Boundless Dominion: Providence, Politics, and the Early Canadian Presbyterian Worldview, 1815-1875

by

Denis Beer McKim

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Department of History
University of Toronto

© Copyright by Denis McKim 2011
Boundless Dominion: Providence, Politics, and the Early Canadian Presbyterian Worldview, 1815-1875

Denis McKim

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Department of History

2011

Abstract

Insofar as the word “Presbyterian” is recognized at all in the early twenty-first century, it is understood to be virtually synonymous with such terms as “austere” and “parochial.” Judging by the actions and attitudes of the denomination’s staunchest adherents in nineteenth-century Canada, such associations are by no means historically unfounded. Devout early Canadian Presbyterians exhibited an unmistakable capacity for, among other things, strict Sabbatharianism and sectarian conflict. Yet there was more to the denomination in nineteenth-century northern North America than an unbending insistence on the importance of Sabbath observance and a seemingly irrepressible penchant for inter- and intra-denominational disagreement, influential though such tendencies were. Early Canadian Presbyterianism was galvanized by an elaborate worldview, the essential characteristics of which contrast sharply with the denomination’s dour reputation. This worldview drew together members of an institutionally incoherent, geographically dispersed denomination and equipped them with an invigorating conceptual synthesis of distinctiveness, duty, and destiny. The central component of the Presbyterians’ worldview was a desire to facilitate God’s
achievement of dominion, or spiritual sovereignty, over northern North America, and to promote an uncompromising Protestant piety as extensively and as energetically as possible throughout the wider world. The realization of these inter-related objectives hinged on the propagation at home and abroad of the denomination’s characteristic theological doctrines and liturgical practices. Fervent Presbyterians were convinced that, in combating sinfulness in nineteenth-century Canada as well as elsewhere in the world, virtue would prevail definitively over sinfulness and the groundwork would be laid for the Christian millennium, a glorious thousand-year age in which violence, poverty, and injustice would be entirely unknown.
Acknowledgments

I did not write this dissertation alone. A number of people contributed in one way or another to the study that follows, and it is a pleasure to be able to acknowledge their efforts here. I am grateful to the staff, faculty, and graduate student community in the Department of History at the University of Toronto for creating a stimulating scholarly environment in which to study and work. For facilitating the research on which this dissertation is based I am indebted to the staff of the following institutions: the Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives; the United Church of Canada Archives; Library and Archives Canada; the Archives of Ontario; the Queen’s University Archives; Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management; and the Media Commons, Robarts Library, University of Toronto. I am especially grateful to Bob Anger and Kim Arnold of the Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives, where much of my research was carried out. Every historian should have the opportunity to work with such kind, conscientious professionals.

I had the good fortune of belonging to a writing group whose members—Ariel Beaujot, Susana Miranda, Alison Norman, Nathan Smith, and Cara Spittal—have been enormously helpful and unfailingly supportive. This dissertation has benefited greatly from their insights and advice. Members of the writing group as well as Julie Gilmour, Brad Miller, and Julia Rady-Shaw generously assisted with my preparation for the dissertation’s defence.

The writings of John S. Moir, doyen of Canadian Presbyterian historiography, have been an invaluable resource. Stuart Macdonald bolstered my knowledge of Christian and Presbyterian history and offered perceptive comments on several of the dissertation’s chapters. Heidi Bohaker insightfully assisted with the third chapter, while Todd Webb provided helpful historiographical references.

The Beer and McKim families have, as always, been hugely supportive. My grandfather, Samuel H. Beer, provided particularly important encouragement and characteristically incisive advice prior to his death in 2009. I am grateful for his contributions and miss him very much.

It is difficult to accurately convey the depth of my gratitude to the members of my dissertation committee for their guidance and friendship. Steve Penfold’s imaginative
contributions to early brainstorming sessions and penetrating comments on the various chapters have strengthened this dissertation substantially. I am grateful for his thoughtful involvement in this project, and am an admirer of his wide-ranging historiographical interests and expertise. Arthur Silver, who graciously acted as one of my committee members while in retirement, has been immensely influential throughout my time as a graduate student. Discussions with Professor Silver on, among other things, the politics and culture of nineteenth-century Canada have been among the most intellectually gratifying experiences of my life, and I am grateful for his assiduous comments on numerous aspects of my dissertation. Mark McGowan has been an exceptional supervisor. He has given unsparingly of his time and knowledge, offered perceptive feedback on the various chapters, written a dizzying number of reference letters, responded to an even larger number of e-mails, and served throughout as a model of scholarly enthusiasm and dedication. I am also grateful to Jan Noel, who posed stimulating questions during the dissertation’s defence, and to Marguerite Van Die, who provided astute insights in her role as external examiner.

Notwithstanding the many individuals who have assisted with the research and writing of this dissertation, the author is solely responsible for any errors and/or infelicities that may appear in the pages that follow.

My sister, Jessica Runge, and her family have been an important source of comfort and good cheer. I am inspired by Helen Dewar’s scholarly aptitude and devotion, and am deeply indebted to her for her love and support. Her contributions to this project have been indispensable.

My parents, Frances Beer and David McKim, have contributed to this dissertation in every conceivable way. For this reason, and countless others, it is dedicated to them.
Table of Contents

Abstract
   ii

Acknowledgments
   iv

Table of Contents
   vi

List of Tables
   vii

Introduction:
Confronting a Caricature
   1

Chapter One:
The Wonders Wrought: Providence, Empire, and the Moral Foundations
   of Early Canadian Presbyterianism
   48

Chapter Two:
Exiles from their Own Realm? Church, State, and the Politics
   of Early Canadian Presbyterianism
   99

Chapter Three:
Beneath the Canopy of Heaven: Nature, Order, and the Presbyterian Conception
   of the Northern North American Wilderness
   152

Chapter Four:
Summoning Up History: Myth, Millennium, and the Making
   of Usable Presbyterian Pasts
   196

Conclusion:
Boundless Dominion
   241

Bibliography
   253
List of Tables

Table One:
Distribution of Presbyterians in Mid-Nineteenth-Century British North America
28
Introduction: Confronting a Caricature

And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.
—Genesis 1:28

The time seems about due for a new history-writing which will attempt to explain the ideas in the heads of Canadians that caused them to act as they did, their philosophy, why they thought in one way at one period and in a different way at another period.


In *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich* Stephen Leacock satirizes the fictional Presbyterian church of St. Osoph. So quarrelsome was the congregation, he explains, that as a result of an extensive series of disputes it severed its ties to virtually every other Presbyterian group. Implicit within Leacock’s assertion is an irreverent critique of the wider denomination’s reputation for fractiousness. St. Osoph’s, he elaborates,

seceded forty years ago from the original body to which it belonged, and later on, with three other churches, it seceded from the group of seceding congregations. Still later it fell into a difference with the three other churches on the question of eternal punishment, the word “eternal” not appearing to the elders of St. Osoph’s to designate a sufficiently long period. The dispute ended in a secession which left the church of St. Osoph practically isolated in a world of sin whose approaching fate it neither denied nor deplored.1

Satirizing St. Osoph’s—and by extension the larger Protestant denomination to which it belonged—was surely Leacock’s main objective. Yet it should not go unacknowledged that his sketch also sheds valuable light on the actual Presbyterian ethos of the day.

Among the most revealing aspects of Leacock’s account is his depiction of the congregation’s unrelenting tendency toward fragmentation. The fractured state of mid-nineteenth-century British North American Presbyterianism throws into relief the “real life” existence of such a predisposition. Owing to a litany of disputes—the most intractable of which pertained to the acutely contentious church-state controversy—the denomination found itself divided into no fewer than eight major subgroups as well as several smaller factions, which existed independent of the larger institutions. The

splintering of British North American Presbyterianism can thus be viewed as evidence of the fragmentary tendency that is exhibited to such a seemingly absurd degree in Leacock’s St. Osoph’s.2

Leacock’s sketch alludes to another theme that featured prominently within nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism. The austere attitude displayed by the congregation of St. Osoph’s regarding the issue of eternal damnation was evident during the late nineteenth-century heresy trial of D.J. Macdonnell. This individual, who served as Minister of St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, Toronto, expressed misgivings in 1875 regarding the Westminster Confession of Faith—the fundamental articulation of Presbyterian doctrine—and its uncompromising position on the duration of the reprobate’s ultimate punishment. He publicly admitted to being wracked by “moral confusion” as a result of the perceived tension between the anxiety-provoking notion of unending punishment and the idea of a merciful God. For Macdonnell, the apparent incompatibility of eternal damnation and divine benevolence proved agonizing. How, he wondered, could both be true?

Macdonnell’s expressions of uncertainty regarding the Westminster Confession rankled with doctrinal conservatives, who charged that his remarks amounted to an assault on denominational orthodoxy. Macdonnell was consequently plunged into a lengthy heresy trial that was administered by the Presbyterian Church in Canada. As the trial unfolded it emerged that a majority of Macdonnell’s ministerial colleagues, who held fast to the orthodox Presbyterian position on eternal damnation, were arrayed against him. The situation was eventually defused as a result of Macdonnell’s agreement, in 1877, to adhere to a declaration of piety that was deemed acceptable by the prosecuting party. That the charges against Macdonnell, which likely would have ended his career, were ultimately dismissed suggests that at least a modicum of “liberality of thought” was permissible within late nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism. Still, the fact that influential segments of the denomination objected—in certain instances vehemently—to his expressions of uncertainty attests to the existence within the Presbyterian community

2 For an overview of the church-state controversy as it relates to Presbyterianism see John S. Moir, “‘Who Pays the Piper…’: Canadian Presbyterianism and Church-State Relations,” in Presbyterianism in Canada: Essays by John S. Moir ed., Paul Laverdure (Gravelbourg, Saskatchewan: Gravelbooks, 2003); and John Webster Grant, Divided Heritage: The Presbyterian Contribution to the United Church of Canada (Gravelbourg, Saskatchewan: Gravelbooks, 2007), 28-57.
of a doctrinal rigidity that was entirely consistent with the dour ethos caricatured in Leacock’s sketch of St. Osoph’s.\(^3\)

The Presbyterian reputation for fractiousness and austerity satirized in Stephen Leacock’s account is thus by no means historically inaccurate. Yet there was more to early Canadian Presbyterianism than seemingly innumerable division-inducing squabbles and impossibly austere debates revolving around the issue of eternal damnation. The denomination was galvanized throughout the nineteenth century by a grand worldview, the essential features of which contrast markedly with the caricature of the prickly Presbyterian. This worldview—and by “worldview” I mean a comprehensive conception of the universe and its inhabitants—drew together members of an institutionally divided, geographically diffuse denomination and equipped them with a compelling conceptual synthesis of distinctiveness, duty, and destiny. Illuminating the principal features of this worldview is the primary objective of this dissertation, which is a thematic intellectual and cultural history of early Canadian Presbyterianism.

This dissertation contends that the central component of the early Canadian Presbyterian worldview was a desire to facilitate God’s achievement of dominion, or spiritual sovereignty, over nineteenth-century Canada and to promote an unalloyed Protestant piety throughout the wider world. These inter-related objectives were to be realized through the propagation at home and abroad of the denomination’s theological tenets and liturgical traditions. Ardent early Canadian Presbyterians aimed to establish a godly society in which biblical precepts would suffuse everyday life, inform the decisions of state officials, reinforce the authority of governmental institutions, and promote rigorous standards in both public and private morality. Accompanying this goal was a yearning to promote Protestant precepts and practices throughout the entire world, where pagan hordes in places like Asia and Africa were allegedly mired in a soul-imperiling

---

darkness. Devout members of the denomination were convinced that, in purging the world of sinfulness, they would hasten the arrival of the Christian millennium itself.4

Why Presbyterianism? Why concentrate on this one particular Christian denomination instead of, say, the Quakers or the Baptists or the Salvation Army or some other group? Given the multiplicity of religious communities that existed within nineteenth-century Canada, why does Presbyterianism merit such sustained and undivided attention? And why focus on a single denomination instead of two, three, or more? Would not a wide-ranging discussion that took into consideration the aims and activities of several Christian communities yield a more comprehensive—and thus more revealing—account of nineteenth-century Canada’s complex religious terrain?

This dissertation concentrates on Presbyterianism for four reasons. First, Presbyterianism was a numerically large denomination that jostled with the Anglicans and the Methodists for the largest number of adherents within northern North American Protestantism throughout the nineteenth century, with the greatest concentrations of Presbyterians residing in Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Upper Canada/Canada West/Ontario. The sheer size of the denomination—which by the early 1870s accounted for upwards of one quarter of Canada’s nearly two million Protestants—goes a considerable distance in explaining why Presbyterianism was one of nineteenth-century northern North America’s most influential religious communities.

Second, nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism boasted numerous prominent individuals as members, whether it was in the domain of private enterprise—John Redpath, Isaac Buchanan—politics—William Morris, George Brown—education—Thomas McCulloch, George Monro Grant—or, as was often the case, in some combination of the above. Such figures’ affiliation within Presbyterianism—which frequently expressed itself in a fierce and unwavering devotion to the denomination and its desire to achieve spiritual dominion over nineteenth-century Canada and to propagate

---

4 In making general references throughout this dissertation to the pre-Confederation period, the term “British North America” will be used. An exception to this pattern will be references to phenomena that occur exclusively in Upper and Lower Canada, or in their successor colonies of Canada West and Canada East, respectively. In such instances the terms “Canada” and “Canadians” will be employed. Needless to say, these terms will also be used in reference to developments occurring throughout northern North America in the post-1867 period. When referring to the nineteenth century as a whole, however, I will employ the terms “nineteenth-century Canada” or “early Canada,” which for the purposes of this dissertation are interchangeable.
an uncompromising Protestantism throughout the wider world—arguably secured for this church a degree of influence within northern North American society that it otherwise would not have attained, notwithstanding its numerically substantial membership.

Third, nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism was a remarkably diverse socio-cultural entity. Members of the denomination, particularly in the mid-nineteenth century, found themselves scattered into a multiplicity of autonomous factions that exhibited an array of divergent attitudes on such polarizing issues as the church-state relationship. Adherents of the denomination also hailed from a variety of homelands, including the Scottish Highlands and Lowlands, Ulster, the American republic and different parts of northern North America. Early Canadian Presbyterians also differed from one another in terms of political affiliation, with adherents of the denomination advocating everything from staunch toryism to unabashed liberalism; and in terms of socio-economic class, as evidenced by the disparity between the “ultra-respectable” early and mid-nineteenth-century Church of Scotland Presbyterians concentrated in cities like Halifax and Kingston, who conceived of themselves as members of a prestigious religious establishment, and the comparatively unrefined early and mid-nineteenth-century Scottish Presbyterian immigrants that settled in rough-hewn communities situated along Lake Erie’s northern shore, who in numerous instances viewed religious establishments as synonymous with doctrinal corruption and inherently unjust temporal hierarchies.\(^5\) An examination of Presbyterianism, then, sheds light not only on one of early Canada’s many religious groups, but also on the tremendous pluralism that typified nineteenth-century northern North American society.

And fourth, an investigation of early Canadian Presbyterianism sheds additional light on the enormously influential Christian and Protestant cultures to which the denomination belonged. As elsewhere in the world, religion existed as one of nineteenth-century Canada’s most important cultural phenomena. The centrality of religion—and in particular Christianity, the principal expression of religiosity in nineteenth-century northern North America—was in large part attributable to its multi-faceted significance. Christianity informed popular attitudes toward such fundamental religious considerations

as piety, sinfulness, salvation, and damnation, thus molding the spiritual outlooks of millions of people.

Yet religion’s importance transcended the expressly religious realm. In shaping notions of morality, Christianity tacitly influenced popular attitudes toward such significant—and seemingly secular—issues as work, leisure, commerce, material acquisitiveness, gender relations, and sexuality. Christianity was also tightly intertwined with notions of socio-economic class, a fact that was as true for non-Presbyterian groups as it was for Presbyterians. For example, groups like the Anglicans, who during the first half of the nineteenth century enjoyed the significant benefits that derived from their status as members of a legally established institution, were commonly associated with northern North America’s social, political, and economic elite, while groups like the Baptists, who exerted substantial influence in backwoods settlements that were sprawled along the British North American frontier, were frequently linked in the popular consciousness with a considerably more modest socio-cultural element. Christianity also bore upon notions of ethnicity. For instance, English-speaking Roman Catholics came to be associated with Ireland, while Presbyterians were to a great degree associated within the nineteenth-century Canadian consciousness with Scotland (though both groups contained a greater degree of ethnic diversity than their reputations might lead one to believe.)

The significance of religion—and especially Christianity—in early Canadian society was thus by no means confined to explicitly religious phenomena. Rather, it permeated countless aspects of everyday life, ultimately influencing popular attitudes toward a multitude of important concerns, including ones that on the surface appeared to be wholly secular. Thus, an investigation of Presbyterianism, in addition to elucidating the traits, experiences, and objectives of one distinct Christian denomination, also allows us to understand better the immensely influential religious culture of which the

---

denomination formed part. Rooted in spiritual conviction, this culture elicited the strongest of emotions—hope, awe, love, fear—and prompted numerous individuals to serve as missionaries, temperance crusaders, and Sunday school teachers in an effort to render Christianity the moral bedrock of northern North American society.

While Presbyterians were inarguably part of northern North America’s religious culture, at a more precise level they were also involved in a decidedly Protestant culture that crystallized during the mid-nineteenth century. Why specify that Presbyterians were involved in a “Protestant” culture instead of simply stating that they were part of a “religious” or “Christian” culture, one that implicitly included the numerically large and culturally influential Roman Catholic community? Because early Canadian Presbyterians, much like their counterparts in other Protestant denominations situated elsewhere in northern North America and the wider western world, frequently defined themselves in contradistinction to Catholicism. Linda Colley has suggested that anti-Catholicism served as a veritable sine qua non for the formulation during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of an integrated British cultural identity. The same could be said for the emergence in nineteenth-century Canada of a coherent Protestant culture. Whereas Protestantism was frequently portrayed through such media as sectarian newspapers, religious pamphlets, and sermons as dynamic, virtuous, pious, and enlightened, Catholicism was routinely depicted as its antithesis—torpid, decadent, superstitious, and benighted.

This tendency to use Catholicism as the foil against which Protestantism attempted to define itself intensified during the mid-nineteenth century. Developments occurring in this period both domestically—including the anti-Catholic remarks of the former monk Allessandro Gavazzi; the increasingly strident attitudes exhibited by the Loyal Orange Order; and the perceived threat of French-Canadian Roman Catholic “domination” within the Canadian legislative assembly—and elsewhere in the world—notably the Oxford Movement, through which divines associated with that university gravitated toward Roman Catholic doctrines and traditions; attempts on the part of the papacy to reinvigorate English Catholicism; and the rise within western Christendom of

---

an uncompromising form of Catholicism known as ultramontanism—emboldened anti-Catholic zealots and contributed to the consolidation of a Protestant culture that bound together members of several denominations, including numerous Presbyterians. Indeed, anti-Catholicism, in conjunction with temperance campaigns, anti-slavery critiques directed at the American republic, and demands for stricter laws regarding Sabbath observance, constituted the fundamental moral imperatives around which an eclectic nineteenth-century Protestant culture was ultimately able to coalesce. This culture, which drew on a heady combination of evangelicalism and proto-middle class social values, sought to recast British North American society in its own image.8

Presbyterian involvement in nineteenth-century Canada’s Protestant culture was entirely compatible with expressions of intra- and inter-denominational difference and diversity. As mentioned, members of the Presbyterian community frequently quarreled with one another over such division-inducing issues as church-state relations, resulting in the fracturing of the denomination. Presbyterians also routinely found fault with other Protestant groups. Consider the denomination’s criticisms during the first half of the nineteenth century of the emotionally unchecked revival spectacles of such radical evangelical groups as the Baptists and the Methodists. These festivals, which the Nova Scotia Presbyterian minister and educator Thomas McCulloch castigated as so many “revolting displays of human debasement,” were frequently denounced for their unbridled displays of religious exuberance, for their lack of emphasis on rigorous scriptural explication, and for their alleged inability to bring about enduring conversions on the part of the participants to a life of Christian virtue.

8 The Protestant culture that emerged in mid-nineteenth-century Canada derived its basic motive force from the beliefs and initiatives of enthusiastic yet respectable denominations like the Presbyterians and the Methodists. It was also galvanized by the energetic activism of a number of multi-denominational voluntary organizations, including temperance and missionary societies; the Lord’s Day Alliance; and the Young Men’s and Women’s Christian Association. Alternate expressions of Protestant piety—including quasi-aristocratic High Church Anglicanism and reputedly uncouth radical revivalism—were increasingly dismissed as obsolete vestiges of a bygone era. John Webster Grant, A Profusion of Spires: Religion in Nineteenth Century Ontario (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988); William Westfall, Two Worlds: The Protestant Culture of Nineteenth-Century Ontario (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1989); T.W. Acheson, “Evangelicals and Public Life in Southern New Brunswick, 1830-1880,” in Religion and Public Life in Canada: Historical and Comparative Perspectives ed., Marguerite Van Die (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); Neil Semple, “The Quest for the Kingdom,” in Old Ontario: Essays in Honour of J.M.S. Careless eds., David Keane and Colin Read (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1990).
Presbyterian criticisms of other Protestant groups softened as the nineteenth century wore on. This process was attributable to the fact that groups like the Baptists and Methodists had by the mid-nineteenth century largely shed their reputation for emotionally uninhibited displays of religious enthusiasm, a phenomenon that coincided with their absorption into British North America’s increasingly bourgeois socio-cultural mainstream. Yet while Presbyterian objections to the doctrines and actions of other Protestant groups grew less harsh as the nineteenth century unfolded, members of the denomination nevertheless retained a strong sense of theological and liturgical distinctiveness that served to differentiate them in meaningful ways from other churches. Thus, in attempting in 1870 to lay the groundwork for a dominion-wide institution that would draw together nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism’s numerous constituent parts, the Reverend William Ormiston emphasized the fact that, for all of their differences, the various factions were bound together by a shared commitment to the denomination’s essential characteristics—namely, the “venerable” doctrines entrenched in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Presbyterianism’s decentralized system of “Church Government.”

