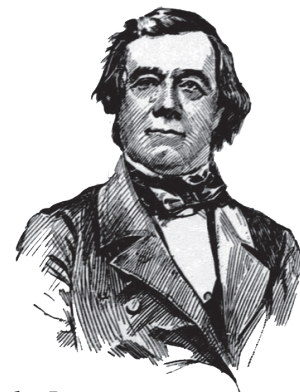


Lawrence O'Connor Doyle – Wit and Beheader of Eagles?



One of the wittiest parliamentarians to emerge from Nova Scotia, and possibly all of Canada, Lawrence O'Connor Doyle had a sharp tongue that kept his colleagues in stitches. In this article, the author relates some of the most well-remembered of his offerings, some perhaps more mythic than others.

David McDonald

Lawrence O'Connor Doyle was born in Halifax on February 27, 1804 and was a member of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly from 1832-1840 and 1843-1855. In 1848, he was appointed a member of the first responsible executive in the British Colonies. He was a strong supporter of parliamentary reform and introduced bills and resolutions that helped Nova Scotia win responsible government. Some of these measures included: opening the Legislative Council to the public; advocating for elections every four years instead of every seven years; and fighting for fishermen to have the same right to vote as farmers did. The purpose of this sketch is not to highlight his political career, but to describe some of his antics. The great orator, Joseph Howe, who was also his friend and fellow reformer, said that Doyle "was the wittiest man he had ever heard or read of." Howe's letters indicate that "ten thousand of [Doyle's] jokes are scattered about the Province."

The most often told story about Doyle in Province House is that he beheaded plaster eagles that decorate some of the window and door surrounds on the 2nd floor. I cannot, however, find any primary source material to corroborate this story. Rumour has it that he was incensed with the boundary dispute over timber between Maine and New Brunswick (Aroostook War) and lopped off the heads in disgust because he thought they were too American. According to the *Journals of the House of Assembly*, Edmund Murray Dodd was the most outspoken member over this border dispute. However, Mr. Doyle was a very witty man, so it was definitely in his character.

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The following stories are from George Edward Fenety's *The Life and times of the Hon. Joseph Howe, the great Nova Scotian and ex-Lieut. Governor; with brief references to some of his prominent contemporaries.*

The Intoxicated Member

The hon. gentleman had the floor, but was in such an intoxicated state, that he was obliged to clutch the back of a chair in order to maintain his perpendicular. Members felt that they were in for a long (anti-*Scots Act*) speech, and there was no way of compelling silence. At length an hon. member cried out "I move that the Speaker take the chair." The Bacchanalian member, thinking it was meant that the chair that he depended on was to be taken from him, at once attempted to resume his seat, but in doing so he came with a crash to the floor—whereupon L. O'Connor Doyle remarked "the hon. gentleman has lost his seat, but he still has the floor."

Kill-Kenny

It is related that Sir Edward Kenny had a dinner party in his house at Halifax, at which Doyle was present. In taking a glass of wine the host swallowed a piece of cork, which happened to be in the glass, and it came very near choking him, whereupon after the danger was all over one of the guests remarked "you came very near going to Cork that time, Kenny." "I think," said Doyle, "it came nearer to Kill-Kenny."

The Halifax Robbing Room

Over the Barristers' door, when the Court was held in the Province Building, the words "Robbing Room," were inscribed upon a sign board. Some Wag added another letter B, so that it was made to read robbing room, which annoyed the Lawyers very much.



When Doyle came along he remarked: No wonder at the annoyance, for the sting is in the Bee.

The Rat Terrier

Another of Doyle's jokes was made on one occasion when the House was in session. An honourable member was declaiming bitterly against a fellow member who had promised him his support in a certain measure but had backed out. At this moment a terrier dog had found his way into the room and barked frantically, to the great disgust of the Speaker and Sergeant-at-Arms. "Put him out, put him out," was the universal shout—whereupon Doyle rose and said "Mr. Speaker, the dog means no harm - he only smells a rat!"

First of the Season Salmon

A wayside Inn of repute on the eastern road from Halifax to Cumberland in the forties of the last century, was Schultz'. This Inn was known far and near throughout the Province. It was situated about 18 miles from Dartmouth. These were the days of coaching before the railway and luxurious Pullman sleepers and parlour cars. A story was told of an old inhabitant of Halifax of a joke played by that noted wit

of the middle of the nineteenth century, on a very narrow clergyman at Mrs. Schultz' table. Lawrence O'Connor Doyle and some of his learned brothers at the Bar, were riding circuit, and arrived at the Inn at dinner time. Among the groups of passengers who came, among the others to taste the Schultz viands, was a gentleman of the cloth known as a no-popery advocate, and gourmand besides. On the table, as part of the menu, was a fresh salmon, the first of the season, taken the day before at Grand Lake. When the company found out that a "first of the season salmon" was to be served, they looked at the clergyman and sighed. "Larry," noticing their distress, comforted them with the remark, "leave it to me." When all were seated, Doyle usurped the clergyman's privilege saying grace before the meal. As he proceeded, he began making the sign of the cross of the fish. This so excited "no-popery" anger of the man of cloth that he got up from the table, and asked Schultz to serve him pork cabbage at a side table. This left the salmon to the other guests, who quickly disposed of it with relish and much amusement.

Over the years some of these stories have changed. There are two renditions of the missing tailor, for example:

"Did you hear," said a friend one day, "that Street the tailor has been found in Argyle Street?" "Yes," was Doyle's answer; "but did you hear how they made the discovery? An old woman got a stitch in her side, after drinking her tea, and she swore there must be a tailor in the well."

A witticism of Doyle's was as follows: A prominent tailor of Granville St. suddenly disappeared and no tidings of him could be obtained. Some months after his disappearance, the well of one of the public pumps was being pumped out for cleaning purposes, when the body of the missing tailor was found at the bottom. About the same time a number of old ladies were drinking tea together when one of them was taken suddenly with a pain in her side. When Doyle heard of it, he said it was a STITCH caused by drinking water from the pump where Street, the tailor drowned himself.

These stories clearly indicate that Doyle was well-liked and had a great sense of humour. If the story of the eagles is true, it is rather odd that it has not been recorded in print. Howe said of Doyle, "he is the only man I ever knew who has not an enemy; whose humour never flags, whose wit never wounds, who, by common consent is everywhere welcome, and who, if ubiquity and immortality could be conferred by universal suffrage, everybody would vote should enliven every scene of festivity down to the end of time." Doyle moved to New York to be near his sister. He died there on October 28, 1864.

Sources

Fenety, George Edward. *The Life and times of the Hon. Joseph Howe, the great Nova Scotian and ex-Lieut. Governor; with brief references to some of his prominent contemporaries.* St. John, NB : E.S. Carter, 1896. pp. 364-365 and 368-369.