

## THE STUDY OF CANADIAN CHURCH HISTORY

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**T**HOSE who deplore the slow progress of Canadian church history towards acceptance as an independent branch of study in the academic field may take consolation from the following remarks on ecclesiastical history in general made by Professor Norman Sykes in an inaugural lecture delivered in Cambridge in 1944:

Whereas the professors of divinity may trace their ancestry to the Lady Margaret or to that majestic lord who, in breaking the bonds of Rome suffered a few doles from the financial profits to fall to the universities, and whilst the regius professorships of modern history enjoy the relatively respectable lineage of two centuries' continuance, the elevation of ecclesiastical history to equal dignity belongs in England to the academic reforms of the nineteenth century.

He then went on to relate that although in Scotland the ancient universities of Edinburgh, St. Andrews, and Glasgow, possessed chairs of ecclesiastical history from the first half of the eighteenth century, yet at that early date the subject was neglected, indifferently taught, and consequently unpopular.

Thus if even in the older homes of learning in Great Britain ecclesiastical history was comparatively late in achieving independent status and distinct professorships, it should occasion little surprise that the story should be repeated in the younger and later developed divinity schools of Canada. Furthermore, if this was the case with the subject in all its breadth and fullness, there should be still less ground for surprise at the slow rise of the much more circumscribed topic of Canadian church history to a recognized place in the theological curriculum.

And yet the subject has much to commend it, and not for the theological student alone. The place of religion in human affairs has been eloquently proclaimed by such masters as Arnold J. Toynbee and Lord Acton. It need not be argued at this late date that the story of churches and churchmen is part of the whole Canadian story, and that Canadian history cannot be fully or accurately represented without giving to the churches a larger place than they have been accorded hitherto. It is evident that in early Canada church and state went hand in hand, and that any attempt to write the history of New France without putting ecclesiastical affairs in a prominent position would be quite impossible. It has not been recognized that the same is true, although to a lesser degree, for the century after the Cession of 1763. A strong attempt was made at that time to reproduce an established church in the British North American colonies, and this attempt

meant that political, ecclesiastical, and indeed economic concerns in these colonies were closely intertwined. This connection is well illustrated by the clergy reserves which are the most striking example in our history of the state endowment of a church, and which were secularized just a century ago. Since the disappearance of church establishments from Canada the separate histories of church and state may be more clearly discerned. Yet the continuing national importance of the churches, and their prominence in helping to pioneer the prairies, the west, and the north, make it necessary for the student of Canadian life to give them full consideration.

The stream of Canadian history has two sources; on the one hand France, the British Isles, and western Europe generally; and on the other the Thirteen Colonies and the United States. Europe is the racial home of the greater part of our population, and these European immigrants naturally attempted to reproduce in British North America the institutions which their ancestors had known for centuries. Hence French Roman Catholics brought at first the seventeenth century fervour of the church of their homeland, the religious orders, some Gallicanism, more ultramontanism. Irish Roman Catholics brought their fierce ecclesiastical loyalty. Anglicans contributed the close cooperation of church and state, the distinctive emphases of the Church of Ireland and the Scottish Episcopal Church, and a tendency to reflect the changing lineaments of the church of the motherland. Presbyterians brought their established church, and in addition many of the ecclesiastical divisions of Scotland. Wesleyan Methodists and other Methodist groups transplanted from Great Britain their characteristic beliefs and practices.

Moreover, most of the religious stocks which came directly from Europe already possessed branches in the Thirteen Colonies, and these American churches strongly influenced their Canadian counterparts. Methodists, Congregationalists and Presbyterians (whose traditions now merge to a great degree in the single channel of the United Church of Canada), Baptists, Lutherans, Anglicans, Friends—all had been more or less Americanized, or were open to American influence in their new northern home. Some sects, indeed, originated in the United States and came to Canada without a European background.

Thus in order to gain a full understanding of the Canadian churches the student should be familiar with the ecclesiastical history of the United States as well as of Europe. With such knowledge he is better equipped to analyze the various ingredients which combine to make up Canadian Christianity, and to learn how the old churches adapted themselves to the new dominion. Indeed, such is the intrinsic value of the subject that it could take its place among the humanities and become one of the roads over which young Canadians might travel to attain a liberal education.

But the story of the Canadian churches should be studied for itself alone, not as a means to any further end. That story does indeed illuminate secular history, and it does require for its better comprehension a broad

background knowledge of general church history, but when read for its own inherent interest it yields rich rewards of instruction and inspiration. The thoughtful student of the subject will discover the truth of Bacon's dictum that 'histories make men wise', and also that such wisdom brings both sadness and gladness. In his perusal of the missionary annals of the churches in this land he will learn what men and women impelled by the Christian Gospel will do for their fellows. The Jesuits of Huronia, the Moravians of the Labrador, the tireless evangelists and missionary priests of the Maritimes and the Canadas, the volunteer clergy who served on Grosse Isle during the cholera epidemic of 1847, the patient, obscure men and women who worked among immigrants, Indians, and Eskimo, in the west and the north, these Christian souls carry on the tradition of apostolic days. Canada, indeed Christendom, should be proud to own them, to read of their works of faith and their labours of love.