How can we reconcile the Presbyterians’ capacity for intra- and inter-denominational disagreement, and for embracing those traits that served to distinguish them from other denominations, with their involvement in a larger Protestant culture? How can it be that members of the denomination throughout the nineteenth century differed—often sharply—both with one another as well as with other Protestant groups while at the same time belonging to a coherent multi-denominational religious community? Answers to these questions can be gleaned from the work of Tony Claydon and Ian McBride, who have examined the relationship between Protestantism and national identity in Britain between the mid-seventeenth and mid-nineteenth centuries. Throughout this period, they have argued, several of Britain’s Protestant groups—for whom expressions of anti-Catholicism was an essential common denominator—

---

conceived of their homeland as a godly Protestant nation. Yet Claydon and McBride point out that seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century British Protestants were simultaneously attuned to the existence within their communities of such ungodly phenomena as widespread sinfulness and sectarian fragmentation. In accounting for the apparent tension between the British Protestants’ idea of a righteous nation and their awareness of impiety and religious disunity in their midst, Claydon and McBride have posited that Britain’s Protestant culture under Stuart and Hanoverian monarchs can most profitably be understood not as an actual entity, but rather as an aspirational entity. That is, while Britain’s Protestants indeed recognized the existence within their communities of vice and inter-denominational strife, they also drew on compelling aspirations regarding the ideal of an unambiguously Protestant nation in which sinfulness and sectarian squabbling would be utterly unknown.11

Applying Claydon and McBride’s ideas regarding Britain’s aspirational Protestant culture to nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism is instructive. Though members of the Presbyterian community differed with one another as well as with other Protestant groups over a litany of issues, they were also drawn together by the inspiring idea of a harmonious multi-denominational religious community that would be unified in its efforts to combat impiety and encourage heightened standards in societal virtue. The existence of intra- and inter-denominational disagreement and diversity was thus entirely compatible with the crystallization of an eclectic Protestant culture that included members of several denominational traditions, not the least of which was Presbyterianism. Accordingly, Thomas McCulloch, the very individual who denounced the radical evangelicals’ revival spectacles as so many stomach-churning exhibitions of “human debasement,” could also declare with equal conviction that the British Empire’s Protestant churches—including those situated in British North America—were “the glory of Christ,” and were endowed by God with a responsibility for nothing less than the spiritual redemption of the world.12

---

This dissertation will primarily concern itself with the chronological period between 1815, which witnessed the beginning of a decades-long surge in transatlantic British migration to northern North America and a corresponding expansion in the membership of British North American Presbyterianism, and 1875, the year in which the various Presbyterian subgroups managed to coalesce and establish a dominion-wide institution. Yet it is chiefly concerned neither with early Canadian Presbyterianism’s numerical growth nor with its institutional evolution, phenomena that have been ably discussed elsewhere. It concentrates instead on aspects of the denomination’s history that have received comparatively scant scholarly attention—early Canadian Presbyterianism’s intellectual and cultural substance. Rather than offering a linear survey of Presbyterianism’s maturation in northern North America that begins with the denomination’s growth in the early nineteenth century and culminates in the realization of a unified national church, this dissertation offers a thematic investigation of the prevailing ideas—the irreducibly important attitudes, assumptions, anxieties, and objectives—that circulated within the denominational consciousness and determined the contours of the early Canadian Presbyterian worldview.

The dissertation’s bracketing dates—1815 and 1875—will not be viewed as impermeable chronological barriers. Though it will concentrate on developments taking place between those two years, significant developments occurring both before 1815 and after 1875 that were relevant to the formulation of the early Canadian Presbyterian identity will be integrated into my discussion as well. Why? Because complex historical phenomena seldom exhibit discrete beginnings and definitive endings. While catalytic individual occurrences may serve to spark larger events—the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the stock market crash of October 1929—the events themselves are often the result of a more elaborate and longstanding cluster of factors. And while definitive actions may appear to bring a significant event to an end—Wellington’s victory at Waterloo, the nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki—the impact of such actions frequently continues to be felt in significant—and often unanticipated—ways for a long time to come. Thus, in taking into account the significance of certain

developments occurring before 1815 and after 1875, this dissertation implicitly acknowledges that historical phenomena rarely—if ever—adhere to neatly delineated chronological parameters.13

Fine. But why assume responsibility for such a lengthy period of time? In attempting to assess upwards of six decades of history does the historian not run the risk of providing a superficial analysis that fails to account for fluctuating cultural, economic, and political circumstances? Focusing on several decades of history provides an opportunity to ascertain which ideas resonated in the early Canadian Presbyterian consciousness over a sustained chronological period. In concentrating on the ideas articulated by adherents of the denomination over more than sixty years of history it becomes apparent which priorities and preoccupations played the most significant role in shaping the Presbyterian worldview, and which issues proved to be comparatively ephemeral when it came to their impact on the denominational identity.

This dissertation concerns itself with the five northern North American provinces—Lower Canada/Canada East/Quebec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia (including Cape Breton, which existed as an independent British North American colony between 1784 and 1820), Prince Edward Island, and Upper Canada/Canada West/Ontario—that contained the most substantial Presbyterian contingents during the nineteenth century. (As mentioned, the largest nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterian communities in terms proportion existed in Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Upper Canada/Canada West/Ontario, while smaller—though not insignificant—denominational contingents existed in parts of Lower Canada.) Occasional references will also be made to the small Presbyterian community that lay to the west of the Great Lakes (and, especially, the Red River settlement), while Newfoundland, whose Presbyterian population throughout the nineteenth century was miniscule, has been omitted from this study altogether.

Why concentrate on so many provinces? In discussing several geo-political entities does the historian not run the risk of failing to account for the diverse cultural,

13 My thinking on the issue of historical periodization has been influenced by the writings of Hayden White. See White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” in The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation ed., White (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).
economic, environmental, and political circumstances that existed within each one? Would it not be preferable to devote one’s attention fully to one province, or perhaps to one region within one province, thus allowing for a more exhaustive exploration of significant phenomena occurring within it? And does the decision to consider several northern North American provinces as a whole not imply that they were part of a single community, whereas in actuality the various provinces to which I have referred exhibited widely divergent characteristics and identities?

The various northern North American provinces that I have chosen to concentrate were by no means homogeneous. Nor were they subsumed within one monolithic community. On the contrary, the various provinces possessed heterogeneous characteristics that served to differentiate them from one another in substantive ways both before and after Confederation.

Early Canadian Presbyterianism was equally diverse. As noted, the various factions that comprised the wider denomination frequently quarreled with one another over such issues as the church-state relationship, resulting in the fracturing of the denomination. Presbyterians also differed from one another depending on their geographic surroundings. Whether or not they belonged to the same Presbyterian subgroup, the experiences of members of the denomination living in, say, Montreal inevitably differed from those of members of the denomination residing along Nova Scotia’s northern shore, given the dramatically divergent settings in which the two groups existed.

Yet for all of their undeniable diversity, nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians also had important things in common. This was especially true when it came to the life of the mind. Presbyterian inhabitants of the various northern North American provinces conceived of themselves as belonging to a larger conceptual community that had two essential dimensions. The first was spatial. Early Canadian Presbyterians in numerous instances envisioned themselves as part of a transoceanic British community that transcended the arbitrary borders of political geography. This community drew together devout members of the denomination scattered throughout the Empire in a spatially diffuse yet spiritually coherent unit.
Early Canadian Presbyterianism embraced an elastic entity known as the “British connection.” Contributing to the imperial fervour that prevailed throughout much of nineteenth-century Canada—including the Presbyterian community—was a sustained surge in transatlantic British migration. Between the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the advent of Canadian Confederation a half-century later approximately five million Britons elected to leave their homeland and take up residence in either North America or Australasia. Between 1815 and 1824 and 1830 and 1834 a majority of these immigrants—totaling more than half a million people—opted to relocate to various parts of British North America, with the largest number of people eventually settling in Upper Canada. British North America’s English-speaking population, which prior to 1815 had been overwhelmingly American, was radically transformed—so much so that by the time of Confederation roughly sixty per cent of the Canadian population was of British birth or extraction. This influx of British immigrants included numerous Ulster Presbyterians (a majority of British North America’s Irish population prior to the mid-nineteenth century was Protestant) as well as close to 200,000 Scots, a majority of whom were Presbyterian. Nineteenth-century Ulsterites and Scots opted to emigrate for a variety of reasons, including the availability of land in British North America; the agricultural clearances that necessitated immigration for numerous tenant farmers situated in the Scottish Highlands; and the existence of overseas kin networks that on many occasions persuaded reluctant individuals to make the transoceanic voyage and join family members residing in British colonies of settlement.

Similar to many other nineteenth-century northern North American communities both religious and secular, the Presbyterians’ sense of attachment to Great Britain manifested itself in a multiplicity of ways—in a sense of ethnic identification with the


peoples of the British Isles; in celebrations of such British institutions as the monarchy and parliamentary democracy; in invocations of British values like the inviolate nature of private property and the supremacy of the rule of law; and in paeans to the unrivalled military, economic, and geopolitical supremacy of the British Empire. The elasticity of the Presbyterians’ attachment to Great Britain did not detract from its forcefulness as a cultural phenomenon. On the contrary, the fact that the “British connection” could be interpreted in several ways allowed it to be deployed for a multitude of reasons, and in a multitude of geographic and chronological contexts. The malleable nature of the Presbyterians’ imperial enthusiasm therefore enhanced its potency as an intellectual impulse within the denominational consciousness.

Nor was the Presbyterians’ pronounced sense of Britishness incompatible with the denomination’s extensive cultural and historical links to Scotland, where Presbyterianism had existed as the official national religion since the late seventeenth century. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Scots as well as many Scots-Irish—Ulsterites of Scottish descent—derived substantial pride from their military, economic, and political contributions to the Empire’s expansion and development, and immigrated in disproportionately large numbers to British colonies of settlement. Scottish enthusiasm for the British Empire intensified following the decisive defeat in the mid-eighteenth century of the Highland insurgents who had sought to topple Britain’s reigning House of Hanover, an event that was followed by an aggressive—and largely successful—campaign to dilute Highland distinctiveness and promote loyalty to the Hanoverian regime in Scotland’s hitherto unruly northern and western regions.

Scottish and Ulsterite Presbyterian immigrants and their descendants living in northern North America were no exception to this pattern of increasingly pervasive imperial enthusiasm. The elasticity of Britishness as a cultural phenomenon ultimately allowed for the simultaneous co-existence of plural identities. Presbyterian imperial

fervour was compatible not only with a sense of Scottish and Scots-Irish distinctiveness, but also with a sense of local, provincial and, after 1867, incipient national pride in northern North America. And, as with other nineteenth-century Canadian groups both religious and secular, the Presbyterians’ sense of emotional attachment to the Empire and the ennobling principles and institutions for which it was thought to stand was systematically reinforced in northern North America through public holidays like Victoria Day, which was initially celebrated in 1849 in Toronto, and the valorization within the education system of such British heroes as Drake, Wolfe, Wellington, and Nelson. Fired by a multi-faceted sense of imperial fervour, early Canadian Presbyterians—whether they were born in Scotland, Ulster, or northern North America—integrated themselves into a transoceanic imagined community that united devout members of the denomination throughout the British Empire.

The second dimension of the Presbyterians’ conceptual community was temporal. Members of the denomination living in nineteenth-century Canada conceived of themselves as fitting comfortably within a grand tradition that tied together a succession of divinely favoured peoples in an unbroken chain that extended majestically throughout time. This tradition began with the establishment two thousand years before Jesus’ birth of the covenantal pact between God and the ancient Israelites and included such iconic—and fiercely pious—entities as John Calvin, John Knox, the Scottish Covenanters and the English Puritans.

According to the elaborate historical mythology that permeated the denominational consciousness, members of this grand tradition—including the Presbyterians themselves—were responsible for facilitating the onward march of western civilization and for propagating as widely as possible the soul-saving Christian Gospels. The Presbyterians’ sprawling historical narrative was by no means devoid of adversity. On the contrary, the virtuous protagonists who were responsible for the advancement of such phenomena as piety, justice, and liberty frequently did battle—sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively—with a variety of demonic enemies, including alleged Roman Catholic and Episcopalian oppressors. The eventual triumph of good over evil—which followed the climactic clash between the two that had been foretold in scripture—would be all the more exhilarating in view of the various adversaries that had been vanquished
by righteous individuals and groups along the way. By contributing to this glorious historical tradition ardent members of the denomination believed that they were accelerating the arrival of the Christian millennium, a glorious thousand-year epoch in which poverty, suffering, and injustice would cease to exist.

When it came to the life of the mind, then, nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism was not confined to a religiously divided and geographically fragmented “community of communities.” Devout adherents of the denomination belonged, instead, to a spatially and temporally vast conceptual unit. This entity cross-cut the institutional cleavages that separated the various Presbyterian subgroups and extended well beyond the territorial boundaries of the individual northern North American provinces.

What is Presbyterianism? When did it come into existence, where did it emerge, on which precepts and institutions does it rest, by which means was it propagated throughout different parts of the world, and why in the event was it able to exert such significant influence within nineteenth-century northern North America?

Presbyterianism’s origins can be traced backwards in time to early modern Geneva, where the French-born theologian and Reformation icon John Calvin settled in the 1530s. Calvin’s Reformation counterpart, Martin Luther, had sought to draw a distinction between that which in his view was religiously essential—the doctrine of justification by faith alone, the notion that the Bible was the only legitimate wellspring of religious knowledge—and that which was religiously ephemeral—sacerdotal rituals, the ecclesiastical structures of the Roman Catholic Church. While Calvin echoed Luther in rejecting Roman Catholicism’s allegedly illegitimate authority, he also aimed to reconcile what he identified as the substance of pure religion with the administrative and disciplinary mechanisms of a church that had been purged of Roman traditions and influences.19

Humanity, on account of the Original Sin that had been transmitted from Adam to all subsequent generations, was in Calvin’s conception mired in a state of abject moral depravity from which it was incapable of escaping on its own accord. For Calvin, a sovereign God was exclusively capable of facilitating the redemptive process through

which undeserving sinners would be reconciled with their omnipotent Creator and permitted to spend an eternity in Heaven. It was imperative in Calvin’s view for a purified church to enforce strict standards in popular morality so as to counter humanity’s intrinsic tendency toward depravity and disobedience. The church’s disciplinary efforts, the logic ran, would give rise to a godly society, or commonwealth, over which an unalloyed Protestant piety would reign.  

Calvin rejected as unscriptural the hierarchical structures of the Roman Church, advocating instead a decentralized form of church governance that featured ecclesiastical leadership by lay elders and clergymen. Geneva’s civil authorities were charged with responsibility for supporting the church’s efforts to promote heightened standards in societal virtue, but were expressly prohibited from interfering in its affairs. Absolute obedience on the part of Geneva’s citizens to the church’s rulings was essential in Calvin’s understanding in order to promote an optimal degree of virtue among the reprobate and to shield the pious from the potentially corruptive encroachments of sin—or, as Calvin himself put it, to ensure that those “who lead a filthy and infamous life may not be called Christians, to the dishonour of God,” and that “the good be not corrupted by the constant company of the wicked, as commonly happens.”  

Calvinistic teachings and institutions, which constituted one branch of “Reformed” Protestantism, made their way through substantial swaths of northern Europe beginning in the mid-sixteenth century as a result of the recently invented printing press as well as patterns of group migration and commercial intercourse among adherents of this particular expression of Christianity. The Reformed tradition found particularly receptive audiences in parts of France, the Netherlands, and Scotland. Within these settings the system of ecclesiastical governance that originated in Calvin’s Geneva would be adapted to larger communities, resulting in the emergence of several of the most important characteristics of what would come to be known as Presbyterianism.  

---


22 See Petegree, Duke, and Lewis, eds., Calvinism in Europe.
Scotland officially embraced Protestantism in 1560 as a result of the Scottish Reformation, through which Papal authority in that nation was repudiated and a Protestant Confession of Faith was adopted. This event went further than its English counterpart in terms of eradicating perceived vestiges of Catholic iconography and ritualism, contributing to the dour form of worship for which Scottish Protestantism—and especially Presbyterianism—would come to be known.23 John Knox, a radical Protestant educator and preacher, was perhaps more responsible than any other figure for promoting in Scotland Calvinistic tenets and traditions. Knox had studied under Calvin while in Geneva, where during the 1550s he sought refuge from persecution at the hands of England’s Roman Catholic Queen, Mary Tudor. Knox’s Calvinistic convictions informed his contributions to the *First Book of Discipline* (1560), a landmark text in Scotland’s religious history to which he as well as several of his Protestant counterparts contributed. The book declared that such Roman Catholic ecclesiastical traditions as the mass should be “utterly repressed” in view of the fact that they were “damnable to mans salvation.”24

Andrew Melville emerged as Scotland’s principal Protestant following Knox’s death in 1572. Like Knox, Melville had studied in Geneva, where he absorbed the austere teachings of Calvin’s disciple, Theodore Beza. Melville’s most significant contribution to Scottish Protestantism appeared in the *Second Book of Discipline* (1578), an immensely influential text composed by Melville as well as several his fellow Scottish Protestants. The book included a denunciation of Episcopacy—the hierarchical system of ecclesiastical polity employed by Anglicans, among other denominations—as well as a call for church governance by elected lay elders, or “presbyters,” and ministers who would be equal to one another in ecclesiastical status. These individuals would cumulatively exercise the authority of bishops under the Episcopalian system, constituting a “corporate episcopacy.” Melville and his collaborators were convinced that basing church governance on the “mutuall consent of brethrene” who would enjoy “equalitie of power” with one another would “tak away all occasioun of tyranny” within

---

the Scottish church. This form of ecclesiastical polity, which was patterned on the Calvinistic system, serves as the essence of Presbyterian church polity.

Presbyterianism’s distinctive system of church governance, which crystallized during the seventeenth century, consisted of a series of church courts. These included, in descending order, a national General Assembly, regional Synods, local presbyteries, and individual church, or “kirk,” sessions, which presided over the administration of congregational affairs and disciplined supposed moral transgressors. Kirk sessions consisted of lay elders, who were elected by members of the congregation, and the congregation’s minister, who served as the session’s chairman, or “Moderator.” Elders and ministers representing various Presbyterian sessions participated in the larger Synodical and presbyterial meetings as well as the General Assembly. Members of individual Presbyterian congregations selected—or “called”—prospective ministers, who were known as either “probationers” or “licentiates,” prior to their official appointments. The congregation’s selection would then by ratified during a presbyterial gathering. These figures were typically expected to have obtained a university degree as well as formal theological training, which reveals the denomination’s emphasis on the importance of education.

Scottish Presbyterianism’s autonomy would be challenged beginning in the early seventeenth century by the Stuart monarchs who reigned over both Scotland and England as a result of the merging of the two nations’ monarchies—the Union of the Crowns—in 1603. The Stuarts—James I, Charles I, Charles II, and James II—viewed the existence of an autonomous Presbyterian church that was governed by a decentralized “corporate episcopacy” as incompatible with coherent monarchical governance. Their views regarding Presbyterianism—as well as the issue of church-state relations more generally—were informed by a politico-religious philosophy known as Erastianism, which called for the subordination of the church to a sovereign state.

The Stuarts sought to consolidate their authority in Scotland by thrusting on that nation’s populace the traditions of the Episcopal Church, an Erastian institution headed by bishops who served under the auspices of the Crown. In 1638 thousands of ordinary Scots registered their displeasure with the impositions of the Stuart monarchs by signing the National Covenant, through which they made plain their attachment to constitutional governance and Presbyterianism. Then, in 1643, the most ardent Scottish Presbyterians joined forces with the English Parliamentarians during their civil war with Charles I and the Royalists, a union that was consummated with the signing in that year of the Solemn League and Covenant. This partnership resulted in the articulation in the mid-1640s of the Westminster Confession of Faith as well as the Longer and Shorter Catechisms, Calvinistic documents that cumulatively came to be known as the Westminster Standards. These documents, which were formulated in England, would subsequently serve as the fundamental articulation of Presbyterian doctrine. (Presbyterianism was temporarily instituted in both Scotland and England, though Erastianism would resurface in the latter following the Parliamentarians’ decisive victory over the Royalists in 1645 at the Battle of Naseby.)

