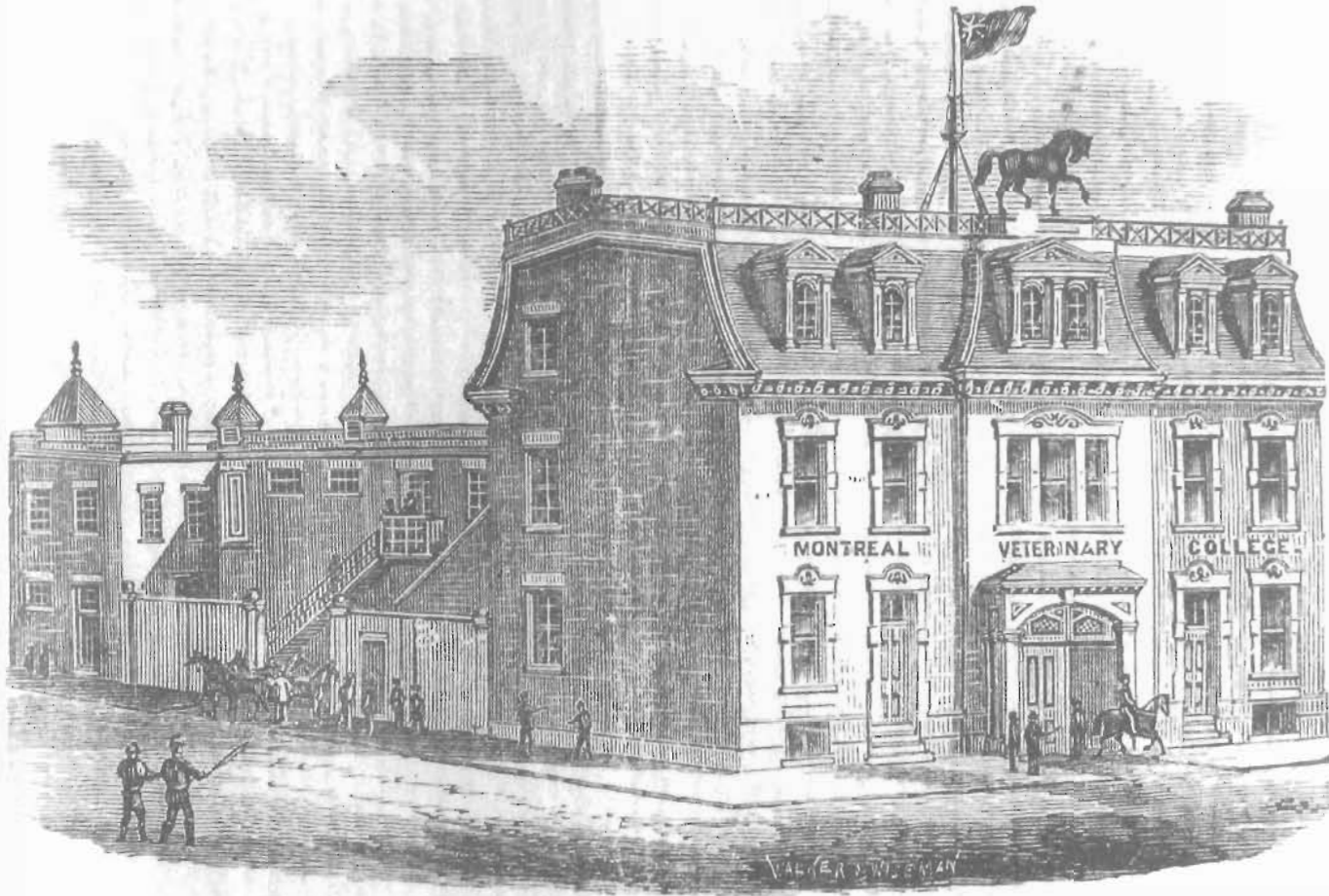
In 1905 McEachran was drawn into one of the greatest, if not the greatest, lawsuits fought in the United States until recent years. The Anaconda Cooper Mining and Smelting Company had been sued by the stockmen of Deer Lodge for two million dollars and a permanent injunction to cease working. McEachran took the case on behalf of the company. The ranchers claimed that their animals were being killed by the fumes from the smelter that was poisoning the hay and grain. The case was heard between 1906 and 1907 at which there were 250 witnesses, 300 examinations and 850 exhibits in evidence, including cartloads of animals, vegetation, photos etc. The records of the case extended to 25,135 pages. The judge took two years to come to his decision in favour of the company.