But in order to instruct and inspire, records must be preserved and used, books must be written, teachers must be trained, and these aims are being accomplished all too slowly. Theological schools even yet neglect Canadian church history, and their collections of books and pamphlets are thin and poverty-stricken. The universities have done better in gathering materials, but up to a quarter of a century ago postgraduate students who wished to do research in Canadian church history received scanty encouragement. It is not difficult to see why these conditions should have prevailed. The purpose of the theological college is to give basic training to candidates for the Christian ministry, preferably in the shortest possible time. Parishes and missions on pioneer, rural, and urban frontiers must be manned, and studies must be so chosen as to achieve this end. Curricula are crowded, and newly developed courses must jostle and compete with traditional subjects if they are to establish themselves. As for the universities, teachers in graduate faculties were not persuaded of the significance of Canadian church history, and preferred to direct their students to the not yet fully tilled fields of politics and economics. But these conditions are changing. Universities now recognize that the history of the development of Canadian churches is at least as important as the history of any other national institution. Theological colleges now admit that church history did not come to a full stop a century or so ago, and that it is all to the good if their graduates know how Canada came to be a professedly Christian land.

Despite the unorganized state of Canadian church history studies a vast amount of material has been preserved, and much has already found its way into print. Denominational histories and biographies of church leaders put in an early appearance. Examples of these are Bettridge's *A Brief History of the Church in Upper Canada*; Akin's *Rise and Progress of the Church of England in the British North American Provinces*; Playter's *The History of Methodism in Canada*; Patterson's *Memoir of the Rev. James Macgregor*; Richey's *Memoir of the Late William Black*. Lists of works mentioned in Castell Hopkins' *Canada, an Encyclopaedia of the*

*Country*, and *Canada and Its Provinces* indicate a growth in the number of publications as the nineteenth century drew to a close. Within the present century the flow of printed books, pamphlets, and periodical literature, swelled by reports of regional church organizations such as synods, has increased in volume. When to these publications are added the unprinted theses of graduate students, and the manuscripts in the dominion, provincial, and denominational archives, the materials for Canadian church history are discovered to be wide in their extent.

The Quebec Diocesan Archives, for example, whose contents are catalogued in the Provincial Archivist's report for 1946-47, is an admirably arranged repository and an indispensable source for information concerning the old diocese of Quebec, which covered both Lower and Upper Canada. Nor is it exclusively Anglican in the breadth of its interest; many references to Methodists, Presbyterians and Roman Catholics are to be found in its various series. The Provincial Archives and the Library of Laval University contain part of the wealth of source material available in the Province of Quebec for Roman Catholic church history. Manuscript material relating to the Presbyterian Church in Canada in the Library of Queen's University alone is great in its bulk. From the point of view of scope and richness the Public Archives of Canada at Ottawa is perhaps best of all, and its contents have the additional advantage of being catalogued, and in some cases calendared, in successive annual reports. Toronto may be numbered among important research centres because of the splendid collections of printed and manuscript matter preserved in the Public Library, the provincial Department of Archives, the United Church Archives, the University of Toronto Library, and some college libraries. In eastern and western archives and libraries from Halifax to Vancouver, and in Great Britain, further collections of documents of primary importance are to be found.

Thus the wide dispersal of materials for his work is one of the greatest difficulties in the path of the research student, and these difficulties will continue to exist unless some effort is made to remove them. A historical records survey in church history would be of the greatest value, both as a guide to workers and as a revelation of the greatness of Canada's documentary heritage in this respect. The interim production of papers similar to Nelson R. Burr's "Sources for the Study of American Church History in the Library of Congress" (*Church History*, September, 1953) would be most helpful. This article, it may be remarked, gives a good idea of the amazing labours of American archivists and librarians in this field, and causes the reader to look forward to the day when Canadian educationists will be as thoroughly convinced of the importance of the subject as Americans are. But before a survey can be undertaken and brought to conclusion much cataloguing and classifying must be done, and search must be made for further historical materials which are at present in private hands, or which are hidden away in obscure places.

Canadian church historical works at present available vary in their value. Some are models of their kind, but all are fragmentary. Many are incomplete through lack of source material. Some are inaccurate. Others betray political and confessional animosity. A few are written as if other bodies of Christians did not exist, or as if such existence were irrelevant or annoying. Yet many have a deep interest for the reader, whatever the merits or demerits of a particular volume may be. Some of the older books especially were written by men whose pens flowed more smoothly than those of modern, possibly more scientific, historians. There is a need for many more special studies, parish and congregational histories, constitutional histories, denominational histories, accounts of special missionary, immigration, and educational projects.