Efforts to impose Episcopalianism on Scotland resumed in 1660 following the Restoration in that year of the House of Stuart and the attendant ascension to the throne of Charles II. Presbyterianism would not be acknowledged as Scotland’s national religion until the era of the “Glorious Revolution,” through which Charles’ successor, the Roman Catholic James II, was displaced by his daughter, Mary, and her Dutch Calvinist husband, William of Orange. The Revolution Settlement of 1690 recognized the Presbyterian Church of Scotland as that nation’s official religion, largely as a result of William’s desire to curry favour with the Presbyterian majority located in Scotland’s parliament.29

Scottish Presbyterianism received further recognition in 1707, with the signing in that year of the Treaty of Union. This document signaled the economic and political merger of England and Scotland and the corresponding formation of Great Britain. It also acknowledged the equality within their respective realms of Britain’s two religious

---

establishments—the Episcopalian Church of England, an Erastian institution, and the Presbyterian Church of Scotland (or “Kirk”), a body whose autonomy from the state was legally enshrined.\(^{30}\)

Yet no sooner had Presbyterianism been recognized as Scotland’s official religion than the denomination was beset by a pattern of intra-denominational disintegration. The key factor precipitating this development was the practice of lay patronage, through which such influential entities as the Crown and large landholders were allowed to disregard the wishes of potentially quarrelsome Presbyterian congregations and appoint ministers to individual churches. The practice, which was viewed by numerous ordinary Presbyterians as a violation of their congregations’ constitutionally sanctioned sovereignty, had been abolished in 1690 in conjunction with the Revolution Settlement. Yet as a result of the tremendous influence wielded within the Scottish Church by powerful lay patrons, the practice was restored in 1712 with the crucial consent of Britain’s civil legal courts. This development, coupled with an internal theological conflict involving staunchly Calvinistic evangelicals and reputedly deistic doctrinal “Moderates,” brought about the fracturing of Scottish Presbyterianism a scant forty-three years after the Revolution Settlement.\(^{31}\)

Followers of a prominent Presbyterian evangelical, Ebenezer Erskine, broke ranks with the Church of Scotland in 1733. The departure of Erskine and his followers was occasioned by their objections to the practice of lay patronage, which amounted in their understanding to a violation of the “parallel sovereignties” of church and state, and to the theological “Moderatism” that allegedly rendered the Scottish Church religiously apathetic. Erskine’s faction would experience a rupture of its own during the following decade due to an internecine conflict over an oath that was to be taken by public officials recognizing “the true religion presently professed in this realm.” One seceding group, the General Associate Synod, or “Anti-Burghers,” objected to the oath, which in their conception amounted to a recognition of the Church of Scotland as the nation’s “true religion.” A second seceding group, the Associate Synod, or “Burghers,” identified no such acknowledgment within the oath, although they continued to chafe at the Church of

---

Scotland’s willingness to allow acts of elite interference in the affairs of individual congregations. It should be noted that these rival Secessionist factions continued to exalt the ideal of permanent state support for an autonomous church, while simultaneously objecting to what they identified as *de facto* Erastian interference in the church’s sphere of activity.\(^{32}\)

The lay patronage controversy precipitated a second major Secession from the Church of Scotland in 1761, when another evangelical faction parted company with the national institution. This group, which came to be known as the Presbytery of the Relief Church, echoed Erskine and his followers in denouncing perceived secular intrusions into the purportedly inviolate spiritual realm. Yet in articulating their objections to the practice of lay patronage members of the Relief Church went further than their Secessionist forerunners, eventually embracing a politico-religious philosophy known as voluntarism. This outlook involved a rejection of all forms of state-aided Christianity and a corresponding reliance on the free-will financial contributions of individual church members. The tenets of voluntarism—which eventually permeated both the Anti-Burgher and Burgher Secessionist factions as well as the Relief contingent—were seen as necessary in order to shelter the church and its sacred teachings from the corruptive intrusions of potentially meddlesome temporal officials.\(^{33}\)

Yet another rupture would occur within the Church of Scotland, which remained that nation’s largest Presbyterian body despite the departures of the eighteenth century, in 1843. The schism was prompted—unsurprisingly—by the practice of lay patronage, which continued unabated as a result of the civil courts’ unwillingness to rule against it. Frustration regarding this issue sparked the “Great Disruption,” through which upwards of one-third of the Church of Scotland’s ministers and members withdrew from the national institution. The secession of 1843 was led by the Reverend Thomas Chalmers, and found its most sympathetic audience within the Church of Scotland’s residual evangelical constituency, whose members came to be known as the “non-intrusionists.”

\(^{32}\) Ibid.; Kidd, *Union and Unionisms*..., 225.

The Great Disruption resulted in the formation in Scotland of the Presbyterian Free Church.34

Thus, by the mid-nineteenth century, Scottish Presbyterianism consisted of three principal branches: the Church of Scotland, the Secessionist tradition, and the Free Church. Each of these constituencies would migrate across the Atlantic Ocean and exert significant influence within northern North American society.

Robert McPherson, a military chaplain stationed among British soldiers participating in the Seven Years’ War, presided over the first Presbyterian service on what is now Canadian territory in 1758 following the decisive British assault on the French fortress of Louisbourg. Presbyterianism’s growth in the Maritime region for the next half-century was slow. A small Presbyterian contingent existed among the New England Planters who moved north in the mid-eighteenth century following the Acadians’ expulsion. These Presbyterians were joined in the later eighteenth century by Presbyterians who had emigrated from Ireland—where the denomination trailed only the Anglicans in terms of Protestant adherents—and settled in such Nova Scotia communities as Truro and Pictou.35

Contributing to Presbyterianism’s sluggish growth in the Maritime region during the mid- and late eighteenth century was the Church of Scotland’s lack of interest in overseas missionary activity, which effectively deprived colonial Presbyterians of access to regular clerical ministrations. The Secessionist Churches—especially the Burgher and Anti-Burgher factions—displayed substantially more enthusiasm when it came to the propagation of the Gospels overseas, though their evangelistic efforts were hobbled by a lack of resources. Yet the zeal of Secessionist Presbyterians residing in northeastern North America—including the indefatigable pioneering missionary and representative of the British Foreign Bible Society, James MacGregor, and the equally dogged educator and clergyman, Thomas McCulloch—was instrumental to the denomination’s

---

35 Moir, Enduring Witness, 37; David A. Wilson, The Irish in Canada (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1989), 8; Smith, Farris, and Markell, A Short History of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, 22-23.
institutional and numerical growth beginning in the early nineteenth century. This pattern of Presbyterian expansion was reflected in the establishment, in 1817, of Presbyterianism’s first British North American-based Synod, the Synod of Nova Scotia.36

Presbyterianism’s development was slower in the Canadas. As in the Maritime colonies, Presbyterianism’s expansion in Upper and Lower Canada was undermined in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by the Church of Scotland’s apathy regarding overseas missionary activities and by the limited resources of the Secession churches, who exhibited greater enthusiasm when it came to colonial evangelism. By 1818 there were fewer than twenty Presbyterian ministers serving in the Canadas, and the denomination’s spiritual influence was confined to a handful of communities—notably Quebec, Montreal, the communities clustered around the Bay of Quinte, and the Niagara region. Half of these Presbyterian ministers belonged to the “Presbytery of the Canadas,” a Canadian-based institution that was created in 1818 and that would be renamed the United Synod of Upper Canada in the early 1830s.37

The Church of Scotland, beginning in the mid-1820s, adopted an uncharacteristically enthusiastic attitude toward the spiritual welfare of Presbyterians residing in British North America. This newfound spirit of missionary fervour on the part of the Scottish Church found expression in the creation in 1825 of the Glasgow Colonial Society (GCS), a missionary agency that was supported by the Church of Scotland’s evangelical constituency. During its first decade of existence, the GCS dispatched forty missionaries to British North America, thus enhancing the Scottish Church’s influence in colonies whose populations were swelling as a result of a surge in transatlantic migration.

The advent of the GCS was initially greeted by Maritime Presbyterians as a welcome—if belated—show of support on behalf of the metropolitan church, which established Synods in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick in the early 1830s. Yet Maritime-based Presbyterians quickly came to view the GCS and its agents not as allies in their campaign to promote Presbyterian principles and practices in northeastern North America, but rather as rivals. This shift in opinion was attributable to the fact the GCS—which enjoyed the support of influential colonial officials including Lord Dalhousie, an

36 Smith, Farris, and Markell, A Short History of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, 27-30.
37 Moir, Enduring Witness, 63-72.
ardent Church of Scotland adherent, or “kirkman,” who served as Governor of Nova Scotia and, later, Governor General of the Canadas—aimed to assert sovereignty over jurisdictions that were already under the authority of the indigenous Synod of Nova Scotia.  

The rivalry between the GCS and indigenous British North American Presbyterian institutions was less pronounced in the Canadas. This was attributable to the paucity of Presbyterian missionaries serving in Upper and Lower Canada prior to the GCS’s creation, and to the Canadas’ larger geographic expanse, both of which rendered instances of missionary overlap between the two factions’ representatives relatively unlikely in comparison to the Maritimes. Due to the GCS’s exertions, a Canadian Church of Scotland Synod consisting of four presbyteries and nineteenth ministers was established in the early 1830s.

How did British North American Presbyterians respond to the ‘Great Disruption’ of 1843? Despite the fact that they were not legally subordinate to metropolitan churches, colonial Presbyterians exhibited considerable support for the seceding, or “non-intrusionist,” faction led by Thomas Chalmers and supported by the Scottish Church’s evangelical wing. The British North American Presbyterians’ support for the non-intrusionists’ cause can be attributed to several factors, including the colonials’ philosophical objection to the practice of lay patronage; and the fact that many British North American kirkmen had been involved with the GCS, which had extensive links to the Scottish Church’s evangelical contingent, the constituency that happened—not coincidentally—to be in the vanguard of the metropolitan rupture.

Delegates of both of the Scottish factions involved in the Great Disruption—the Church of Scotland and the upstart Free Church—were dispatched to British North

---

38 Ibid., 77-80; C. Campbell and R.A. MacLean, Beyond the Atlantic Roar: A Study of the Nova Scotia Scots (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), 204-208.
39 Additional Presbyterian groups were active in the Canadas during the early nineteenth century as well. These included the United Secession Church of Scotland, an avowedly voluntaristic Secessionist faction that was established in Upper Canada in 1834, and which came to be known as the Synod of the United Presbyterian Church in Canada; and a variety of American Presbyterian groups, who were active in the Niagara region, where they acquired a reputation for such evangelical traditions as temperance campaigns. Yet the influence of these American groups declined precipitously following the Upper Canadian Rebellion of 1837-8, which prompted many Canadians—including Presbyterians—with republican sympathies to take flight to the United States. Moir, Enduring Witness, 80-86.
America in an effort to convince colonial Presbyterians of the righteousness of their divergent politico-religious contentions. The Free Church delegation, which included the energetic Reverend Robert Burns, appears to have been the more successful of the two delegations, as evidenced by their success in engendering support among colonial Presbyterians for the non-intrusionists’ cause. Nova Scotia’s Kirk Synod, which included Prince Edward Island, expressed unanimous support for the non-intrusionists’ decision to break ranks with the Scottish Church, eventually adopting the title “Free Synod of Nova Scotia” in an exhibition of solidarity with their metropolitan counterparts. Circumstances were rather different in New Brunswick, where only three of thirteen Kirk ministers elected to secede in 1845. The New Brunswickers’ support for the Kirk can be attributed in part to the fact that neither of the Scottish delegations visited that colony, meaning that New Brunswick’s Presbyterians were not exposed to Robert Burns’ arguments—which many British North Americans found compelling—in favour of the non-intrusionists’ actions.41

Twenty-three of the Kirk’s sixty ministers in Canada opted in 1844 to break ranks with Church of Scotland and establish a Canadian Free Church, which officially came to be known as the Presbyterian Church of Canada. The Canadian Free Church enjoyed its strongest support in Upper Canada’s western districts, as evidenced by the fact that thirteen of its twenty-three ministers were situated to the west of Hamilton and seventeen of its ministers were situated to the west of Kingston. The Canadian Free Church would subsequently undergo a process of rapid expansion, gaining eleven ministers in its first few weeks of existence and emerging as the largest and most influential element within British North American Presbyterianism.42 (See table one below for data on the distribution of northern North America’s Presbyterians in the mid-nineteenth century, the period in which census information regarding citizens’ religious affiliations began to be compiled with regularity across the various British North American colonies.)

### Table One: Distribution of Presbyterians in Mid-Nineteenth-Century British North America

#### 1851-2 Upper Canada

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>952,004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestants</td>
<td>723,608</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterians</td>
<td>204,148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterians as percentage of Protestants</td>
<td>28.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Breakdown by subgroup**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Presbyterians”</td>
<td>75,308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Presbyterians—Church of Scotland”</td>
<td>59,102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Presbyterians—Free Church”</td>
<td>69,738</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### 1851-2 Lower Canada

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>890,261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestants</td>
<td>123,619</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterians</td>
<td>33,486</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterians as percentage of Protestants</td>
<td>27.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Breakdown by subgroup**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Presbyterians”</td>
<td>29,154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Presbyterians—Church of Scotland”</td>
<td>4,047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Presbyterians—Free Church”</td>
<td>267</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### 1851 Nova Scotia

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>276,854</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestants</td>
<td>182,770</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterians</td>
<td>72,924</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterians as percentage of Protestants</td>
<td>39.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Breakdown by subgroup**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Presbyterians—Church of Scotland”</td>
<td>18,868</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Presbyterians—Lower Provinces”</td>
<td>25,279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Presbyterians—Reformed”</td>
<td>28,777</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### 1861 New Brunswick

---

28
[Breakdown by subgroup unavailable for New Brunswick]

1861 Prince Edward Island

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>80,857</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Protestants</td>
<td>44,003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterians</td>
<td>25,862</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterians as percentage of Protestants</td>
<td>58.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Breakdown by subgroup unavailable for Prince Edward Island]


Given the fragmented state of mid-nineteenth-century British North American Presbyterianism, how did the denomination’s various factions manage to come together to establish a new national institution? Which determinants allowed Presbyterianism’s constituent parts to overcome their differences and forge a unified church? One critical factor contributing to the process of pan-Presbyterian reconciliation were the similarities that existed between the Secessionist and Free Church factions. While the two contingents ostensibly differed over the issue of church-state relations—the Secessionists were in many instances outright voluntarists, while the Free Church theoretically insisted on the state’s responsibility for materially supporting the activities of an autonomous church—both bodies were in actuality drawn together by a deep-seated suspicion of civil intrusions into what they identified as the church’s inviolate sphere of activity. Moreover, hitherto contentious church-state controversies had by the mid-nineteenth century largely evaporated as a result of such developments as the secularization beginning in 1854 of the Clergy Reserves. Secessionist and Free Church Presbyterians were also drawn together in the mid-nineteenth century by a shared moral orientation. This orientation—which manifested itself in an evangelical aversion to acts of Sabbath desecration, widespread alcohol abuse, the practice of slavery in the American republic, and the influence exerted in British North America and the wider western world by Roman
Catholic ultramontanists—served to integrate Secessionist and Free Church Presbyterians into nineteenth-century Canada’s multi-denominational Protestant culture. Members of these two Presbyterians factions also tended to be reform-oriented when it came to their political leanings. Such moral and political similarities between Secessionist and Free Church groupings played a vital role in the emergence in the mid-nineteenth century of an impetus for denominational union.43

The Canadian Free Church constituency, the Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Canada, merged in 1861 with its Secessionist counterpart, the Synod of the United Presbyterian Church in Canada, establishing in that year the Canada Presbyterian Church. For their part, Nova Scotia’s Free Church Synod merged in 1860 with its Secessionist counterpart, the Synod of Nova Scotia, establishing the Synod of the Presbyterian Church of the Lower Provinces of British North America, an institution that absorbed the small Free Church Synod of New Brunswick in 1866. Not to be outdone, the Kirk Synods of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick—the Synod of Nova Scotia in Connection with the Church of Scotland and the Synod of New Brunswick in connection with the Church of Scotland, respectively—officially joined forces in 1867, establishing the Synod of the Presbyterian Church of the Maritime Provinces of British North America. This merger involving Maritime adherents of the Church of Scotland indicates that the Presbyterian appetite for denominational unification during the later nineteenth century was by no means limited to the Free Church and Secessionist subgroups.44

During the early post-Confederation period a movement for dominion-wide union began to gather momentum. The Reverend William Ormiston, outgoing moderator of the Canada Presbyterian Church, contributed to the burgeoning union cause in the early 1870s when he sent an overture to the four major Canadian Presbyterian groups that comprised northern North American Presbyterianism—the Synod of the Presbyterian Church of the Lower Provinces of British North America, the Synod of the Presbyterian Church of the Maritime Provinces of British North America, the Canada Presbyterian Church, and the Synod of the Presbyterian Church in Canada in connection with the


Church of Scotland—in hopes of furthering the project of intra-denominational reconciliation. His efforts resulted in a veritable blueprint, the Basis of Union, which aimed to obviate residual differences between the various groups regarding such issues as church-state relations.45

The greatest resistance to the proposal existed within the Maritime region’s Kirk constituency, the Synod of the Presbyterian Church of the Maritime Provinces of British North America. Fifteen congregations drawn from this body ultimately elected to remain outside of the national Presbyterian institution. Overall, though, less than five per cent of the ministers from the four major British North American churches opted not to join the new Presbyterian Church in Canada. This dominion-wide body, which represented the vast majority of Canada’s roughly 600,000 Presbyterians, was officially ushered into existence in 1875 with a meeting of the new church’s General Assembly at Montreal’s Victoria Hall skating rink.46

Presbyterianism’s fundamental characteristics in terms of both theology and church polity made their way across the Atlantic Ocean and took root in northern North America. Accordingly, aspiring Church of Scotland ministers in the presbytery of Prince Edward Island declared in the mid-nineteenth century that the Westminster Standards were the “truths of God,” and affirmed that the denomination’s distinctive system of “government and discipline” was “founded upon the word of God.”47 Likewise, the Prince Edward Islanders’ contemporaries in the Canadian Free Church pledged that Presbyterianism’s distinctive combination of Calvinistic theology and decentralized form of church polity were “the truths of God.”48

Similarities between metropolitan and colonial Presbyterians were by no means confined to issues of theology and church governance. Significant aspects of Presbyterian worship in northern North America hewed closely to the ecclesiastical pattern that had been established overseas. Early Canadian Presbyterian church services were typically held in log cabins or wooden clapboard structures, especially in remote communities.

45 Ibid., 136-137.
46 Ibid., 137-145.
47 UCA 79.033C Presbyterian Church of the Maritime Provinces in Connection with the Church of Scotland. Presbytery of Prince Edward Island. Minutes, 1854-1875. Microfilm Reel 1. “Formula… required to be subscribed by Licentiates of the Church of Scotland on obtaining License, and by ministers at their ordination and induction.”
48 Ecclesiastical & Missionary Record, July 1845, 100.
Comparatively grand ecclesiastical structures—notably St. Mathew’s, Halifax and St. Andrew’s, Niagara-on-the-Lake—existed in cities, and included such architectural characteristics as elevated podiums and boxed pews that would be rented out to the church’s wealthier members (poorer members, by contrast, would typically be seated on log benches). Yet in virtually all instances the décor of Presbyterian houses of worship—whether in rough-hewn backwoods settings or bustling urban centres—was characterized by a simple, unadorned ethos.

Sunday morning services usually began at nine o’clock and opened with requests for prayers of remembrance on the part of members of the church community. The central component of these services was a sermon—frequently upwards of one-and-a-half hours in length—that consisted of a stern synthesis of scriptural analysis and moral injunction. Members of the congregation would also sing hymns in unison during nineteenth-century Presbyterian church services. Adherents of the denomination viewed choirs and organs with skepticism well into the late nineteenth century, as their adoption was seen as likely to detract from the spontaneous musical fervour of individual members of the congregation who, it was feared, would no longer feel obliged to express their religious convictions through song.49

Sunday afternoon church services would begin after a mid-day recess. These meetings involved such phenomena as the official admittance of new members of the congregation; the admonishment by the minister of supposed moral transgressors, who would be seated at the front of the church on a seat commonly known as the “stool of repentance”; and the baptism of infants, a prerequisite for church membership in adulthood. Communion, or the “Lord’s supper,” would typically be administered once per year, often constituting the most important annual event in the spiritual life of a given congregation. The dispensation of this sacrament often attracted substantial crowds, the largest of which numbered in the thousands. This was especially true in geographically peripheral settings in which churches were few and clerical ministrations were uncommon. As a result of the large volume of people that would amass communion would frequently be administered outdoors in the summer, where the dispensation of the

sacrament would serve as the culminating event in an elaborate festival that usually lasted for several days.\textsuperscript{50} Presbyterian communion festivals featured numerous sermons, which were frequently delivered in both English and Gaelic, as well as instances of lay scriptural explication. A pronounced air of solemnity prevailed over the proceedings, prompting one contemporary observer to describe the festivals as a “picnic of deaf mutes.”\textsuperscript{51}

As in Britain, catechism played an important part in promoting Presbyterian piety in nineteenth-century Canada. Presbyterian Sunday schools—which were typically led by either the minister of a given congregation or the local schoolmaster, and which relied on the support of literate men and women drawn from the congregation—systematically inculcated Calvinistic morality in young peoples’ minds beginning in the early nineteenth century. Presbyterian youth would also be required to memorize such texts as the Shorter Catechism, while the minister and elders of the local congregation would scrutinize their religious knowledge—or lack thereof—at regular intervals by way of public examinations.