Duncan McEachran was widely travelled in North America. In 1881, he visited Alberta and the Northwest Territories (the Bow River) via the Missouri River, across the plains from Fort Benton in Montana to Morleyville. On his return he published descriptions of the journey (McEachran, 1881) that clearly exhibited his high moral character.

Having three days to wait for our steamer, we made what purchases we required, and took advantage of an offer of a high Government functionary to show us the "city [Bismarck] by gaslight." Our first visit was to a "keno" gambling house, where we stayed but a short time, the disgusting sight of seeing gambling in its worst form, and the foul air and still fouler language soon drove us from the place, none of us caring to stay long enough even to comprehend the game, which was new to us.

He was equally unimpressed by the "opera house":

Ascending the narrow stairway we reached the gallery, which was partitioned off into a row of curtained boxes, in which were seated in lounging attitudes the better-off class dressed in the height of regular fashion, rings and paste diamonds forming a conspicuous part of their dress. These boxes are connected with the stage by a narrow stairway on each side, by which the actresses reached the boxes and spent their time between the acts, being regaled by beer or



NOS. 6 AND 8 UNION AVENUE, MONTREAL.

Montreal Veterinary College
(McGill University Archives, PR001239)



Duncan McNab McEachran

champagne according to the taste of the occupants; about half a dozen women acted as waiters and their dress, manners and loose conduct and conversation indicated the life of immorality which they led. The scenery and surroundings were of the most primitive nature, and the singing and acting were execrable. While we were looking on a large woman with a voice like a cow-horn attempted to sing a vulgar ditty, "Champagne and oysters."

The orchestra consisted of four pieces, lead by a cornet player who, as one of our party remarked, must have been eating onions, so disagreeable was the toot-toot of his brassy instrument.

Clearly, McEachran was not without a sense of humour.

Some of our party pleased the braves [of an Indian reservation] by giving them tobacco and the fair maidens by candies, of which they seem very fond. One of our party, more gallant than the rest, became fascinated by the pleasant smile, the white teeth and pretty face of a dusky maiden, jokingly expressed a wish to have her for his own, a wish which, unexpectedly to him, was communicated by an interpreter to her mother and brother, who agreed to make her his for the consideration of four ponies, which would cost about \$60 to \$80. This little bit of romance furnished us with no little amusement. However, our jocular friend, thinking discretion the better part of valour, and not knowing exactly how his first wife would approve the addition to the family circle, added another proof to the adage that men are deceivers ever. It was evident that, whatever the feelings of the maid may have been, her brother was not a little disappointed in being done out of his ponies.

Above all, McEachran was seriously concerned about the dangers of importing diseased cattle, a theme that runs through his whole professional life. He encouraged efforts to prevent the introduction of foot and mouth disease, pleuro-pneumonia and other infectious ailments from European countries. He repeatedly went to England demanding changes in their manner of treating stock. His ideas were sometimes ridiculed but, in 1875, he persuaded the Canadian Government of the need to establish a quarantine system. In April 1876, he was appointed Chief Veterinary Inspector of Canada, a post he held until

1902, in which year he became Honorary Veterinarian to the Government of Canada. As first inspector of stock, he organised the first Canadian cattle quarantine at Point Lévis, Quebec. A few years later, the United States quarantine stations were remodelled on the ideas set out by McEachran. After 1902 he was appointed an Honorary Consultant Veterinarian to the Canadian Government. Rose (1888) recorded:

The efficiency of the quarantine for cattle under his management has been thoroughly tested on two occasions vis. 1885, when the contagious disease, "foot and mouth," or vesicular epizootic, was twice brought into quarantine from Great Britain, so thorough was the quarantine that not only did it not extend beyond, but it did not even affect any other cattle, of which there were several hundreds within the enclosure. The prompt and effective manner in which pleuro-pneumonia was dealt with in 1886, when that fell destroyer was imported in a herd of Galloway, proved beyond doubt the efficiency of the quarantine and the ability of the inspectors to deal with contagious diseases.

In January 1879 he was commissioned to investigate pleuro-pneumonia (lung plague) that was prevalent in the United States, visiting New York, Long Island, **New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia** and the **District of Columbia**. His work led to important steps being taken by the **British and Canadian governments** to prevent the import of diseased animals. He was also instrumental in establishing a **Health of Animals Bureau in Ottawa** and wrote the **Contagious Diseases Animal Act**.

McEachran was greatly concerned for both animal and human well-being. He frequently consulted with medical practitioners on pathological matters. He was especially interested in many aspects of Montreal's sanitary conditions. He recognised that milk could communicate infections and diseases, but it was 15 years before his recommendations were taken seriously. These were that all milk offered for sale should be regularly inspected as should all dairy establishments. A more disturbing tale is given by Osler and Clement (1883). The influence of McEachran's thinking on Osler can be seen in the following extract:

In the interests of public health, it is a matter of great importance that the food supply of cities should undergo strict supervision, with

a view of excluding possible sources of disease...Speaking of Montreal, meat inspection consists in the examination of the carcasses of all animals exposed for sale or killed at the abattoir, and its superficial character is clearly shown by the results of this examination...

The Highland Shepherds are stated to eat without ill effects the flesh of animals which have died of anthrax. In the case of pork it is not so much the flesh of salted meat which has been known to produce sickness as when made into sausages and brawn (head cheese)...this is not surprising to anyone who has watched their manufacture...Odds and ends go for mince meal, and too often, bits of old meat which is just beginning to turn. The experience is only too common of tasting in a mouthful of sausage the disagreeable flavour of a morsel which is high.

McEachran, in an address to graduating students, summarised the concern:

It is the veterinary surgeon's duty to acquire such a knowledge of disease and its symptoms and those of animals that he can protect his fellow man from what may be hurtful.

McEachran was never wanting of the novel, but effective, solution to a problem. There was an outbreak of influenza amongst the horses in New York that brought transport to a virtual standstill. He went to the Brooklyn Station, chose a number of horses and ordered frequent stops and a barrel of ale and gruel. The horses were to take a drink at every stop. In a few days the services were back to normal.

Duncan McEachran's other academic achievements included publications in the *American Veterinary Review* (1870 onwards), fellowship of McGill University (1890), Dean of the Faculty of Comparative Medicine and Veterinary Surgery (1890-1903), Doctor of Veterinary Surgery (McGill University, 1890), Professor of Veterinary and Medical Surgery (1890-1903), Emeritus Professor of the Faculty of Comparative Medicine and Veterinary Surgery (1905-1924) and Doctor of Laws (McGill University, 1909). When McGill celebrated its centenary in 1922, graduates gathered to honour the founder of the Veterinary College and an impressive tribute was paid to him by Dr. Veranus A. Moore, Dean of New York State Veterinary College at Cornell.

Duncan was married on June 9, 1868 to Esther, third daughter of Timothy Plaskett of St. Croix, West Indies when he resided in Montreal. This family connection perhaps explains the apparent wealth accrued by McEachran early in his academic career. Duncan and Esther had two children, Evelyn Victoria, born on May 24, 1869 and Jeanie Blackney, born on September 19, 1871. Evelyn Victoria died in May 1874.

Duncan died at Ormstown, Quebec on October 13, 1924.

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