But it is idle to expect a continued fruitful interest in Canadian church history until study books have been written, and to this necessary task competent historians should turn their attention. An indication of the kind of book which is called for is given in the words of Professor Herbert Butterfield written some ten years ago:

The historian seeks in the first place to 'resurrect' something or other that has happened in the past. Uncoiling the cinematographic film he projects for us the people, the stories, the scenes, the events of a chosen period. One half of him seeks to know more about the men and the events. . . . but. . . . another half of his mind strains to discover some meaning in the procession of the centuries, some pattern in the shifting combinations of circumstance. The historian moves forward to other purposes therefore, and his narrative turns into exposition, his pictures acquire depth and structure.

The truth uttered by Professor W. E. Collins of King's College, London, half a century ago should also be kept in mind when such a project is being considered: "Ecclesiastical history cannot be isolated from history as a whole. . . . It is not the history of one section or one element of human life, but of all human life as seen from one point of view." This point of view is, of course, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, and the extension of the Incarnation in the Church. But even if the wished-for textbooks be deficient in exposition, or if they do not attain the high ideal put forward by Professor Collins, yet some such books we must have if students are to be encouraged to take up Canadian church history seriously. Books written on the lines of William Warren Sweet's *Story of Religions in America*, or *Religion in Colonial America* would be welcome and useful.

The slow but sure permeation of Christendom by the ecumenical spirit presents a new challenge to church historians, including those of Canada. It has already influenced the writing of such a massive work as K. A. Latourette's *History of the Expansion of Christianity*, and the same author's *History of Christianity*, where efforts are made to paint a picture on a global canvas, and to tell the story of Orthodox and Roman Catholic as well as Protestant churches down to the present day. The recently published composite *History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948*, edited

by Ruth Rouse and S. C. Neill, has a similar basis. It should be possible, now that barriers of ignorance and suspicion are being removed, to approach the study and the writing of Canadian church history without giving too much prominence to

... old, unhappy, far-off things  
and battles long ago,

and to recognize gladly what religious groups and churches other than our own have done to create a Christian nation, to build up the Kingdom of God in this land.

Part of the difficulty under which the study of Canadian church history labours may be attributed to a current lack of historical sense. Church builders in the last century possessed this sense. They were conscious of laying permanent foundations for future construction, and they fed their hopes by dreaming of the spacious days to come when their churches, then small and weak, would provide Christian leadership for a great nation. The turmoil of the twentieth century has shortened the views of many, has led them to break faith with the past, to be careless of the records of past achievement, to immerse themselves in the present, and to be sceptical about the future. A revived study of Canadian church history would correct this tendency.

In order to advance the fortunes of this study, archives should be further developed to house what still remains despite accidents, past neglect, and often heedless destruction. People must be encouraged to entrust their church relics to expert keeping. Cataloguing of books and manuscripts must be undertaken. Historical records scattered throughout Canada and Great Britain must somehow be made available for study, either by transcription or microfilm. And since these activities cannot be carried on without money, both private donors and central church boards must be shown their importance. Grants in aid of publications, even if small at first, would bring hope to many a frustrated and discouraged student that the results of his toil would eventually get into print.

In accomplishing these aims the assistance of experts will be needed, but just as necessary will be the aid of those who would not claim that name. Interested ministers and laymen can give great help. The story of two old Anglican congregations on the Quebec-Vermont border will illustrate this. St. Armand East, as mission and parish, has had an existence of one hundred and forty-seven years. For the greater part of this time two successive rectors and their families cherished the parish papers. Today these papers constitute a valued part of the church archives of Quebec and Montreal. In the neighbouring St. Armand West stands a building dating from 1827, long used as a parsonage, and still a dwelling house. Succeeding occupants and owners of this old house preserved the library so well that when it was broken up only a few years ago it represented the accumulation of more than a century. Fortunately these books and papers have also been

preserved, and they come down to the present day in all their fascination because former generations took thought for generations to come. But for two circumstances such as these one may record many instances of thoughtless waste not only of the historical capital of the church but of the whole community.

The thousands of ministers and priests throughout Canada should set about the collection and preservation of their congregational records—registers, minute books, scrapbooks, printed reports, files of bulletins, magazines and church newspapers, pictures, monumental inscriptions—materials, in short, from which a comprehensive parish history could be compiled. If each clergyman would set his hand to write such a history or to promote its publication, so much the better. In no way can one gain a better sense of what is worth preserving and what is not. These collected records should be filed under simple headings, or placed in chronological order in cardboard filing boxes, and these boxes should be kept in a safe or, better still, entrusted to a central archives for security. It is a result of such thoughtful care that collections of documents from the past have been handed down to the present. With little change the glowing words of Joseph Howe might be adopted as a motto by those who have at heart the promotion of Canadian church history:

A wise nation preserves its records, gathers up its muniments, decorates the tombs of its illustrious dead, repairs its great public structures, and fosters national pride and love of country by perpetual reference to the sacrifices and glories of the past.