Religious inculcation involving both children and adults also took place within the domestic sphere. Family members, including servants in the case of the well-to-do, would assemble in the morning for the purpose of Christian worship. This phenomenon typically consisted of either the singing of a hymn or the reading of a psalm as well as scriptural explication and silent prayer. In virtually all instances such domestic religious exercises would be led by the male head of the household, which attests to the importance of patriarchal authority within nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism. “Praying fathers and heads of families,” observed one Presbyterian minister in the mid-1860s, “are the best of all patriots. Our empire,” he elaborated, “owes much of its greatness to its brave warriors, its wise statesmen, its enterprising merchants, its men of learning and science.” Yet it owes exponentially more “to the piety and prayers of its household patriarchs.” These men, through their promotion of Protestant piety within the domestic

\textsuperscript{50} McDougall and Moir, “Introduction,” in \textit{Correspondence of the Glasgow Colonial Society} ed., McDougal and Moir, xxviii.

realm, were responsible in the minister’s conception for maintaining the high standards in religious virtue that were indispensable to the British Empire’s global power.\textsuperscript{52}

Yet it would be erroneous to conclude that female Presbyterians were inactive when it came to the propagation of the denomination’s tenets and traditions. On the contrary, women played a crucial role in Presbyterian missionary activity both at home and abroad, especially in the later nineteenth century. They managed to do so largely as a result of their association with such supposedly intrinsic female traits as sensitivity and kindness, which equipped women with a moral justification for involvement in mission-related activities. The vigorous promotion of Protestant piety, whether in northern North America or elsewhere in the world, came to be viewed throughout much of Canadian Presbyterianism—not to mention other Christian denominations—as consonant with women’s allegedly innate instincts and tendencies. Women also played a crucial role in fundraising initiatives for missionary work. By the late nineteenth century as much as two-thirds of the revenues for overseas Presbyterian missionary activities were generated by female-led agencies. Unmarried women were particularly active in the denomination’s mission-related activities, as full-time engagement in such initiatives was thought to be prohibitively time-consuming for married women whose primary obligations—childbirth, childrearing, and a host of domestic chores—were purportedly concentrated in the home. Plainly, then, the existence of patriarchy as an influential factor within nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism did not serve as an insurmountable obstacle to active female involvement in the denomination’s campaign to promote Christian principles and practices throughout northern North America and the wider world.\textsuperscript{53}

Though members of the Presbyterian community—especially the largely evangelical Free Church and Secessionist factions—became involved in temperance

\textsuperscript{52} PCCA William Gregg papers 1978-8001 microfilm reel 2; series I-3-b. Poems and Tracts, 1840-1868. April 1865; no. 1; “Family Worship,” 4.

campaigns as the nineteenth-century unfolded, substantial segments of the denomination—including adherents of the religiously temperate Church of Scotland—did not object to moderate alcohol consumption at such social events as weddings and wakes. Members of the denomination were considerably more strict when it came to acts of Sabbath desecration, a transgression that few devout Presbyterians—regardless of the subgroup to which they belonged—were able to abide. Accordingly, a pronounced sense of religious solemnity prevailed within the home on Sundays, when only the most vital of functions—the preparation of meals and the attainment of firewood were expected to have been carried out the day before—were viewed as permissible.\textsuperscript{54}

Continuities between metropolitan and northern North American modes of worship played an important part in alleviating feelings of isolation and cultural dislocation among Scottish and Ulsterite immigrants. As Marjory Harper has noted, churches—including ones that were Presbyterian—nurtured a sense of socio-cultural cohesiveness within Scottish immigrant communities scattered across different parts of the globe, in large part by “ministering to the spiritual needs of their uprooted… compatriots.”\textsuperscript{55} The devotion exhibited by the followers of Norman McLeod, a Scottish Presbyterian minister, attests to the tendency of Scottish Presbyterians to latch on to religious figures and institutions as a means of maintaining a sense of communal identity amid unfamiliar cultural and environmental circumstances. In 1817 McLeod was accompanied by four hundred of his parishioners from Loch Broom, Scotland across the Atlantic Ocean to Pictou, Nova Scotia. McLeod and his flock moved again three years later, this time from Pictou to St. Ann’s on Cape Breton Island. McLeod and his followers would be uprooted yet again in the mid-nineteenth century, relocating in this instance from St. Ann’s across the world, eventually settling in New Zealand in 1851. The willingness of McLeod’s flock to follow him wherever he went is illustrative of the important position occupied by religious traditions—and in this case Presbyterianism—within nineteenth-century Scottish immigrant communities.\textsuperscript{56}

This dissertation is chiefly a work of intellectual history. The practice of intellectual history made significant advances during the middle third of the twentieth

\textsuperscript{54} C. Campbell and R.A. MacLean, \textit{Beyond the Atlantic Roar}, 220.
\textsuperscript{55} Marjory Harper, \textit{Adventurers & Exiles}, 327.
\textsuperscript{56} Harper, “Exiles or Entrepreneurs?” 35; C. Campbell and R.A. MacLean, \textit{Beyond the Atlantic Roar}, 198.
century, particularly in the United States. These positive developments occurred largely as a result of the creation in the early 1940s of the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, a periodical devoted to the systematic examination of various aspects of the history of western thought, and of the publication during this period of such landmark works of intellectual history as A.O. Lovejoy’s *Great Chain of Being* and Perry Miller’s *New England Mind*. Characteristics of works of intellectual history produced in this era—which were far from monolithic—include a desire on the part of their authors to identify individual ideas that transcended time and that shaped history in meaningful ways over lengthy chronological periods and across vast geographic expanses (as evidenced by Lovejoy’s *Great Chain of Being*); and an effort to provide a comprehensive account of the conceptual circumstances that prevailed within a given community or nation and that molded the collective psyche of its inhabitants (as reflected in Miller’s *New England Mind*).

For neither the first nor the last time, historiographical developments taking place in the United States would have a significant—albeit belated—impact on Canadian historical scholarship. The flowering of intellectual history in that nation coupled with important domestic developments including a pervasive sense of optimism surrounding the Canadian centennial and a corresponding outpouring of cultural nationalism as well as an unprecedented surge in governmental funding for higher education, proved to be fertile conditions for Canadian intellectual historians at work in the 1960s and early 1970s. These included S.F. Wise, whose penetrating assessment of the ideas articulated by late eighteenth and early nineteenth clergymen, “Sermon Literature and Canadian Intellectual History,” shed light on the ways in which politically and culturally conservative values became ingrained in the British North American popular consciousness; and Carl Berger, whose exquisite investigation of the attitudes espoused by imperial enthusiasts in Canada between Confederation and the First World War, *The Sense of Power*, has been credited for “[inaugurating] serious intellectual history in English-speaking Canada.”57

As elsewhere in the western world, the sub-field of Canadian intellectual history receded during the later twentieth century. Practitioners of social history, who drew on unconventional quantitative methodologies that had traditionally been deployed in disciplines like demography, economics, and sociology, increasingly devoted their energies in this era to such hitherto neglected historical categories as race, class, and gender. Social historians, in the words of Robert Darnton, aimed “to make contact with the submerged mass of humanity and to rescue the lives of ordinary men and women from oblivion in the past.”58 From the perspective of this emerging scholarly sub-field, intellectual history appeared to be either irrelevant—owing to its characteristic preoccupation with the writings of unrepresentative elites—or, worse, misleading—given the fact that, in focusing on abstractions, intellectual historians typically accorded short shrift to the material circumstances—wages, labour conditions—that determined fundamental aspects of ordinary peoples’ lives.59

Yet while the practice of intellectual history in Canada receded, it did not disappear. On the contrary, thoughtful contributions to this historiographical sub-field were produced during the later twentieth century on a variety of topics ranging from Upper Canadian perceptions of the early American republic; to evolving French Canadian conceptions of Confederation; to the nineteenth-century central Canadian movement for westward territorial expansion. The emergence of social history and the persistence of intellectual history were thus by no means mutually exclusive phenomena.60

---


Two historiographical developments that have come to the fore in recent decades have stimulating implications for the practice of intellectual history in the early twenty-first century, whether in Canada or elsewhere in the world. The first is linked to the study of the history of ideas, and finds expression in the writings of Quentin Skinner, J.G.A. Pocock, and John Dunn. These figures, often described as members of the “Cambridge School” on account of their affiliation with that university, have challenged traditional intellectual historians’ tendency to conceive of ideas as immutable abstractions that transcend time, maintaining instead that ideas should be perceived as the products of specific circumstances. Ideas, in other words, cannot be accurately understood in isolation from the chronological, geographic, cultural, economic, and political settings in which they originate and evolve. The recovery of meaning is thus contingent on the recovery of context, including the fluctuating linguistic circumstances—the shifting idioms and discursive strategies—that confer a particular significance on a particular term at a particular juncture.61

The second development, which is linked to the inter-related sub-fields of cultural history and historical anthropology, is concerned with the ways in which people—including “ordinary” individuals and groups—perceive themselves and the world in which they live.62 The critical underlying presupposition is that a given individual or

---


62 For examples of recent works that incorporate aspects of intellectual and cultural history see Sean Mills, The Empire Within: Postcolonial Thought and Political Activism in Sixties Montreal (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010); Jeffrey L. McNairn, The Capacity to Judge: Public Opinion and Deliberative Democracy in Upper Canada, 1791-1854 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000); Claire Elizabeth Campbell, Shaped by the West Wind: Nature and History in Georgian Bay (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2005); Steve Penfold, The Donut: A Canadian History (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008); Keith Walden, Becoming Modern in Toronto: The Industrial Exhibition and the Shaping of a Late Victorian Culture (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); E.A.
group’s perception of the world is not in actuality the world per se, but rather a particular rendering of the world that is filtered through the lens of unconscious attitudes and expectations. The result has been an emphasis on the part of cultural historians and historical anthropologists on peoples’ “mentalities” or “mental worlds,” an approach that concerns itself with individual and popular perceptions as well as tacit assumptions. This approach also focuses on cognition, the mental processes and faculties involved in the acquisition and absorption of knowledge. That is, in addition to concentrating on what people thought and experienced, it concentrates on how people thought and experienced, and entails an emphasis on the metaphors, symbols, and intellectual categories that structure and inform peoples’ understanding of the world and their place within it.

Exploring “mentalities” or “mental worlds,” in Peter Burke’s words, serves to “occupy the conceptual space between the history of ideas and social history,” thus obviating the need to choose between “an intellectual history with the society left out and a social history with the thought left out.”

This dissertation will draw on both of these developments—namely, an emphasis on the importance of context in relation to the history of ideas as well as on the study of peoples’ “mentalities” or “mental worlds”—in assessing the intellectual and cultural history of nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism. Under the auspices of intellectual history this dissertation also intersects with two additional historiographical literatures. The first is the history of the British World. The notion of an expansive conceptual framework that takes into account not only metropolitan Britain but also one or more of that nation’s colonies of settlement was initially propounded in the 1970s by Pocock, who advocated a “new British history” that would integrate the eclectic Anglo-Celtic diaspora into “a context of inherent diversity, replacing the image of a monolithic ‘parent society’ with that of an expanding zone of cultural conflict and creation.”

---


Consistent with Pocock’s remarks, this dissertation views nineteenth-century Canada—including the Presbyterian community that existed within it—as part of a larger trans-oceanic British community that was characterized by an intricate network of commercial, ideological, and emotional circuits that crisscrossed much of the globe, influencing millions of peoples’ lives on several continents in profound ways. The application of such a conceptual framework, which implicitly acknowledges the permeability of borders and the multi-faceted significance of the British imperial phenomenon, brings into focus the myriad ways in which Canadian history—including Canadian Presbyterianism—has shaped, and been shaped by, its interactions with the larger British World.

The second historiographical literature to which this dissertation connects under the auspices of intellectual history is the study of Canadian Christianity. Works devoted to aspects of the history of Canadian Christianity in the mid-twentieth century concerned themselves with a range of issues, including the religious aspect of the French-English relationship; fluctuating church-state relations; and the process of “indigenization” undergone by the various Christian denominations, through which they shed their institutional affiliations with metropolitan entities and became ensconced in Canadian society. Yet the study of Christianity, which during this period was largely confined to the periphery of Canadian historical scholarship, scarcely scratched the surface of such fundamental concerns as religion’s intellectual and cultural substance—or, as Berger put it, of perceiving religion “as a way of defining self,” and as a way of determining notions of “feeling and faith.”

The sub-field’s orientation shifted beginning in the later twentieth century, due in large part to a lively debate over the so-called “secularization thesis” which illuminated aspects of Canadian Christianity’s hitherto overlooked intellectual and cultural dimensions. For David B. Marshall, a marked increase in the number and percentage of Canadians adhering to “no religion”—which rose from 6,193, or 0.1 per cent of the population of nearly 5.4 million, in 1901 to 26,893 (including more than 10,000 avowed


atheists), or 0.4 per cent of the Canadian population of 7.2 million, in 1911—was symptomatic of an unmistakable declension when it came to the issue of conventional religiosity. Marshall, whose conclusions on this matter accorded with those articulated in Ramsay Cook’s *Regenerators*, attributed what he identified as religion’s waning influence in the early twentieth century to a variety of factors, including scientific challenges to Christian orthodoxy; efforts on the part of individual clerics to infuse their sermons with a practical thrust, which inadvertently undermined Christianity’s indispensable metaphysical foundations; and, not least, shifting notions of gratification on the part of the Canadian populace, which increasingly stressed the importance of material fulfillment in this life over spiritual fulfillment in the next.66

Alternative perspectives, which were put forth by scholars such as Marguerite Van Die, Nancy Christie, Michael Gauvreau, and Phyllis Airhart, effectively challenged the arguments articulated by Marshall and Cook regarding Christianity’s declining influence within Canadian society. In differing ways these historians’ works brought into focus the plasticity of religious conviction, which in their conception successfully adapted to fluctuating socio-economic circumstances—including the emergence of such quintessentially modern phenomena as urbanization, industrialization, and the sophistication of the secular state—and continued to exert considerable influence over substantial swaths of Canadian society well into the twentieth century.67


To be sure, individual early Canadian Presbyterians—much like members of other religious communities—were cognizant of such potentially destabilizing texts as Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* and *Descent of Man*, which were published in 1859 and 1871, respectively. Yet, as A.B. McKillop and Michael Gauvreau have shown, devout mid- and late nineteenth-century northern North American evangelicals—including several influential Presbyterians—succeeded in formulating alternative hypotheses regarding processes of scientific and historical causation, thus shielding vital aspects of Christian orthodoxy from potentially corrosive scientific challenges for several decades to come. A.B. McKillop, *A Disciplined Intelligence: Critical Inquiry and Canadian Thought in the Victorian Era* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001 [1979]); and Gauvreau, *Evangelical Century*.

historiographical momentum generated by the debate surrounding the “secularization thesis” has been sustained in recent years by stimulating studies on a variety of topics relating to the history of Canadian Christianity, including biographies of eminent clerical figures, the ways in which religious phenomena shape intra-familial relations, and discussions regarding the relationship between Christianity and commemoration.68 This dissertation seeks to contribute to the expanding literature centring on the history of Canadian Christianity through an investigation of the principal intellectual and cultural impulses that circulated within early Canadian Presbyterianism.

As for methodology, this dissertation is based in part on church records derived from regional synods, local presbyteries, and individual kirk sessions from across the Presbyterian subgroups and northern North American colonies that I will be concentrating on. Yet it is primarily reliant on sectarian newspapers, pamphlets, and sermon literature produced by individual Presbyterians, both clerical and lay, drawn from the various subgroups and provinces. Why devote so much attention to these sources? In drawing on sectarian newspapers, pamphlets, and sermons does one not run the risk of focusing on the ideas of an atypical elite? How can one be confident that the ideas proffered by such figures are in fact indicative of the concerns and convictions that existed elsewhere in the denominational community?

This dissertation focuses on Presbyterian newspapers, pamphlets, and sermons for four primary reasons. First, the principal ideas expressed through these media were articulated not by a few individuals, but rather by sizeable segments of the denomination, including individual clergymen and devout lay Presbyterians. Second, they were expressed not in a few instances over a limited amount of time, but rather in numerous instances over a lengthy chronological period.

The third reason why this dissertation concentrates on Presbyterian newspapers, pamphlets, and sermon literature is that such media cumulatively constituted a vibrant discursive community, or “public sphere.” An integrative public sphere brought together members of a politically divided, geographically diffuse denomination in a variety of discussion-oriented communities in which words and ideas intermingled and jostled with one another for conceptual supremacy within the Presbyterian consciousness. Such communities cumulatively served as a deliberative forum through which assumptions and anxieties regarding a variety of issues could be discussed, debated, and eventually transmitted to a broader Presbyterian public. The principal ideas articulated by individual Presbyterians via newspapers, pamphlets, and sermons were therefore not confined to an isolated, unrepresentative few. Rather, they were indicative of a broader climate of opinion that prevailed throughout much of the denomination’s mental world.

The fourth reason why this dissertation concentrates on Presbyterian newspapers, pamphlets, and sermon literature is that in numerous instances one discerns a correlation between the rhetoric put forth through these media and the actions undertaken by rank-and-file adherents of the denomination. Consider the Presbyterians’ mid-nineteenth-century condemnations of the institution of slavery in the southern United States. One representative critique, which was published in the January 1861 edition of the *Canadian United Presbyterian Magazine*, denounced slavery as a degrading practice through which “three or four million of our fellow-creatures [are] held in bondage,” and as a “blot” on the American republic’s “otherwise fair and boastworthy escutcheon.” It was incumbent on Canadian Presbyterians, the article concluded, “to stamp the sin of slavery with their deepest detestation.”

Such anti-slavery critiques mesh with the Presbyterians’ involvement in the Buxton mission, a settlement created in Canada West during the mid-nineteenth century for black people who had succeeded in escaping the fetters of slavery in the southern United States. Ordinary Canadian Presbyterians provided the enterprise with critical

---


70 *Canadian United Presbyterian Magazine*, January 1861, 4.
support, as evidenced by their investment in the joint stock company that facilitated the mission’s initiatives as well as in their support for the multi-denominational fundraising agency that provided the mission with additional revenue.71

Consider, also, the correlation between anti-Catholic rhetoric and action within the Presbyterian community. The Reverend George Patterson, in a public address that was subsequently published in the January 1860 edition of Halifax’s *Presbyterian Witness and Evangelical Advocate*, declared that “whatever advance has been made in knowledge, in freedom, in wealth, and in the arts of life has been made in spite” of the influence exerted with western society by the “Romish Church,” a term that was frequently deployed by mid-nineteenth-century Protestants in an effort to underscore the alleged fact that Catholics residing in primarily Protestant communities and nations harboured insidious loyalties to a foreign land.72

Such anti-Catholic views, which stressed Roman Catholicism’s supposed backwardness, accord with the actions undertaken beginning in the mid-1860s by the Montreal “Ladies’ Auxiliary Association in Connection with the French Mission Work of the Church of Scotland,” an organization comprised of female Presbyterians in that city that was devoted to bringing about the conversion to Protestantism of Roman Catholic Lower Canadians. The association, which established a school through which Protestant precepts would be inculcated in the minds of young Lower Canadian Catholics and which funded the activities of a Protestant missionary who served in that colony, announced in its first annual report that it hoped that, “through its instrumentality, many precious souls may be led to pursue and love the word of God, and thereby be emancipated from the moral darkness and bondage by which they are surrounded, to the enjoyment of Gospel light and liberty.”73

Emphasizing the correlation between Presbyterian rhetoric and action is not meant to suggest that ordinary Presbyterians were uniformly receptive to the ideas put forth by denominational elites. On the contrary, instances of resistance and insubordination on the part of rank-and-file Presbyterians were by no means unheard of, particularly before the

---

72 *Presbyterian Witness and Evangelical Advocate*, 21 January 1860, 10-11.
denomination’s numerical and institutional expansion beginning in the early nineteenth century. For example, the efforts of James MacGregor, an influential Presbyterian standard-bearer in the Maritime region between the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, were occasionally met with expressions of “thoughtless irreligion,” which manifested themselves “even in the House of God.” Immediately after the first large-scale Presbyterian service over which MacGregor had had an opportunity to preside in Nova Scotia, a member of the congregation announced to the other individuals in attendance (and to the minister’s chagrin), “come, let us away to the grog shop.”74 Similarly, during the initial sermon delivered by MacGregor on Prince Edward in the late eighteenth century members of the congregation reputedly “refused to sit down,” opting instead to remain standing in groups, “talking and laughing as though [they were] at a picnic party.”75

Nor is the emphasis on the correlation between Presbyterian rhetoric and action meant to suggest that the Presbyterian rank-and-file simply reacted to the injunctions put forth by influential clerical and lay individuals, as though they were passively obeying orders. On the contrary, spontaneously occurring initiative appears to have been, at least, an equally important motivating factor when it came to determining the behaviour of the denomination’s most ardent adherents. Stressing the relationship between rhetoric and action is intended, instead, to demonstrate that influential intellectual impulses—including an aversion to the practice of slavery in the United States and an equally fervent objection to the tenets and traditions of the Roman Catholic Church—exerted substantive influence throughout the denomination, and were thus by no means limited to the writings and public remarks of an atypical Presbyterian elite.

Each of this dissertation’s four chapters revolves around an idea that occupied a position of prominence within the early Canadian Presbyterian imagination. The first chapter, “The Wonders Wrought: Providence, Empire, and the Moral Foundations of Early Canadian Presbyterianism,” examines the part played by notions of providence—the idea of a divinely authored universal design—in determining Presbyterian perceptions

74 NSARM Thomas McCulloch papers, volume 554, document 37; Address to United Presbyterian Synod, Scotland on behalf of Pictou Academy. “Remarks Upon the Religion and Education of Nova Scotia from the time of its occupation by the British till the present.”

of the world and their place within it. The chapter posits that a synthesis of providentialism and British imperial enthusiasm suffused the denominational consciousness throughout the nineteenth century and bound together members of an institutionally fragmented, spatially diffuse denomination in a coherent conceptual community. It also examines Presbyterian attitudes toward Roman Catholicism and slavery in the American republic, which in both instances brought into focus the intellectual amalgam of providence and empire that permeated the denomination and equipped its members with an exhilarating synthesis of duty and destiny.

The second chapter, “Exiles from their Own Realm? Church, State, and the Politics of Early Canadian Presbyterianism,” assesses the widely divergent politico-religious ideologies that circulated within the denomination’s mental world. It contends that these disparate outlooks were based on differing interpretations of the British political tradition, and translated into a variety of secular political ideologies that ranged from staunch toryism to unabashed liberalism. The chapter concludes by arguing that, for all of their politico-religious differences, members of the Presbyterian community were drawn together by visions of a “Christian Nation” in which unambiguously Protestant principles would suffuse society and acts of Sabbath desecration and immoderate alcohol consumption would be sharply curtailed.

The third chapter, “Beneath the Canopy of Heaven: Nature, Order, and the Presbyterian Conception of the Northern North American wilderness,” examines the denomination’s attitudes toward the natural world, and posits that nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians were invigorated by a desire to assert moral authority over the untamed environment, which was viewed as both a physical and a moral entity. This objective was to be achieved, ardent adherents of the denomination reasoned, through the activities of Presbyterian missionaries serving in backwoods northern North American communities as well as through the establishment within these settings of such Presbyterian liturgical traditions as communion festivals and church courts. The Presbyterians’ yearning to achieve moral sovereignty over the untamed northern North American environment would have important implications not only for nineteenth-century Canadians of British birth or ancestry, but for their Aboriginal counterparts as well.
The fourth chapter, “Summoning Up History: Myth, Millennium, and the Making of Usable Presbyterian Pasts,” discusses the epic conception of history that occupied such a salient position within the denominational consciousness. It contends that the Presbyterians’ historical narrative, which allegedly began with the establishment of the covenantal bond that wedded God to the Israelites and which included such iconic individuals and groups as John Calvin, John Knox, the Scottish Covenanters, and the English Puritans, ultimately influenced the denomination’s understanding of time itself, which was viewed by devout members of the denomination as a relentlessly teleological entity that would culminate in nothing less than the Christian millennium.

The author of this dissertation is not a Presbyterian though, in the interests of full disclosure, there have been adherents of the denomination on both sides of my family. Yet this dissertation is neither a sentimental exercise in ancestor-worship through which I hope to validate the religious beliefs and practices of my forebears, nor an anachronistic moral critique of a religious community whose views were shaped in a dramatically different era by a dramatically different set of cultural circumstances. What follows, instead, is an attempt to illuminate the principal ideas and impulses that shaped the early Canadian Presbyterian worldview, and to shed further light on the influential Christian and Protestant cultures to which the denomination belonged.
Chapter One: The Wonders Wrought: Providence, Empire, and the Moral Foundations of Early Canadian Presbyterianism

Righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people.
—Proverbs 14:34

In Canada, Great Britain must ever be recognized as the mother of parliaments, the upholder of true liberty, and as worthily filling the foremost place in the promotion of wise civilization.

—William Kingsford, *The History of Canada*, volume VIII (1895)

S.D. Clark, in *Church and Sect in Canada*, attributed the establishment during the late nineteenth century of dominion-wide churches—including the Presbyterian Church in Canada, which came into existence in 1875—to the waning significance within Canadian society of division-inducing ecclesiastical influences that had been “inherited from the old world.” “Empire gave way to nation,” he explained, and the “sect spirit” that had traditionally militated against the establishment of national churches evaporated as a result of the “growing maturity of Canadian life.”

Clark’s observations, which portray “old world” influences as obstacles to the various churches’ institutional evolution in northern North American prior to the late nineteenth century, are consistent with a longstanding interpretation of early Canadian Presbyterianism’s history. Accounts of the denomination’s nineteenth-century development have tended to dwell on the ingrained pattern of internecine conflict that preceded the establishment, in 1875, of a dominion-wide body. Investigations of Presbyterianism’s formative era in this country have devoted substantial attention to the “spirit of separation” that was purportedly responsible for the scattering of the denomination into no fewer than eight major subgroups as well as several smaller factions, which existed independent of the larger institutions. Such discussions are frequently followed by an explanation as to how this quarrelsome assortment of subgroups became involved in a progressive “movement towards union,” through which

---

1 S.D. Clark, *Church and Sect in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1948), 329-330.
anxieties were allayed, rifts were patched up and, at length, denominational reconciliation was achieved.²

This pattern of Presbyterian unification has traditionally been portrayed as the logical religious corollary to the political maturation of the Canadian state. Discussions pertaining to the creation of a unified church that was coextensive with the confederated Canadian provinces are often intertwined with a teleological discourse on Canada’s transition from subordinate colony to self-sufficient nation. The colony-to-nation approach to the history of nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism hinges on the notion that residual “overseas influences” were responsible for denominational fragmentation in the years prior to 1875. Politico-religious disputes originating in western Europe—and in particular Great Britain—allegedly crossed the Atlantic Ocean and impeded the establishment in northern North America of a coherent Presbyterian community. Such influences, however, are thought to have waned as Presbyterianism’s constituent parts became more firmly ensconced within the new Canadian dominion.

Central to this process of waning “overseas influences,” according to the traditional rendering, was the inspiring example of Confederation. Mirroring the various British North American colonies in their decision to enter into a national union, Presbyterianism’s subgroups have been portrayed as casting off the divisiveness of the pre-Confederation era. Instead, the argument runs, they embraced a nation-wide institution as a mechanism for bringing about the diffusion throughout Canadian society of Protestant precepts and practices. The tacitly nationalistic narrative regarding Canadian Presbyterianism’s unification almost invariably unfolds as follows: colonial subservience gives way to national assertiveness, “old world” divisiveness succumbs to “new world” unity, and the Presbyterian Church in Canada is born. Shelves groan beneath the weight of such accounts.³

² See, for example, H.H. Walsh, The Christian Church in Canada (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1956), 212-214.
The conventional rendering of nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism contains significant shortcomings, arguably the most glaring of which is its preoccupation with the divisions allegedly wrought by “old world” influences prior to the process of intra-denominational reconciliation that culminated in the formation of a dominion-wide church. To stress the endemic divisiveness that preceded the establishment of a national institution is to overlook the unity of thought that underpinned the denominational community before 1875. Counteracting early Canadian Presbyterianism’s internal schisms, this fundamental conceptual cohesiveness was central to the denominational ethos.

The preceding critique is not meant to suggest that the emphasis placed by such scholars as S.D. Clark on the indigenization of Canadian Presbyterianism is wholly inaccurate. To deny the importance of this pattern would be both misleading and ungenerous. After all, the realization of a nation-wide Presbyterian church inarguably involved the overcoming of formidable obstacles, several of which were indeed remnants of “overseas” disputes that had been transmitted from western Europe to northern North America. Additionally, nationalistic twentieth-century observers were in many instances motivated by an iconoclastic desire to deviate from the imperialistic preoccupations of an earlier historiographical age. Their emphasis on the emergence of autonomous Canadian institutions—including the dominion’s churches—can thus be viewed as a bold alternative to the scholarly orthodoxy against which they were reacting.4

It nevertheless seems evident that a tendency on the part of Canadian church historians to concentrate disproportionately on Presbyterianism’s institutional history—and in particular on the sloughing off of “old world” influences prior to the advent of a nation-wide union—has resulted in a reductive conception of the denomination’s formative era. This conception neglects important aspects of Presbyterianism’s intellectual substance.

---

Situating the history of nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism within the context of a wider “British world” offers a refreshing alternative to the traditional “colony-to-nation” account. Phillip Buckner has persuasively argued that this country’s past has been shaped in innumerable ways through its interactions with the British Empire. In his 1993 presidential address to members of the Canadian Historical Association Buckner urged his audience to jettison the notion that the emergence of a coherent Canadian national identity was a “natural development” that inevitably entailed the complete and utter eradication of “all other loyalties.”\(^5\) Rather than conceiving of Canadian nationalism as a spontaneously occurring phenomenon that decisively laid waste to British imperial enthusiasm in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he advocated the adoption of an alternative tack. Drawing on the path-breaking works of J.G.A. Pocock, Buckner recommended a methodological approach that would concern itself with the elaborate web of political, commercial, and ideological circuits that constituted the amorphous “British world.”\(^6\) The adoption of such a model, Buckner reasoned, would counteract the potentially distorting aspects of nationalist historiography, and would reassert the centrality of the multi-faceted British “imperial experience” within Canadian history.\(^7\)

Buckner’s remarks regarding the usefulness of the “British world” framework, which have been augmented in recent years by historians working in a variety of sub-fields, have illuminating implications for the study of nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism.\(^8\) In stressing the permeability of borders and the enduring resonance of the imperial affiliation, such an approach allows for a departure from the comparatively

---


\(^{7}\) Buckner, “Whatever Happened to the British Empire?” 30.

parochial institutional and national emphases that have hitherto dominated accounts of
the denomination’s formative era in this country. Indeed, by applying such a conceptual
framework to nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism’s intellectual dimension it
emerges that, contrary to the indigenization narrative, “old world” influences were in fact
integral to the denominational self-conception.

Conceiving of themselves as a uniquely favoured “national” entity not unlike
ancient Israel, nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians coalesced around a cluster of
beliefs. They viewed themselves as endowed with a special responsibility for the
advancement of God’s providential design, through which the wicked would be punished
and the righteous would be rewarded.9 This conviction dovetailed with their fierce
attachment to the principles, institutions, and mystique of the British Empire, which was
viewed throughout the denomination as a providentially sanctioned vehicle for the
worldwide propagation of Protestantism and the unrivalled virtues and institutions of
western civilization. From this constellation of convictions flowed a blistering anti-
Catholic prejudice and an equally strident critique of the institution of slavery in the
southern United States. These impulses, which threw into relief the centrality of
providentialism and British imperial enthusiasm within the denominational
consciousness, reinforced a sense of denominational mission that reverberated throughout
the Presbyterian consciousness and extended well beyond the borders of the British North
American colonies and the early Canadian dominion.

This chapter takes as its central theme the synthesis of providentialism and British
imperial enthusiasm that invigorated nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism. It
contends that this combination, which was interpreted in a variety of ways depending on
the cultural and chronological context, played an indispensable role in the fashioning of a
coherent denominational sentiment. Zealous adherents of the denomination consistently

---

invoked a conceptual amalgam of providence and empire during the pre-1875 period in an effort to make sense of the universe and their supposed status within it as a people highly favoured of God.

A discussion of providentialism as an influential motif within nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism’s mental world should perhaps begin with an examination of its most significant traits. The Christian doctrine of providence maintains that the “sovereign God who creates is also the God who guides.” More precisely, providence—the notion of the unfolding of a divinely authored universal design—is thought to consist of three irreducible elements: first, that God is the fount of creation; second, that God sustains, monitors, and exercises authority over all that is in existence, and is thus the fundamental engine of both physical and historical change; and, finally, that everything in existence as well as the entirety of time itself are infused with an unavering, albeit frequently inscrutable, purpose that for all of its mystery will nevertheless inevitably be realized, with the divine plan culminating gloriously in the Christian millennium. The cosmos, the totality of history, the natural world in all of its verdant complexity, and the inner-workings of human society—everything is accounted for. The doctrine of providence therefore amounts to nothing less than the awe-inspiring assertion that literally no aspect of God’s handiwork is exempt from divine oversight and influence.

Devout nineteenth-century Presbyterians placed a particularly heavy emphasis on God’s providential sovereignty. This intellectual tendency manifested itself in a belief in the creator’s infinite authority and in a corresponding conviction regarding humankind’s abject inability to merit salvation. Doctrinaire Presbyterians, steeped as they were in the stern tenets of Calvinism (about which more will be said), were insistent on God’s absolute omnipotence. They were equally convinced of the insufficiency of human agency when it came to humanity’s deep-seated yearning for sanctification. Redemption, devout Presbyterians maintained, is entirely contingent on the graciousness of God. The capricious whims of individual sinners—who were thought to be intrinsically corrupt on

11 Helm, *The Providence of God*, 22-3; McKim, *Presbyterian Beliefs*, 27.
account of Original Sin’s indelible stigma—play no role whatsoever in precipitating this essential process.12

Such views regarding God’s omnipotence and humanity’s inability to merit salvation contrasted with the Arminian doctrines that circulated within other nineteenth-century Christian groups, notably Methodism. The Arminian theological outlook, which reputedly held that saving faith in God stems from the spontaneous exertions of repentant individuals, was dismissed by orthodox nineteenth-century Presbyterians as erroneous. The Reverend Michael Willis, Principal of Knox College, Toronto, declared in an 1869 address that adherents of Arminianism presumptuously conceive of “the sinner” as capable of sparking the redemptive process through which depraved individuals could be reconciled with God. By contrast, churches rooted in the Calvinistic tradition were thought by Willis to afford “all the glory” to the universe’s creator when it came to the phenomenon of sanctification. Adherents of Calvinism in Willis’ understanding attributed the extension of saving faith to the “wonderful love” of God who, “in His infinite wisdom and mercy,” selected certain individuals for salvation not because of their own actions or traits, but rather because of his awesome—and frequently inscrutable—capacity for conferring unmerited holiness upon them.13

Nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians conceived of God’s providential sovereignty as intricate and utterly comprehensive. John Barclay, minister of St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church in Kingston, Upper Canada, attested to the denomination’s belief in the Almighty’s unchecked providential authority in an early nineteenth-century sermon. The fact that God created the world and presides over its affairs “cannot be doubted,” he declared. “The same wisdom,” he elaborated, “that... arranged in due order all its parts and gave to each its properties... shall be able to

12 Davies, The Vigilant God.
13 Michael Willis, The Gospel of Grace Vindicated; Being Sermons Preached on Several Sabbath Evenings in 1869... (Toronto: A. Lovell, 1870), 12.

Willis’ account of Arminianism is a misleading caricature, rather than an accurate description. Arminianism, in the words of John Webster Grant, “stressed as strongly as Calvinism our inherent incapacity to choose the way of salvation.” Yet in contrast to Calvinism’s unrelentingly pessimistic view of human nature, Arminianism also posited that individual sinners had been endowed with a capacity for accepting God’s “offer” of grace. “The possibility of... redemption,” Grant explained, “could therefore be held out to all.” John Webster Grant, A Profusion of Spires: Religion in Nineteenth Century Ontario (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 29-30. See also Marguerite Van Die, An Evangelical Mind: Nathaniel Burwash and the Methodist Tradition in Canada (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1989), 30-31.
It was absurd in Barclay’s view to suggest that such a carefully calibrated arrangement as the solar system was the product of mere “chance.” Barclay deployed a series of rhetorical questions in an effort to accentuate the forcefulness of his contention. Is it by chance, he inquired, that the various planets rotate in an orderly manner around the sun? Is it by chance that the sun is situated at the center of the universe, where it dispenses “light and heat, and joy” to the inhabitants of our planet? Is it by chance that the earth’s surface, which is routinely “decayed and faded by winter’s storms,” is rejuvenated each year by the warming return of spring? Surely not! For Barclay, God’s absolute providential authority was plainly apparent in the solar system’s intricacy and ineffable magnificence.

The Reverend George Patterson offered a complementary account of God’s boundless providential authority in a mid-nineteenth-century biography of his grandfather, the early Presbyterian missionary James MacGregor. Whereas Barclay emphasized the Creator’s absolute sovereignty over the universe, Patterson stressed his control over the entirety of world history. “The plans of Providence,” he explained, “exhibit one closely connected chain of events, stretching from the beginning of time until the end thereof.” Expanding on the divine plan’s utter vastness, Patterson noted that each event in the elaborate historical chain is connected to the next, “whether in the all absorbing past or the opening future.” This grand sequence of events, he added, was relentlessly purposeful. Every earthly occurrence could be viewed as the product of a foreordained design that included “all the past periods of human existence.” Patterson went as far as to affirm that this divinely orchestrated pattern was destined to persist until “the last syllable of recorded time.” The totality of history in his understanding was subsumed within divine providence’s inexorable onward march.

In accounting for the formulation of the early Canadian Presbyterian identity, the importance of the all-embracing, relentlessly determinative providential schema sketched

---

14 Queen’s University Archives (henceforth QUA), St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church Fonds, Appendix B; A Collection of Seven Sermons by the Rev. John Barclay, MA, First Minister of St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church (Kingston); Sermon on Psalm 103:19, undated, unpagedinated.
15 Ibid.
out by such figures as Barclay and Patterson can scarcely be overstated. Though ardent Presbyterians were by no means unique among Christian groups—not to mention adherents of certain non-Christian religious traditions—in focusing on the providential theme, their emphasis on God’s absolute sovereignty nevertheless occupied a clearly defined, unmistakably important position within the denominational psyche. It governed their understanding of the universe and their perceived position within it as a divinely favoured spiritual entity.

From the seemingly mundane to the monumental, the all-powerful hand of God was thought by the Presbyterians to be everywhere apparent and ceaselessly at work. It followed in their understanding that the unfurling of the divine plan encompassed both unfavourable phenomena as well as that which was gratifying. It was a mistake in the Presbyterians’ estimation to believe that God was capable of dispensing to humanity “nothing but peace and prosperity.” This “delusive sentiment” allegedly sprang from two equally erroneous presuppositions—namely, that human beings “merit peace and prosperity”; and “that peace and prosperity are the only things that a gracious Providence can bestow upon a nation.” Rejecting such notions as unfounded in scripture and as inconsistent with the workings of providential authority, devout members of the denomination frequently interpreted instances of worldly instability and suffering as so many divinely administered punishments.

The Reverend Robert McGill’s reaction to an 1852 fire that laid waste to sections of Montreal is illustrative of the nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterian conviction that punishments were meted out by God to both individual sinners and entire communities. McGill, in assessing the fire’s import, began his address by declaring that “every sincere Christian” assuredly believes in God’s universal providential authority and is aware of the fact that the “events of his own life” have been guided and shaped by that divine authority that “created and upholds the universe.” Yet in addition to governing individuals’ lives, McGill asserted that divine providence also exercises control over the affairs of larger groups, which in his conception were dealt with by God in accordance

---

17 *The Presbyterian*, May 1849, 70.
with their prevailing moral “character.” 18 When a given city has been forced to endure unfavourable circumstances, he explained, it can be “fairly inferred” that the attendant communal suffering was warranted on account of the transgressions of at least a few of its citizens.

The 1852 fire was in McGill’s understanding one such punishment. While he conceded that it was difficult to discern precisely why the universe’s “Sovereign Ruler” had chosen to punish Montreal’s inhabitants in this way, he suggested that the conflagration was likely a divinely engineered reaction to a lack of unity within the city’s Protestant community. McGill charged that, as a result of the virtual absence within Montreal of intra-Protestant cohesiveness, Roman Catholicism—which was guilty in his conception of priestly despotism and blasphemous “ritualism”—had been permitted to exert disproportionate spiritual influence. 19 McGill concluded his sermon by asserting that a concerted campaign led by Montreal’s Protestants to promote enhanced unity within their ranks would be imperative if they hoped to counter Catholicism’s allegedly pernicious effects and shore up their physical security and spiritual welfare.

Further evidence of the pronounced extent to which nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians viewed earthly misfortune as punishment meted out by God on account of human sinfulness can be found in the reaction of the congregation of St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church in York, Upper Canada to a cholera epidemic that afflicted that town in the summer of 1832. Reacting to the crisis, the church’s minister, the Reverend William Rintoul, convened weekly meetings of the congregational session—an administrative and disciplinary body consisting of the minister and elected lay elders of a given congregation—and wider church community in an effort to assuage York’s suffering. The meetings of session were designed to encourage “prayer as well as supplication to God on account of the prevalence of the present pestilential Disease,” which was thought by members of the congregation to have been brought on by widespread sinfulness. Church records indicate that members of St. Andrew’s, York acknowledged “the duty and necessity of a distinct recognition of God in a judgement so marked as the present malady.” They appealed to the universe’s providential ruler to

19 Ibid., 62-64.
hasten the plague’s “removal,” and prayed for the “sanctification of… the community and the world at large while it prevails.”

The spectre of providential punishment shaped Presbyterian attitudes toward intra-familial relations. Consider the denomination’s views regarding family worship, though which parents and children as well as servants in the case of the well-to-do would gather on a daily basis and engage in scriptural explication, silent prayer, and either the singing of a hymn or the reading of a psalm. One Presbyterian minister described such religious exercises in the mid-nineteenth century as “a blessing to a whole neighbourhood, to the whole community, to the whole nation.” Why? Because devout families who promoted Protestant piety within the domestic sphere through family worship served as the “grand conservators of national virtue and morality.” As such, they prompted God to bestow providential “blessings on the land” while simultaneously averting the potentially catastrophic “judgements of the Almighty.”

The idea that pervasive sinfulness within a given community was capable of eliciting God’s wrath was by no means inconsistent with Presbyterian orthodoxy. On the contrary, the denomination’s belief in a causal relationship between immorality and providential punishment was entirely consistent with the Calvinistic ethos that underlay denominational doctrine. For John Calvin, the sixteenth-century theologian for whom the system is named, a preponderance of iniquity within a given community represented a pernicious moral contagion that, when left unchecked, led inevitably to the flouting of God’s laws. An inability to curb pernicious behaviour could in Calvin’s conception spark a degenerative downward spiral in which the proliferation of vice and disorder would bring about potentially cataclysmic expressions of divine displeasure.

Yet whereas sinfulness could bring about expressions of God’s disappointment, divine approval could, in contrast, manifest itself in a nurturing paternalism that aimed to reward virtue and encourage further obedience. Though God could punish sinful individuals and communities he could also exalt those who were righteous. In keeping

---

20 PCCA, mfm 2004-8039 St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, Toronto. Session Records, 1 July 1832.
with this notion nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians conceived of themselves as enjoying a special providential status that was indicative of divine favour.

The Presbyterians’ sense of communal distinctiveness was predicated on a belief that they were an exceptional people tasked with an equally exceptional mission—namely, to facilitate civilization’s progress and to promulgate as widely and as energetically as possible Christianity’s glad tidings. They saw themselves as an elect spiritual nation comparable to ancient Israel—as a chosen people, in other words, who were united to God by way of an unbreakable covenantal bond and imbued with a divinely ordained destiny that linked them indissolubly to the unfolding of the providential design. Though it was expressed in differing ways depending on the cultural and chronological circumstances, the Presbyterians’ sense of spiritual nationhood featured prominently within the denominational consciousness throughout the pre-1875 period.23

The notion that Presbyterians constituted an elect spiritual nation centred on the intellectual legacy of the Protestant Reformation, and on the accompanying belief that members of the denomination were latter-day Israelites wedded to God by way of an enduring bond. Fearing persecution for their rejection of Papal authority, many sixteenth-century Protestants residing in primarily Roman Catholic communities took flight from their increasingly inhospitable homelands and resettled in such autonomous European centres as Zurich, Amsterdam, Emden, and Geneva. Their travails were portrayed within early modern Protestantism as analogous to those of the Old Testament Israelites, who escaped Egyptian captivity and were delivered under providential auspices into the Promised Land of Canaan.24

Yet the early modern Protestants’ conception of themselves as the ancient Israelites’ spiritual successors rested on more than comforting analogies. Protestants—and especially Calvinists—gravitated in this era to the notion that, like Israel, they were united to God by way of a covenantal relationship. As recounted in Genesis God, or

---

23 See pp. 63-64 below for a discussion regarding the differences between the Presbyterians’ conception of spiritual nationhood and the modern nation-state.
Yahweh, promises to shelter the descendants of Abraham, an Israelite, in exchange for their unswerving allegiance. If Israel will obey his commandments, God will establish a covenantal pact with them and act as their eternal protector. Failure on the part of the Israelites to abide by the conditions of this agreement, however, can result in potentially catastrophic expressions of divine disappointment.

Ardent early modern Calvinists, who were bound together in this era through patterns of commercial intercourse, group migration, and marriage as well as by shared doctrinal convictions, latched on to the covenantal model for two principal reasons. First, despite the fact that they believed that one’s soul was predestined by God to either eternal bliss or endless punishment, they felt that in stripping away as much sinfulness as possible and abiding by the divinely authored commandments they could potentially discern within themselves evidence of their own election to everlasting life in heaven. And second, they felt that a community-wide obligation to adhere in full to God’s laws would counter the potentially anarchic ramifications of Antinomianism, a destabilizing doctrine which posited that divinely favoured individuals were free to flout both religious and civil authorities and engage in rampant lawlessness. (It should be noted that orthodox Calvinists believed that only a minority within any community—including an elect spiritual nation, whose elevated status in the eyes of God was not thought to translate into across-the-board communal salvation—would ultimately be admitted to heaven. Adherents of the Calvinistic theological tradition nevertheless embraced the covenantal model chiefly as a result of its perceived spiritual utility and disciplinary effectiveness.)

Such views regarding the covenantal pact between God and his chosen people became entrenched in Calvinist communities throughout northern Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, establishing in numerous instances a compelling rationale for individual piety and strict social order. They would eventually make their way to early modern Scotland, where Presbyterianism emerged as the dominant form of Christianity largely as a result of the efforts of John Knox and Andrew Melville—both of whom, not coincidentally, studied in Geneva, the quintessential Calvinistic hot-bed—following the Scottish Reformation of 1560. So enmeshed in the fabric of Scottish Presbyterianism was the covenanting tradition that it was invoked during two of the more

---

25 Smith, *Cultural Foundations of Nations.*
pivotal moments in the nation’s history. In 1638 thousands of ordinary Scots signed the National Covenant, which affirmed their devotion to Presbyterianism and their corresponding opposition to the arbitrary liturgical impositions of England’s Episcopal monarch, Charles I. And, in 1643, the fiercest Scottish Calvinists aligned themselves with the English Parliamentarians during their Civil War with the Royalists via the Solemn League and Covenant. In both instances Scottish Presbyterians invoked the covenanting tradition in an attempt to underscore the perceived righteousness of their religious and political convictions.⁴⁶

The covenanting legacy was no less influential among eighteenth and nineteenth century Ulster Presbyterians. Kerby A. Miller has argued that, in addition to bolstering a belief in an enduring communal relationship with God, the covenanting ethos served to strengthen sentimental bonds in northern Ireland between Presbyterian individuals and families. The result in his view was a heightened sense of social cohesion and denominational righteousness. Elaborating on the notion that Ulster Presbyterians conceived of themselves as an elect spiritual nation, Miller has asserted that members of this ethno-religious community in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries viewed history itself as an elaborate drama in which they played the part of ancient Israel. Filling the role of the Israelites’ Egyptian tormentors were “Anglican Pharaohs,” who wielded disproportionate temporal influence in Ireland as a result of their status as members of a legally established church. Ulster Presbyterians, Miller explains, were confident that this grand “morality play” would eventually result in a decisive triumph in which, similar to ancient Israel, they would be “delivered” by God from injustice and persecution.⁴⁷

The notion that Presbyterians were latter-day Israelites wedded to God by way of a covenantal bond took root in post-revolutionary British North America. A mid-nineteenth-century Sabbath School lesson intended to be inculcated in the minds of young Presbyterians residing in eastern Upper Canada attests to the widespread belief that members of the denomination were an elect spiritual nation à la ancient Israel. The

---

lesson explained that the Israelites, following their departure from Egypt and their forty-
years of wandering in the wilderness, were poised under Joshua’s leadership to enter into
Canaan. Their experiences, the lesson explained, brought into focus the fact that God
carries “his people”—whether they were ancient Israelites or nineteenth-century
Presbyterians—to safety through “all trials,” regardless of their severity. The lesson
concluded by urging Belleville’s young Presbyterians to “follow God through all dangers,
as did the Israelites.” The underlying message was clear: Presbyterians, as a divinely
favoured community, were obliged to emulate ancient Israel in their faithful obedience to
the universe’s sovereign ruler.28

Accompanying the Presbyterians’ perceived status as a chosen people was an
obligation to abide at all times by God’s commandments. Such a responsibility was
intrinsic to the covenantal affiliation. God, in forging a bond with Israel, established an
unbreakable union that was destined to endure throughout the ages. Implicit within this
relationship was a responsibility on the part of God’s chosen people to adhere in full to
the Creator’s laws. The inability of a chosen people to remain obedient, the argument ran,
could result in acts of divinely initiated punishment. As Anthony D. Smith has observed,
the mental life of a covenanted community purportedly fused to God by way of a
covenantal bond is therefore characterized by neither “naive optimism”—certainty that
God will invariably look favourably upon his people, no matter the circumstances—nor
“passive fatalism”—blithe resignation to the inevitability of whatever will occur in the
future, be it good or ill. Rather, covenanted peoples typically conceive of themselves as
both specially favoured and endowed with a solemn duty from which they must never
deviate. Anxiety regarding disobedience and the corresponding spectre of providential
punishment thus looms large within the collective psyche of an elect spiritual nation.29

Nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians were no exception to this pattern of
apprehensiveness on the part of supposedly chosen peoples when it came to disobedience
and the corresponding threat of divinely engineered punishment. An 1863 sermon
delivered in Toronto by the Reverend William Gregg noted that the Israelites, following

---

28 PCCA Gregg Papers 1978-7001. Reel 2, Series 1-3-b: Poems and Tracts, 1840-68. “Notes on Sabbath
and Akenson, *God’s Peoples*. 

---

62
their arrival in the Promised Land, eventually ran afoul of God. He explained that this
development had been occasioned by the Israelites’ “dishonesty,” “uncleanness,” and
rebelliousness against divinely authored laws. Such transgressions, Gregg noted, were all
the more egregious in view of the fact that the Israelites were a “holy nation” that had
been “nourished and supported by their heavenly Father.” Yet as a result of their
disobedience the Israelites’ had come to be seen by God as a “sinful nation” deserving of
punishment. Gregg proceeded to relate this account regarding Israel’s disobedience to the
cosmic status of nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism. He informed his audience
that the “promises which were made to the Israelites will all be fulfilled to us,” but only if
“by faith” we venerate Christ and abide at all times by his father’s commandments.30
God, in keeping with the essential characteristics of the covenantal pact, could be
expected to shelter and bestow greatness on an elect spiritual nation. Failure on the part
of that nation to adhere in full to the Almighty’s commandments, however, threatened to
elicit expressions of divine wrath.

Nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians’ belief in their status as an elect
spiritual nation dovetailed with their fervent attachment to the traditions, institutions, and
mystique of the British Empire. Rather than confining themselves to one particular region
or colony, members of the denomination imagined themselves as part of a spatially
diffuse yet spiritually cohesive British community that transcended the arbitrary borders
of political geography and united devout Presbyterians throughout the Empire. Adherents
of the denomination frequently celebrated British imperialism as a providential vehicle
through which the worldwide propagation of Protestantism and the matchless virtues and
institutions of western civilization could be achieved. The Presbyterians’ emphasis on the
greatness of the Empire—which members of the denomination routinely attributed to
providential favour—bore a close resemblance to the views expressed by their
metropolitan denominational contemporaries, and contrasted markedly with the anti-
imperial radicalism of their American coreligionists in the era of the Revolutionary War.

The amorphous national community envisioned by nineteenth-century Canadian
Presbyterians differs in substantive ways from the modern nation-state, the emergence of
which has been attributed to a variety of factors ranging from the rise of industrial

capitalism to the advent of mechanisms of mass communication. Ernest Gellner, in discussing the characteristics of the geographically and politically self-contained nation-state, has defined modern nationalism as “primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent.”

Nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians, conversely, conceived of themselves as members of a widely dispersed yet religiously coherent nation that was bound together under providential auspices by a deeply rooted commitment to moral rectitude and doctrinal integrity. Theirs was a national community of the spirit and the mind.

It is not difficult to grasp why nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians—not to mention members of other groups both religious and secular located throughout the Empire—perceived Great Britain as a divinely favoured entity. Britain emerged in 1815 as the world’s principal military power following its triumph in a lengthy struggle with its archrival, Napoleonic France. It was also the world’s economic powerhouse, boasting prosperous industries, a sophisticated financial system, and elaborate trading networks that crisscrossed much of the globe. And, following the late eighteenth-century departure from the Empire of the thirteen Anglo-American colonies, Britain’s territorial holdings expanded significantly, increasing from 26 in 1792 to 43 in 1816.

Enjoying dominion over vast swathes of territory and hundreds of millions of people—many of whom were neither white-skinned nor Christian—in Africa, Asia, Australasia, and northern North America, the British Empire was celebrated by its proponents as a majestic entity upon which the sun never set. For zealous Christians, it went without saying that the Empire was responsible for bringing about the enlightenment and spiritual elevation of “heathen” peoples situated within Britain’s vast sphere of influence. A nineteenth-century imperial patriot, whether in Britain itself or in one of its colonies of settlement, could thus be forgiven for attributing the Empire’s military, economic, and geopolitical supremacy to providential favour. How else could one account for the attainment of such greatness?

---

The imperial enthusiasm exhibited by nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians accords with the attitudes of their Scottish and Ulsterite coreligionists. Colin Kidd, in delineating the limits of nineteenth-century Scottish nationalism, has argued that Lowlanders and Ulsterites—many of whom were Presbyterian—thought of themselves in this period not as racially Celtic, but rather as Teutonic. Through an investigation of the writings of nineteenth-century historians and natural philosophers he has demonstrated that in numerous instances Lowlanders and Ulsterites viewed themselves not as Celts—a people, he explains, who were frequently derided for their perceived backwardness and attendant penchant for superstition—but instead as a “Germanic race” who shared essential traits with what they identified as the comparatively enlightened “Anglian and Saxon peoples of England.” The notion that Lowlanders and Ulsterites—including large numbers of Presbyterians—constituted a veritable repository of unspoiled Teutonism contributed in Kidd’s conception to the crystallization of a staunchly British cultural identity that served to differentiate them in fundamental ways from their Celtic counterparts in the Scottish Highlands and Ireland, many of whom were Roman Catholic.35

What about Highland Presbyterians? To what extent were members of the denomination situated in Scotland’s remote northern and western regions integrated into the British Presbyterian community? By the late eighteenth century Scottish Highlanders of all religious stripes had largely shed the taint of Jacobite disloyalty that they had acquired in an earlier era as a result of their support in certain instances for England’s erstwhile Roman Catholic King, James II, and his descendants. Following the decisive defeat of the Jacobite insurgents in 1746 at the battle of Culloden, British officials brought into effect legislation designed to dilute Highland distinctiveness. Such measures, which included efforts on the part of the British government to prohibit the wearing of tartan for everyone except soldiers serving in Britain’s army, contributed in Linda Colley’s conception to the consolidation of imperial influence within Scotland’s

once-unruly Highlands. No longer a potential breeding ground for insubordination, Scotland’s northern and western regions quickly became “the arsenal of the empire” on account of Highland soldiers’ vigorous contributions to the British “imperial war machine.” Eighteenth and nineteenth-century Highland Presbyterians, who had never been as closely linked to the Jacobite insurgency as their Roman Catholic and Episcopalian counterparts, were by no means immune to this pattern of enhanced British influence within Scotland’s northern and western territories.36

Accelerating the absorption of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Highlanders of all religious persuasions into the British sphere of influence were the exertions of Presbyterian missionary institutions like the Scottish Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SPCK). This agency, which served as the Presbyterian equivalent of the English Episcopalian institution of the same name, was founded in 1709 in an effort to promote heightened standards in popular piety among religiously neglected Highlanders of various denominational backgrounds. The Scottish SPCK took pains to purge Highland society of such reputedly pernicious—and allegedly interrelated—phenomena as ignorance, superstition, Jacobitism, and Roman Catholicism. Supported by both the Presbyterian Church of Scotland and the British government, this institution also aimed to systematically promote within Highland society loyalty to Britain’s reigning— and Protestant—Hanoverian regime. To be sure, inhabitants of Scotland’s northern and western regions—regardless of their denominational affiliation—frequently retained distinctive cultural traits, not the least of which was the Gaelic linguistic tradition. Yet the activities of bodies like the Scottish SPCK contributed to the integration of large numbers of Highlanders—including numerous Presbyterians—into Britain’s cultural orbit.37

Contrary to the arguments articulated by Kidd, nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians’ sense of emotional attachment to the British Empire did not express itself in notions of Teutonic racial purity. In fact, members of the denomination exhibited considerable inconsistency when it came to such issues as the perceived ethnic and/or racial distinctiveness of Lowland Scots from their Celtic Highland counterparts. For example, the Reverend Robert Burns, commenting on an 1867 trip that he had taken to

36 Colley, Britons, 119-120. See also Steve Murdoch and A. Mackillop, eds., Fighting for Identity: Scottish Military Experience c. 1550-1900 (Boston: Brill, 2002).
Kincardine, Ontario, exulted in the intellectual and moral improvement that was thought to have occurred in the town since his previous visit approximately twenty years before. Burns noted that, whereas in the mid-1840s Kincardine had been little more than an “unbroken forest,” it was now a thriving community studded with schools and churches, and teeming with Scottish “Lowlanders and Celts.”\(^ {38}\) The fact that Burns felt it was necessary to differentiate between these two groups suggests that in his view people of Lowland extraction differed significantly from their Highland counterparts. (Though it is unclear whether Burns attributed these differences to biologically ingrained—and thus virtually immutable—racial divergences or to comparatively ephemeral cultural ones.)

By contrast, the Reverend John Sprott of Musquodoboit, Nova Scotia, described that colony’s early Scottish Presbyterian ministers, whether they were Lowlanders or Highlanders, as “North Britons.” The fact that both groups were subsumed within a single category suggests that, from Sprott’s perspective, whatever racial and/or cultural differences existed between Scottish Lowlanders and Highlanders—at least among Presbyterians—were insufficiently pronounced to warrant their separation into discrete groupings.\(^ {39}\)

Nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians were substantially clearer when it came to drawing racial distinctions between Ulster Presbyterians and Irish Roman Catholics. For instance, the Reverend George Patterson, in commenting in the mid-nineteenth century on the early Ulster Presbyterians of Truro, Nova Scotia, unequivocally asserted that their experiences in Ireland amid an Irish Catholic “race” that was “so much inferior in intelligence and civilization” nurtured within their ranks a sense of “pride” that made its way across the Atlantic Ocean and manifested itself in northeastern North America.\(^ {40}\) Yet when it came to the issue of whether Scottish Lowlanders and Highlanders were ethnically and/or racially distinct groups nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians were considerably hazier. This lack of clarity lays bare the ambiguities

---


\(^ {39}\) *Missionary Record of the United Presbyterian Church*, July 1855, 126.

inherent in nineteenth-century conceptions of racial distinctiveness and purity. It can also be construed as evidence of the contested, contingent nature of whiteness itself.41

Nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians’ imperial patriotism, rather than stressing notions of Teutonic racial purity, was primarily couched in a rhetorical emphasis on the superiority of Britain’s constitution and on the British Empire’s exalted global status. Such emphases played a vital role in the formulation of a coherent denominational identity that ultimately bound together members of the Presbyterian community, whether they were Lowlanders, Highlanders, Ulsterites or their North American-born progeny. A widespread imperial enthusiasm cross-cut the institutional cleavages and vast territorial distances that served to separate nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism’s constituent parts.

The Reverend Alexander Mathieson, an adherent of the Church of Scotland, rhapsodized in 1836 about the unrivalled greatness of the British constitution. British subjects “groan not under the oppressive sway of a tyrannical monarch,” he declared. Contrary to the cruel despotisms that held sway over much of continental Europe, Britons in Mathieson’s understating lived under the “mild reign” of a King—William IV—“who is the father of his people,” and whose paternal authority is kept in check as a result of the political power exerted within Britain by the aristocratic House of Lords and by the comparatively democratic House of Commons. Mathieson added that subjects of the Empire were the beneficiaries of a system of government that, in its capacity for promoting both justice and liberty, existed throughout the world as an object of tremendous “admiration.”42

---

41 See Noel Ignatiev, How the Irish Became White (New York: Routledge, 2007); and Daniel Coleman, White Civility: The Literary Project of English Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).
42 PCCA Alexander Mathieson, A Sermon, Preached in St. Andrew’s Church, Montreal, on the Thirtieth Day of November, 1836 (St. Andrew’s Day) by the Reverend Alexander Mathieson, A.M. (Minister of that Church, and one of the Chaplains of the St. Andrew’s Society, Montreal), 13.

An 1843 editorial published in the Toronto Banner, the Presbyterian publication owned and operated by Peter and George Brown that came to be affiliated with the Canadian Free Church following that subgroup’s emergence in 1844, echoed Mathieson’s expressions of fondness for the British constitution. Whether in “ancient or modern times,” the article asserted, no regime could be found that has provided its citizens with such a remarkable combination of wealth, justice, and liberty. No form of government, the article elaborated, has “secured so large an amount of individual prosperity,” formulated such “equitable laws,” and extended to both individuals and the press such remarkable freedom. It came as no surprise to the Banner and its fiercely Presbyterian owner-operators that the British constitution—the elaborate bundle of laws, conventions, and institutions by which Britons were governed—was the envy of the world. The Banner, August 1843.
The Reverend William Gregg, a Free Church adherent, explicitly attributed the supposed superiority of Britain’s institutions and the greatness of the British Empire to divine guidance. “Why should we imagine that the ship of State can move steadily along without an immediate superintending Providence,” he inquired, while acknowledging the punitive “hand of God” when societies are beset by hardship and afflicted by seemingly inexplicable catastrophes? In precisely the same way that God punishes sinful communities, Gregg explained, the Almighty shelters and sustains those who are seen in his infinite wisdom to be righteous. For Gregg, the splendour of the British constitution and the global dominance of the British Empire were neither the result of mere good fortune nor the product of purely human endeavour. Rather, they were attributable to an abiding providential favour that deliberately conferred greatness upon Great Britain and its subjects.43

A combination of providentialism and imperial enthusiasm was central to the Presbyterian identity in nineteenth-century Canada. In addition to providing an otherwise disparate assortment of Presbyterian factions with a nucleus of ideas around which to coalesce, this combination of godly sovereignty and British imperial zeal infused the denomination with a compelling sense of mission. By equipping the British Presbyterian nation with a conceptual synthesis of pride, prestige and virtue, it bolstered their belief in a unique communal responsibility for the advancement of God’s redemptive design.

An 1861 editorial published in the Home and Foreign Record of the Presbyterian Church of the Lower Provinces of British North America reveals the belief that Presbyterians were a divinely favoured spiritual nation that had been gifted by God with a solemn responsibility for the advancement of the providential plan. Recalling the language and imagery put forth by the Puritans of colonial New England, the author declared that British North American Presbyterians’ “position” and “duty” were inextricably linked—“We are a city set on a hill which cannot be hid.” Presbyterianism’s “duty,” the article continued, “is to let our light so shine that men seeing our good works may glorify our Father in heaven.”44 Presbyterians in the author’s conception were an

43 PCCA, William Gregg papers. Reel 2, Scrapbook; Sermon at Cooke’s Church, Toronto, undated.
elect spiritual nation who were duty-bound to facilitate the unfolding of the divinely authored design through the energetic exertions of missionaries and evangelical voluntary societies. Members of the denomination identified the British Empire as a providentially ordained vehicle through which the glorious objective of Christianizing the world could be realized.

Presbyterian interpretations of significant nineteenth-century developments occurring in northern North America as well as elsewhere in the world attest to the synthesis of providentialism and British imperial fervour that permeated the denominational consciousness. The War of 1812, the Napoleonic Wars, the Canadian Rebellions of 1837-38, the European Revolutions of 1848, the Indian “Mutiny” of 1857, and the Canadian Presbyterian Union of 1875 were viewed by devout Presbyterians as indicative of God’s unchecked universal sovereignty, and of the privileged global position occupied by the British Empire. This heady combination of godly authority and imperial patriotism was invoked by members of the denomination—albeit in differing ways, depending on the cultural and chronological context—in an effort to ascertain the cosmic significance of major developments taking place at home and abroad.

Montreal’s Robert Easton, in an 1815 address on the significance of the War of 1812, stated that divine providence was responsible for the fact that Lower Canada was largely spared the violence and upheaval that characterized the conflict’s most intense military encounters. “It cannot escape our notice,” he observed, that Lower Canada was “exempted in great measure from the scourge of war.” It was to “that overruling providence,” Easton maintained, that Lower Canadians were indebted for the preservation of relative peace and stability during an era in which American invaders threatened British North America’s physical security.

The rhetoric employed by Easton regarding the providential significance of the War of 1812 pales in comparison to the positively glowing terms in which British North American Presbyterians discussed the circumstances surrounding Great Britain’s military

---

45 Easton, *Reasons for Joy and Praise: A Sermon Preached April 6, 1815: Being the Day of General Thanksgiving for Peace with the United States and in the Presbyterian Church, St. Peter’s Street, Montreal*, 10.

triumph over France in the Napoleonic Wars. Britain’s victory, which brought to an end more than twenty years of virtually uninterrupted warfare between these two rivals, allegedly threw into relief the special relationship between the British Empire and the universe’s sovereign ruler.

Nova Scotia’s Thomas McCulloch, a Secessionist educator and minister, attributed Britain’s victory in the Battle of Trafalgar to its status as a divinely favoured entity in an 1814 sermon. Accompanying this exalted status, McCulloch thundered, was a responsibility on the part of the British Empire for propagating Christianity among the wretched and benighted the world over. God, he declared, had bestowed on the Empire a special “duty” to propagate the soul-saving Gospels as widely and as vigorously as possible. McCulloch went as far as to assert that the Empire was the vital instrument through which the regeneration of the world would be achieved. McCulloch, in emphasizing British Protestant evangelists’ responsibility for precipitating the world’s spiritual redemption, explicitly equated nineteenth-century Presbyterianism with ancient Israel. “We are a part of the commonwealth of Israel,” he declared, “we share its immunities; we have an interest in all its hopes and [consolations]; and, certainly, it becomes us to seek its prosperity.”

British North American Presbyterians’ overseas counterparts espoused virtually identical sentiments regarding the British Empire’s divinely favoured status. The remarks of Edinburgh’s Archibald Alison, a Presbyterian minister, regarding the cosmic import of Britain’s victory over France in the Napoleonic Wars are illustrative of this fact. Alison, in a thanksgiving sermon on Britain’s victory in the Battle of Trafalgar, emphasized the divinely ordained nature of Nelson’s triumph. He identified the providential “breath of Heaven” as the definitive factor in securing the British admiral’s victory. Britain’s Empire, he added, was playing a key role in the “progressive” development of world history, largely as a result of the efforts of its Protestant evangelists. Acting in

conjunction with “the sublime designs of Providence,” British imperialism was contributing to the moral regeneration of humanity through the worldwide propagation of Christian enlightenment and virtue.\textsuperscript{50} Alison’s remarks regarding the complementary relationship between British imperialism and Protestant evangelism—which bore a close resemblance to those of McCulloch—reflect the unity of thought that bound together numerous nineteenth-century Presbyterians on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

Presbyterian expositions regarding the British Empire’s divinely favoured status were by no means limited to such early nineteenth-century conflicts as the War of 1812 and the Napoleonic Wars. On the contrary, in a sermon delivered in 1838 the Revered Robert McGill argued that the fizzling of the Upper Canadian Rebellion—which threatened to tear asunder the imperial bonds that linked that colony both constitutionally and culturally to the British Empire—was attributable to “the providence of God.”

McGill began his address by stating that the universe’s divine governor wields absolute control “not only over individuals, but over nations.” It was to this superintending authority, he elaborated, that “the pious and good owe the peculiar blessings of their own condition… [including] the prosperity of kingdoms, the security of empire and the fate of battles.”\textsuperscript{51} There could be no uncertainty in McGill’s conception as to whether Upper Canada’s “deliverance” from revolutionary violence in 1837-8 had been divinely orchestrated. Rhetorical questions were employed in an attempt to enhance the forcefulness of his contention. “Can we doubt that he smote to the earth the fierce and blaspheming [rebels]? Can we doubt that he paralysed all their subsequent opposition and scattered them as chaff before the wind[?]\textsuperscript{52}

An 1838 address written by the Synod of the Presbyterian Church in Canada in connection with the Church of Scotland stressed the ill-fated Upper Canadian Rebellion’s cosmic significance.\textsuperscript{53} These Canadian adherents of the Church of Scotland affirmed that “few, if any” of their members had played “any part” in the Rebellion. Yet they did not interpret their subgroup’s exhibitions of loyalty in this instance as grounds for spiritual

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 226-227.
\textsuperscript{51} PCCA Robert McGill, \textit{“The Love of Country”}, a Discourse Preached in St. Andrew’s Church, Niagara, on Tuesday 6 February, 1838 (a Day Appointed for Public Thanksgiving, on Account of Our Deliverance from the Miseries of the Late Insurrection…), 7-8.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{53} Home & Foreign Missionary Record for the Church of Scotland, May 1838, 14-15.
complacency. Rather, they viewed the violence and disorder wrought by the Rebellion as a mild punishment meted out by God on account of the pervasiveness within their church of sinfulness. Their remarks on this matter dovetail with the orthodox Calvinistic belief that failure on the part of an elect spiritual nation to abide by the Almighty’s commandments can result in punitive expressions of divine displeasure. “God,” the address explained, “has given us intimation of his power to punish, and has chastised us gently according to his mercy.” Divinely administered punishments, they added, had been administered as a result of a litany of transgressions, including “[our church’s] feverish anxiety concerning political affairs—our general unconcern regarding things of religion—the common dishonour of [God’s] name, and disregard of his laws.” The address concluded by urging members of this Canadian Presbyterian constituency to abide by stricter moral standards in the future. Failure to do so, the address implied, could engender severe punishments that would be meted out by the universe’s sovereign ruler.54

Nor were Presbyterian conceptions of the British Empire’s privileged providential status limited solely to conflicts that bore immediately upon Great Britain and its array of imperial possessions. The revolutionary tumult that enveloped much of continental Europe in 1848, for example, allegedly yielded additional evidence of the Empire’s special cosmic status despite the fact that Great Britain was not involved in the proceedings. The fact that the British Isles were for the most part spared the upheaval that characterized the conflicts occurring on the continent—which resulted in the toppling of monarchies—was indicative of godly favour. Great Britain’s divinely favoured status during the revolutions was trumpeted in an essay published in the May 1848 edition of the Ecclesiastical & Missionary Record, a Canadian Presbyterian publication. Integral to this conception was God’s supposed preservation of Britain as a veritable oasis of peace and stability despite its close physical proximity to the revolutionary maelstrom. There could be no doubt in the author’s view as to whether an omnipotent divine authority had prevented the transmission of the radical contagion from continental Europe to Great Britain. “God has so ordered it,” the author declared, that the chaotic spasms responsible

54 Ibid., 14-15.
for the overthrow of “imperial thrones” on the continent failed to wreak comparable havoc among his favoured peoples in Britain. 55

Given the cosmic significance of events like the European revolutions of 1848, mid-nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians offered effusive expressions of gratitude for the privileged status of the Empire to which they belonged. 56 Consider the statement composed in 1848 by the Presbyterian Church of Canada in Connection with the Church of Scotland and addressed to Lord Elgin, the Canadian Governor General. At this “remarkable” juncture in world history, the address declared, when so many nations are “convulsed by revolutions,” the stability of Britain’s Empire provides ample cause for “rejoicing.” The hand of God in the Presbyterians’ conception had deliberately shielded the British monarchy from the “dreadful evils” of revolution. 57 The address to the Governor General, Queen Victoria’s Canadian surrogate, added that “this part of Your Majesty’s dominions” enjoyed the “utmost peace and tranquility” as a result of the pervasiveness within it of British principles, traditions, and institutions. The Canadian Presbyterians, in conclusion, affirmed that they looked forward to remaining “loyal and attached” to the Empire in the years to come. 58

The Presbyterians’ response to the Indian “mutiny” of 1857 offers additional evidence of the denomination’s abiding emotional attachment to the British Empire. Ronald Hyam has described this event as arguably “the most traumatic experience” in Britain’s “imperial century,” the hundred-year span between the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars and the outbreak of the First World War when the Empire’s global influence—economic, military, and cultural—was greatest. The conflict was sparked by the British military’s use of cartridges for the Lee-Enfield rifle, which were greased with tallow from the fat of both cows and pigs. To access the cartridges’ contents they had to be bitten open, an act that was deeply offensive to both Hindus and Muslims. Yet beyond this catalytic issue the conflict was thought to be symptomatic of a smouldering resentment on the part of the Indian populace toward the policies employed in southern

55 Ecclesiastical & Missionary Record of the Free Church of Scotland, May 1848, 106.
57 The Presbyterian, August 1848, 126.
58 Ibid.
Asia by the British regime, or Raj. The 1857 episode ultimately involved widespread killings on both sides, including the murder of two hundred British civilians at Cawnpore and, in a controversial act of retribution, the firing of reputedly treasonous Indian soldiers, or sepoys, from the mouths of cannons.\(^{59}\)

The reaction of Hamilton, Canada West’s Central Presbyterian Church to the Indian conflict attests to the existence within the denomination of substantial “grass roots” enthusiasm for the British Empire and its purportedly glorious global mission. The congregation, in response to the conflict, resolved to set aside 27 November 1857 as a day of “humiliation and prayer” with regard to the “calamities” occurring in southern Asia. Members of the church looked to divine providence to bring about the restoration of order and the diffusion throughout the Indian sub-continent of Christian civility. They ultimately hoped that the affair would result in the strengthening of British influence and in the intensification of Protestant evangelism throughout both the region and the world.\(^{60}\)

Presbyterian responses to the union of 1875, which resulted in the creation of a dominion-wide church, underscore the enduring importance of providentialism and British imperialism within the denominational psyche during the later nineteenth century. The four bodies that comprised “the great Presbyterian family of British North America”—the Synod of the Presbyterian Church of the Lower Provinces of British North America, the Synod of the Presbyterian Church of the Maritime Provinces of British North American in Connection with the Church of Scotland, the Canada Presbyterian Church, and the Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Canada in Connection with the Church of Scotland—managed to come together in that year and establish a new national institution. This achievement, according to one Presbyterian observer, would not have been accomplished without the “Providence of God,” which allowed the denomination’s often-quarrelsome constituent parts to jettison their differences regarding such issues as the church-state relationship and forge a “solemn covenant” with one another as well as Jesus Christ, “the King and Head of the Church.”\(^{61}\)


\(^{61}\) *The Presbyterian*, July 1875. See also *Home & Foreign Record of the Presbyterian Church of the Lower Provinces of British North America*, June 1875, 142.
Yet the Canadian Presbyterians’ pursuit of a nation-wide church was not fuelled by a desire on the part of the denomination’s membership to distance themselves from metropolitan traditions and institutions. On the contrary, in laying the groundwork for the creation of the Presbyterian Church in Canada adherents of the denomination took pains to reaffirm their fidelity to what was frequently described as “the church of our fathers.” A Canadian Church of Scotland deputation was dispatched to Britain in 1875 for the express purpose of conveying to their metropolitan counterparts their constituency’s “deep gratitude” and “undiminished attachment.” For the Canadians, the establishment of a new national institution and the perpetuation of meaningful emotional ties to the metropolitan church were by no means mutually exclusive phenomena.

The enthusiastic expressions of imperial patriotism exhibited by nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians contrast sharply with the reputation for revolutionary enthusiasm garnered in the era of the Revolutionary War by their Anglo-American co-religionists. Due to a variety of factors—notably the tradition of Presbyterian resistance to perceived Episcopalian oppression and the denomination’s democratic system of church polity—members of the denomination are thought to have been among the most fervent contributors to the revolutionary insurgency. Such an interpretation is by no means unfounded. Benjamin Witherspoon, a Presbyterian minister who served as President of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton), was the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence; and certain eighteenth-century Anglo-American loyalists allegedly dismissed the revolutionary insurgency as little more than “a Presbyterian war” on account of the denomination’s support for the radical cause, which was especially emphatic in such “middle colonies” as Pennsylvania.63


To emphasize the continued fidelity of Canadian Presbyterians to their overseas counterparts during the era of national union is not meant to downplay the importance of denominational reconciliation in the later nineteenth century. Rather, in acknowledging the persistence of sentimental bonds between Canadian Presbyterians and their metropolitan coreligionists, such an emphasis is designed to underscore the enduring significance of “old world” ties to the denominational identity in nineteenth-century northern North America.

What accounts for this discrepancy? How can it be that eighteenth-century Anglo-American Presbyterians were emphatically in favour of the revolution while their nineteenth-century co-religionists situated on the same continent were decidedly pro-British? Answers to these questions can be found in both Great Britain itself and in British North America. Thousands of Presbyterians had emigrated from Britain to British North America in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars. By the early nineteenth century they had, by and large, come to see the Empire as a defender of justice and liberty against the perceived menace of French despotism. This fundamentally pro-British cultural orientation, which in numerous instances accompanied Presbyterian immigrants during their voyage across the Atlantic Ocean, was reinforced in the New World.

Loyalty emerged in the nineteenth century as an enormously influential cultural phenomenon among inhabitants of northern North America—including Presbyterians—on account of the divisive legacy of the American Revolution, events like the War of 1812, and the post-1815 surge in British immigration. To be sure, loyalty meant different things to different people. For archconservatives it entailed unswerving obedience to colonial elites while, for reform-oriented liberals, it was entirely compatible with vigorous expressions of political dissent and with assertive campaigns to secure the rights and liberties that were enshrined in the British constitution. Yet contested though its significance may have been, loyalty was central to post-revolutionary British North American society. Rejecting violent insurrection as a legitimate expression of political protest, it served as a popular cultural motif around which an eclectic variety of groups and individuals were ultimately able to coalesce.

Bound up with the combination of providentialism and imperial enthusiasm that invigorated early Canadian Presbyterianism were two ideological tendencies that played an important part in shaping the denominational worldview. A pronounced anti-Catholic prejudice and an equally strident critique of the institution of slavery in the southern United States, in addition to laying bare the centrality of notions of providential causation

189); and Joseph S. Tiedemann, “Presbyterianism and the American Revolution in the Middle Colonies,” Church History 74, no. 2 (June 2005).
and British imperial enthusiasm within the denominational consciousness, served to reinforce the Presbyterians’ sense of divinely ordained denominational duty.

Reductive notions regarding the righteousness of Protestantism and the corruption of Roman Catholicism exerted substantial influence within nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism’s mental world. Such ideas also circulated extensively throughout the wider British World. David Hempton, in discussing the relationship between religion and political culture in British society between the late seventeenth and mid-twentieth centuries, has identified the essential convictions that underpinned English anti-Catholicism. “Protestantism,” he has observed in a statement that could easily be transposed onto the larger British imperial community, “was England [emphasis added]; it preserved freedom; it was morally pure; and it was providentially on the right side in the great cosmic battle between good and evil…. Roman Catholicism,” by contrast, “was foreign, violent, morally corrupt, doctrinally erroneous, magical, devious, and was led by a standing army of Popes, Jesuits, and priests.”65

Congruent with Hempton’s observations, the argument has been made that a popular culture of anti-Catholicism was instrumental to the emergence during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of a coherent British self-conception. The three following phenomena substantiate such an interpretation: the designation by Protestant churches of days of thanksgiving for events like the sinking of the Spanish Armada, the foiling of Guy Fawkes’ “gunpowder plot,” and the failure of the Jacobite risings of 1715 and 1745; the pervasiveness within ordinary Britons’ homes of texts such as John Foxe’s Book of Martyrs and John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress, which chronicled the perseverance of virtuous Protestants in the face of Catholic cruelty; and the routine burning in effigy of the Pope, the Roman Catholic Church’s spiritual and ecclesiastical head.66

Anti-Catholic sentiments among the British populace deepened during the early and mid-nineteenth century as a result of several politico-religious developments that

---

65 David Hempton, Religion and Political Culture in Britain and Ireland: From the Glorious Revolution to the Decline of Empire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 144.
allegedly threatened the Protestant foundations upon which British society rested. The four following events played a particularly significant role in stoking the fires of British anti-Catholicism: “Catholic Emancipation” in 1829, which removed restrictions on the ability of Roman Catholics to occupy seats in Britain’s parliament; the Maynooth Grant, which allowed for the provision of funds from the British treasury for a Roman Catholic seminary in Ireland; the Oxford Movement, which witnessed divines from that university warming to reputedly heretical notions regarding the doctrine of apostolic succession and the metaphysical significance of transubstantiation; and the “Papal aggression” controversy of the early 1850s, through which Pope Pius IX—an adherent of a thoroughgoing form of Roman Catholicism known as ultramontanism—attempted to reinvigorate English Catholicism.

Such developments coincided with a sharp rise in evangelicalism, an emotionally charged expression of Protestantism. The evangelical surge contributed to nineteenth-century British Protestants’ sense of disdain when it came to their Roman Catholic counterparts, who were increasingly denounced as an insidious “fifth column” that threatened to corrode Britain’s Protestant character from within. The regular invocation by nineteenth-century British Protestants—especially evangelicals—of terms like “Popish” and “Romish” in reference to Roman Catholicism lays bare the widespread belief that Britain’s Catholic population was inherently disloyal, harbouring allegiances as it reputedly did to a foreign leader and a foreign land.67

Such phenomena were central to the crystallization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of a palpably Protestant British identity. Increasingly cliché though the term may be, Roman Catholicism existed within the British popular consciousness during this period as the quintessential other. That is, Catholicism served as the benighted foil against which an enlightened British Protestantism aimed to define itself. Indeed, in its purported liberty, prosperity, and dynamism, the attendant sense of Britishness was for its adherents the antithesis of the stifling torpor that was thought by hostile Protestant observers to typify the culture of Roman Catholicism.

---

67 Haydon, “‘I love my king and my country…’,” in Protestantism and National Identity eds., Claydon and McBride, 38-49; Wolffe, The Protestant Crusade.
These developments—namely, the British popular culture of anti-Catholicism; nineteenth century developments like “Catholic Emancipation,” the Maynooth Grant, the Oxford Movement, and the “Papal aggression” controversy; a nineteenth century rise in Protestant evangelicalism; and the attendant “othering” of Roman Catholicism—resulted in an outpouring of anti-Catholic vitriol throughout much of the British World. Nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism was not immune to this trend. On the contrary, a broadly held anti-Catholicism played a significant part in the emergence of a coherent denominational self-conception. Compounding anti-Catholicism within early Canadian Presbyterianism—as well as several other Protestant groups—were controversial northern North American developments occurring in the 1850s, notably the Gavazzi riots, which involved violent clashes over the incendiary anti-Catholic remarks of the former monk, Alessandro Gavazzi; the evermore intolerant attitudes of the Loyal Orange Order; and the shrill objections of many Upper Canadian Protestants to the perceived spectre of French-speaking Roman Catholic “domination” within the united province of Canada.68

The anti-Catholic views espoused by nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians were fuelled by prejudicial attitudes. John Wolffe has attributed the existence of prejudice to humanity’s innate psychological predisposition to “generalize,” and to arrive at irrational conclusions regarding unfamiliar individuals, groups, and cultural phenomena “quite as readily as rational ones.” Following the formulation of such conclusions, he explains, inconvenient evidence that calls into question the original prejudicial conception is either shunted aside or, alternatively, acknowledged as an anomaly that proves the rule. The result in Wolffe’s conception is a “vicious circle” through which parochialism and intolerance reinforce one another’s authority and bigotry hardens into conventional wisdom.69

The anti-Catholic arguments proffered by nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians accord well with Wolffe’s account regarding the emergence of prejudicial


69 Wolffe, Protestant Crusade, 4.
attitudes. While in certain instances Presbyterians espoused positive views of their Roman Catholic counterparts—as seen, for instance, in their expressions of gratitude to the Recollet Order of Montreal, which permitted that city’s Presbyterians to hold services in their church prior to the erection in the late eighteenth century of a Presbyterian place of worship—an unflattering rendering of Roman Catholicism nevertheless occupied an important position within the denominational consciousness.

A counter-argument could perhaps be made that, rather than being spurred on by an irrational prejudice, nineteenth-century Presbyterian critiques of Roman Catholicism were in fact predicated on a wholly rational—that is, a reason-based—objection to that church’s doctrines and liturgies. Presbyterians are Protestants, and Protestants—at least orthodox nineteenth century ones—disagree with Catholics when it comes to such fundamental theological considerations as church polity and the metaphysical significance of sacraments. Why, in view of this fact, should Presbyterian criticisms of Roman Catholic tenets and practices necessarily be interpreted as the product of an irrational prejudice? Would it not be more accurate to describe them as an entirely rational—though not necessarily correct—response to a religious tradition with which, in certain key respects, they differed?

Such an assertion is not without merit. Reason-based theological objections almost certainly informed nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterian attitudes toward Catholicism, based as they invariably were on an ecclesiastical tradition that differed in fundamental ways from that of the Roman Church. Yet the vitriolic tenor and sheer pervasiveness of Presbyterian anti-Catholic outbursts—which routinely stressed the supposed poverty and ignorance of predominantly Catholic communities, and which portrayed the Roman church’s spiritual authority as the religious equivalent of slavery—betrays the existence within the denomination of an animus that involves more than purely rational criticism. It is one thing for a Protestant to disagree with a Roman Catholic over, say, the Pope’s ecclesiastical headship. It is another thing altogether for that Protestant to declare that Catholics the world over are mired in a soul-imperiling ignorance. While it may be based in part on rational objections, the second assertion, due

---

70 UCA Croil Papers. Box 1, File 1, Autobiography. Life of James Croil, 1821-1916, pp. 1-100, 70.
to its sweeping, condemnatory nature, attests the existence of an underlying prejudice as well.

The rhetorical emphasis placed by Presbyterians throughout the pre-1875 era on Roman Catholicism’s supposed spiritual oppressiveness lays bare the centrality of anti-Catholicism within the denominational psyche. As we shall see, such an emphasis prompted Presbyterians to propagate the supposedly superior tenets of Protestantism among the inhabitants of the overwhelmingly Roman Catholic inhabitants of Lower Canada. Given this combination of anti-Catholic rhetoric and action, the importance of prejudice to the denomination’s self-conception cannot be denied.71

Thomas McCulloch put forth succinct expressions of anti-Catholicism in two early nineteenth-century texts, 1808’s *Popery Condemned by Scripture and the Fathers* and 1810’s *Popery Again Condemned*. The catalyst for McCulloch’s diatribes was a conflict involving Robert Stanser, Anglican Rector of Halifax, and Edmund Burke, who would go on to serve as that city’s Roman Catholic Bishop, over the latter’s desire to bring about the establishment in Nova Scotia of a Roman Catholic college.72 McCulloch’s remarks, which entailed a denunciation of such Roman Catholic traditions as the ecclesiastical headship of the Pope and the veneration of Saints, capture the anti-Catholic views that circulated within the British North American Presbyterian consciousness. Intertwined with McCulloch’s denunciation of Catholic principles and practices was a sense of excitement regarding an anticipated millennial clash between Protestantism and Catholicism. Describing the Roman Church as “the mother of harlots,” he declared that the time was “not far distant, when the flames with which she has tormented the servants of God, will overtake her.”73 McCulloch’s remarks regarding

---

71 Identifying the existence of anti-Catholicism within nineteenth-century Presbyterianism—not to mention several other Protestant groups—is not intended to pass judgment on a denominational community whose views were shaped in a radically different era by a radically different set of cultural circumstances. In addition to being anachronistic, leveling such a moral critique might also seem hypocritical, given our own inability—unwillingness?—in the early twenty-first century to tackle such fundamental ethical concerns as climate change and the plight of certain indigenous communities. Rather, emphasizing the existence of anti-Catholicism within nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism is meant to highlight one of the most significant aspects of the denominational identity.


Roman Catholicism may well have drawn on rational theological objections. Yet they were plainly accompanied by a scathing prejudice as well.

Nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians, in criticizing their Roman Catholic counterparts, took pains to contrast standards of living in primarily Catholic and Protestant communities. This strategy was designed to underscore Catholicism’s perceived backwardness in relation to Protestantism’s supposed dynamism. It sprang from the conviction that, whereas Catholicism wherever it existed was virtually synonymous with poverty and ignorance, Protestantism was purportedly conducive to the attainment of widespread prosperity and enlightenment. The nineteenth-century Presbyterians’ remarks regarding the reputedly complementary relationship between Protestantism and temporal progress fit comfortably within a longstanding intellectual tradition that would linger in the western cultural consciousness for generations to come. For evidence one need look only to the arguments put forth by Max Weber, who in the early twentieth century posited that an emphasis placed by Protestants—and in particular Calvinists—on such values as diligence, thrift, sobriety, and industriousness facilitated the emergence of modern capitalism.74

Presbyterian efforts to contrast standards of living in primarily Catholic and Protestant communities placed substantial emphasis on the allegedly inverse relationship between natural fertility and national virtue. An excerpt from a public lecture by George Patterson, which was published in Halifax’s Presbyterian Witness and Evangelical Advocate in early 1860, is illustrative of this tendency. “The loveliest provinces of Europe,” he argued in reference to such southern European nations as Italy and Spain, have under “Romish” spiritual authority been plunged into a state of “poverty, political servitude and… intellectual torpor.” By contrast, Protestant nations in northern Europe—including Great Britain—which were once notorious for “sterility” and “barbarism” were purportedly transformed by “skill and industry” into fruitful “gardens,” boasting an enviable lineage of “heroes, statesmen, philosophers and poets.”75

75 Presbyterian Witness and Evangelical Advocate, 21 January 1860, 10-11.
Patterson identified religious virtue—or the lack thereof—as responsible for the disparities that distinguished Catholic countries from their Protestant counterparts. “Righteousness exalteth a nation,” he thundered, “but sin is a reproach to any people.” It was no coincidence, Patterson explained, that those states who enjoyed widespread enlightenment and prosperity were also the ones in which Protestantism exerted the greatest cultural influence. Great Britain in Patterson’s understanding epitomized this correlation between Protestant piety and national greatness. The elevated global status enjoyed by Britain was attributable in his understanding “to her sound Protestant Christianity,” which allegedly allowed that nation to overcome seemingly unfavourable environmental circumstances and attain an unprecedented degree of economic, political, and moral greatness.76

Comparable arguments regarding the supposed correlation between religious virtue and national greatness appeared in an 1846 edition of the Presbyterian Ecclesiastical & Missionary Record, in which an unnamed commentator contrasted the Protestant and Catholic states of the Americas. The discussion turned on the dichotomy that allegedly distinguished the vigour and freedom of the former from the lethargy and subjugation of the latter. In “Protestant America,” the author declared, “every man” enjoys virtually undisturbed freedom as a result of widespread religious liberty and enlightenment that prevail within the country. Thus, “peace and happiness, knowledge and love, liberty and prosperity” abound. This scenario contrasted with the alleged destitution and ignorance of “Catholic America,” comprising in the author’s understanding Mexico and “the republics south of her.” Within such states, the author affirmed, “despotism and anarchy, desolation and misery” exist in direct proportion to the pervasiveness among the populace of Roman Catholic tenets and traditions.77

The following statement encapsulates the conviction that, whereas Protestantism was everywhere a source of national greatness, Catholicism invariably obliterated the benefits that derived from a salubrious climate and a plentiful array of natural endowments. The “fairest portions of the world,” including “Italy, Spain… and South America,” were allegedly consigned by divine providence to the spiritual domain of

76 Ibid., 11.
77 Ecclesiastical & Missionary Record, February 1846, 159.
“popery.” Accordingly, the author continued, the inhabitants of such naturally “rich and fertile countries” have in all instances found themselves mired in poverty and ignorance. The reason? The prevalence within such states of Roman Catholicism, which the author denounced as the “‘mother of abominations.’”

The supposed correlation between Roman Catholicism and cultural backwardness featured prominently within Presbyterian critiques of overwhelmingly Catholic Lower Canada. Consider the remarks of the Reverend Robert Burns, a Scottish missionary who took part in a mid-nineteenth century North American tour that included stops in several Canadian towns. Burns, who would eventually immigrate to Upper Canada, emphasized what he saw as the disparity between the depleted fields of the “old habitants” and the comparatively productive “husbandry” to which he had been exposed in Upper Canada.

Burns described Lower Canada’s Roman Catholic population as “a simple and light-hearted race” who inhabited their feudal estates “from generation to generation without any perceptible change.” The Lower Canadian Catholics’ cultural stagnancy in Burns’ view rendered them spiritually apathetic and thus incapable of throwing off the yoke purportedly thrust upon them by the colony’s priestly caste.

Burns identified religion as responsible for the perceived discrepancy between Lower Canadian backwardness and Upper Canadian dynamism. Whereas Lower Canada’s sluggish economic development was attributed to the pervasiveness within French Canadian society of “Popery,” the wealth and ingenuity that in his conception typified so many Upper Canadian communities was attributed to Protestantism.

78 Ibid. The perceived relationship between religious virtue and national greatness was in the author’s estimation evident within northern Europe as well. The author highlighted the supposed discrepancies exhibited in the statuses of Ireland and Scotland in an effort to illustrate this conviction. “Popery” was described as “the blight of [Ireland’s] prosperity” and “the withering curse of her children.” Conversely, Scotland, situated “across the channel,” was in the author’s understanding replete with educational institutions and churches, which were portrayed as central to that country’s admirable moral character and “hallowed wealth.” The author unsurprisingly attributed the supposed disparity between Ireland and Scotland to their differing religious traditions. Whereas Roman Catholic Ireland was wracked by poverty and ignorance, Scotland, owing to its ardent Protestantism, was “the glory of the British Isles.”

79 Differing perspectives on the supposed sluggishness of agricultural productivity in New France and Lower Canada can be found in Fernand Ouellet, Lower Canada: Social Change and Nationalism (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1980); and in Allan Greer, Peasant, Lord, and Merchant: Rural Society in Three Quebec Parishes, 1740-1840 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985).

80 Robert Burns, Report Presented to the Colonial Committee of the Free Church of Scotland, on Canada and Nova Scotia. By the Rev. Dr. Robert Burns, Paisley, One of the Deputies of the Free Church to America (Paisley: Printed by Alex. Gardner, For the Colonial Committee, 1844), 15.

81 Ibid.
went as far as to liken Roman Catholicism’s purportedly pernicious impact to the institution of slavery in the southern United States, which was responsible in his conception for both the exhaustion of agricultural resources and the inhumane exploitation of enslaved individuals. Burns’ time in French Canada purportedly recalled his travels in Virginia, where the “withering effects” of slavery were evident in “the blasting of the fields” as well as in the “degradation of man.”82

Numerous Presbyterians came to feel that they were obligated to promote Protestantism’s tenets within Lower Canadian society. Failure to combat “Romish” superstition in that colony, they were convinced, would effectively condemn much of its populace—which as a result of its perceived apathy was incapable of liberating itself from Catholic oppressiveness—to a fiery perdition. Small wonder, then, that devout nineteenth-century Presbyterians devoted substantial attention to the activities of Protestant missionaries serving in Lower Canadian communities. While they expressed an interest in bringing about the conversion of certain English-speaking Catholic groups—not least Lower Canada’s Irish Catholic community—zealous nineteenth-century Presbyterian missionaries were primarily concerned with promulgating Protestantism among that colony’s substantial French-speaking constituency, which by the mid-nineteenth century numbered roughly one million in total.83

An 1854 editorial in George Brown’s Globe attests to the sense of urgency that surrounded the efforts of Protestant missionaries serving among Lower Canada’s French-speaking Roman Catholics. It asserted that “many a man in the parishes of the districts of Quebec and Montreal, grinding under despotism which he has not the power to resist, looks with hope to the efforts of Upper Canadian Protestants who are about to free him from slavery.”84 James Fettes, a Presbyterian Missionary stationed in Lower Canada, articulated comparable sentiments regarding Roman Catholic oppressiveness and the corresponding importance of Protestant evangelism. He hoped that his efforts, guided by the “great Head of the Church,” would aid in liberating French Canadian Catholics from

---

84 Globe, 27 January 1854.
“Romish ignorance and superstition,” adding that he aimed to “break the bonds by which Satan holds so many thousands in his power, and so successfully enslaves the whole of this benighted land.”

A perceived responsibility for bringing about the conversion to Protestantism of Lower Canadian Catholics was linked in the nineteenth-century Presbyterian consciousness to the belief that they were a divinely favoured spiritual nation endowed by God with a responsibility for the advancement of the providential design. “Assuredly it will not redound to our honour as a branch of the Scottish Zion,” a Presbyterian observer maintained in 1848, “if we show an unwillingness or lukewarmness in supplying our neighbours, the Votaries of Romanism, with that spiritual instruction which they know not” as a result of their subordination to a priestly caste. To disregard the denomination’s responsibility for promulgating Protestantism among the Lower Canadians, the author implied, would be to flout the solemn duties conferred upon them by God regarding the progressive onward march of righteousness and piety.

Presbyterians served as arguably the most enthusiastic contributors to the French Canadian Missionary Society (FCMS), a multi-denominational agency that was established in Montreal in 1839 for the purposes of converting Lower Canadian Catholics to Protestantism. The FCMS’s mandate, according to the Presbyterian minister William Smart, was to promote Protestant principles and traditions among French Canadian Roman Catholics, who in his conception were “sunk in the darkness of popery, under the yoke of a numerous and wealthy priesthood.” Echoing Robert Burns’ paternalistic remarks, Smart observed that while the French Canadians were “naturally intelligent” they were also “extremely ignorant” as a result of Catholicism’s stultifying impact. It was therefore necessary in Smart’s view to encourage the French Canadians’ intellectual and moral “improvement.” The FCMS, consistent with this objective, established an “Institute” complete with a one hundred acre farm at Point aux Trembles, near Montreal. There, Smart explained, Lower Canadian Catholics would be exposed to the reputedly

85 The Presbyterian, April 1848, 50.
86 The Presbyterian, June 1848, 79.
ennobling tenets of Protestantism, and would receive training in advanced agricultural
techniques, in which the “French Canadians are miserably deficient.”

Presbyterian efforts to promote Protestantism among French Canadian Catholics
persisted throughout the nineteenth century. For example, a “Ladies’ Auxiliary
Association in Connection with the French Mission” was established by the Sabbath
School teachers of Montreal in the mid-1860s. The Association, in its first annual report,
made plain its desire to bring about the “emancipation” of French Canadian Roman
Catholics from the “moral darkness and bondage” to which they had traditionally been
subjected. Accordingly, a day school was established under the Association’s auspices
in which the teacher, one Miss Vernier, extolled the virtues of Protestantism.
Additionally, funds were raised by the society in an effort to support the missionary
activities of a Mr. Geoffrey, who visited with Lower Canadian families, presided over
prayer meetings, and attempted to distribute copies of the Bible in hopes of undermining
the spiritual authority exerted within that colony by Roman Catholic priests.

The national Presbyterian union of 1875 was viewed by members of the
denomination as a divinely ordained instrument for combating Roman Catholicism. One
observer, speaking at the General Assembly held in Montreal that marked the dominion-
wide institution’s inception, hailed the establishment of a national Presbyterian Church as
a providential vehicle through which the “great and mighty power of Rome” could be
more effectively combated in northern North America. The observer’s remarks reputedly
elicited an ovation from the Presbyterian multitude arrayed before him.

And the first act of the newly minted Presbyterian Church in Canada was to
establish an institution that would be geared toward French Canadian evangelization.

This agency, which essentially replaced the defunct FCMS, routinely accounted for one

88 UCA William Smart Papers. Box 1, File 14, Notes and Misc. Papers. “Brief Explanation of the
Character, Objects, and Wants of the French Canadian Missionary Society.”
89 PCCA 2005-7003 Ladies’ Auxiliary Association in Connection with the French Mission Work of the
90 The results of the Association’s efforts were mixed. Miss Vernier’s activities were deemed by the
Association to be a resounding success, with twelve students—eight of whom were girls—enrolled in the
school by the end of its first year. Mr. Geoffrey’s efforts, by contrast, reputedly met with stiff resistance
within Montreal’s Catholic community. Routinely “reviled and insulted,” he managed to persuade only
seven families to accept copies of the Bible during his first year of service, while failing to bring about any
conversions. Ibid., 1-3.
91 The Presbyterian, July 1875, 180.
fifth of the denomination’s annual domestic expenditure, employing seventy-nine workers in conversion-related activities by 1892. It also operated two preparatory schools and offered French-language courses at the Presbyterian theological college located in Montreal. Such initiatives and institutions underscore the persistence within the denomination of anti-Catholicism as an influential intellectual impulse in the later nineteenth century.92

What of the Americans? How did early Canadian Presbyterians perceive the expanding, increasingly influential republic situated to the south? And to what extent were developments occurring within its borders viewed by members of the denomination through a providential lens? As noted, expressions of British imperial patriotism were central to the denominational ethos throughout the nineteenth century. Yet just because the Presbyterians were overwhelmingly pro-British does not mean that they were necessarily anti-American as well. Jane Errington has argued that, while loyalism was indeed a compelling cultural phenomenon in Upper Canadian society, a residual “wariness” regarding the divisive legacy of the American Revolution and the reputed instability of republican institutions steadily declined in the early and mid-nineteenth century. Taking its place, she contends, was an “admiration for and an openness to American ideas and developments,” with the American republic increasingly functioning as a figurative “yardstick” against which Upper Canadians attempted to gauge their colony’s cultural and commercial development.93

Such an assessment regarding Upper Canadian attitudes toward the American republic is fundamentally applicable to nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism. Lingering misgivings concerning America’s reputed radicalism—which were most pronounced in Upper Canada, where the War of 1812 aggravated old animosities—were to a large extent eclipsed within the denominational consciousness over the course of the nineteenth century by a sense of admiration for the United States’ burgeoning wealth and penchant for ingenuity. This essentially favourable perception is evident in the reference, excerpted above on page 84, to the “happiness, knowledge and love, liberty and

92 Grant, “Presbyterian Missions and Canadian Nationhood,” 141.
93 Errington, *The Lion, the Eagle, and Upper Canada*, 36.
prosperity” that were thought by members of the Presbyterian community to abound in American society.

Nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians were fond of their American co-religionists, especially the “Old School” Presbyterian faction. This group succeeded in safeguarding Calvinistic orthodoxy during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries amid a torrent of unconventional evangelicalism that, from the British North Americans’ perspective, verged on heretical religious radicalism. The “Old School” constituency managed to safeguard Calvinism’s theological essence during this period largely as a result of its emphasis on God’s absolute providential authority, which countered the radical evangelical belief that repentant sinners could independently contribute to the redemptive process through which they could be reconciled with God.94

Yet nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterian perceptions of the American republic were by no means uniformly positive. In addition to harbouring suspicions concerning the most extreme manifestations of American evangelicalism—which cropped up in British North America, and which the inveterate Calvinist Thomas McCulloch denounced in the early nineteenth century as so many “revolting” displays of “human debasement”—early Canadian Presbyterians also objected to the institution of slavery in the southern United States.95

British North American anti-slavery critiques intensified during the mid-nineteenth century as a result of the introduction in the United States of such

94 The “Old School” Presbyterians, in preserving orthodox Calvinism, were seen as a bulwark against the radical theological movements that proliferated in the United States during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As an alternative to the stern doctrines of Calvin, such movements in numerous instances embraced the notion that a given sinner could, through intense piety, contribute to the reconciliation between himself and God. From the perspective of theological conservatives such notions represented a scandalous departure from the Calvinistic doctrine of “free grace,” which held that God was solely responsible for facilitating the process of sanctification, through which individual sinners would be redeemed. George Marsden, The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience: A Case Study of Thought and Theology in Nineteenth-Century America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973). See also Hatch, The Democratization of American Christianity. For the persistence in post-revolutionary British North America of such traditional expressions of Protestantism as Episcopalianism and Wesleyan Methodism see J.I. Little, Borderland Religion: The Emergence of an English-Canadian Identity, 1792-1852 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

controversial legislation as the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, which permitted slave-owners to forcibly reclaim escaped “property” that had taken flight to states in which the institution of slavery was prohibited. This statute, coupled with the extension of the practice of slavery into recently acquired territory in the American west, resulted in mounting Canadian criticism of what by the mid-nineteenth century had come to be known as the United States’ “peculiar institution” in consequence of slavery’s decline as a legal practice elsewhere in the western world. (Legislation calling for the gradual elimination of slavery in British North America was introduced beginning in the late eighteenth century, while the practice was abolished throughout the British Empire by 1834.) A deep-seated opposition to this aspect of nineteenth-century American society, which was especially pronounced among the Free Church constituency, was vital to the denominational identity. It galvanized Presbyterians and bolstered their sense of divinely ordained purpose. It also brought into focus the synthesis of providentialism and British imperial enthusiasm that permeated the denominational consciousness.

Central to the anti-slavery critique put forth by mid-nineteenth century Canadian Presbyterians was the conviction that the practice was both unjust and inhumane. The Reverend Michael Willis, one of the most vigorous Presbyterian anti-slavery activists, defined the institution in a mid-nineteenth-century public lecture as “compulsory service, founded in violence, and recognising no right of consent or contract in the weaker party.” For Willis, no justification for such an institution could be found in either the “law of nature” or the pages of Holy Scripture.96 Willis was adamant that the Biblical “injunction to obedience” could not be deployed as a rationale for slavery. Extended to its logical conclusion, Willis declared, this command potentially provided ethical justifications for such abhorrent practices as polygamy, owing to the alleged subordination of wives to their husbands, as well as arbitrary despotism, given citizens’ purported moral obligation to abide in all instances by civil laws. Rejecting such rationalizations as morally unconscionable, Willis insisted that “the law of right” must in all instances counterbalance the “law of might.” The values espoused and embodied by “our Lord Saviour” Jesus Christ made clear in Willis’ understanding the tenets by which human

behaviour should be governed. Principal among them from his perspective was the “law of love,” which by any measure was incompatible with the cruel practice of slavery.97

The persistence of slavery in the United States, in the estimation of fervent mid-nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians, served to tarnish the American republic’s otherwise enviable reputation. George Brown, in an 1863 speech delivered to a meeting of the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, asserted that the United States, as a result of its continued willingness to countenance such an institution, increasingly occupied a “frightful position” in the eyes of western Christendom. Brown, who bestowed plaudits later in the address on Presbyterian clergymen Michael Willis and Robert Burns on account of their energetic efforts on the society’s behalf, lauded Canadian anti-slavery activists for attempting to “goad” the Americans on to suppress the “inhuman traffic” that in his conception diminished their nation’s international stature.98

Mid-nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians increasingly felt that the persistence of slavery in the United States flew in the face of the high-minded ideals upon which the American republic was purportedly founded. “Is it possible,” asked an 1848 article in The Presbyterian, to believe that “the Americans have become and continued democratised in their form of government from a genuine respect for the mutual rights of citizenship, when slavery is still maintained among them by law?” The American constitution’s ostensible veneration of the fundamental equality of all men amounted to a patent hypocrisy in view of the pernicious institution’s continued existence. For ardent Canadian Presbyterians, “slavery and the rights of man are equally eternal principles in their constitution,” which amounted to “a mockery of God and man and all principle, for which doubtless a day of reckoning will come.”99

So acute were the Canadian Presbyterians’ objections to the institution of slavery that they led to a rupture with their American co-religionists. In June of 1845 the Synod

98 Library and Archives Canada (LAC), George Brown papers, mfm reel 5. The American War and Slavery: Speech of the Hon. George Brown, at the Anniversary Meeting of the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, Held at Toronto, February 3, 1863, 1. See also Canadian United Presbyterian Magazine, January 1861, 4.
99 The Presbyterian, November 1848, 179.
of the Presbyterian Church of Canada denounced the “sinful apathy” displayed by America’s churches regarding the persistence of such an abhorrent practice, through which “millions of human beings… are bought and sold as any article of property.” The “Old School” Presbyterians, for all of their doctrinal integrity, were not spared their Canadian co-religionists’ scorn. The catalyst for the rift between these two factions was a resolution on the issue of slavery passed in the spring of 1845 by the American Presbyterian body to which the “Old School” constituency belonged. The resolution plainly privileged the preservation of denominational unity over the necessity of eradicating slavery. It avowed that it was not the church’s responsibility to “take action” when it came to that ever-contentious practice, given the fact that America’s religious institutions were founded on the belief that the ownership of slaves was no obstacle to “Christian communion.” It followed in the American Presbyterians’ view that discussions pertaining to the issue of slavery served only “to separate the Northern from the Southern portion of the Church,” a result the statement concluded that “every good citizen should deplore.”

A denunciation composed by the Canadian Presbyterian Synod’s Committee on American Slavery was dispatched to the Presbyterian Church in the United States in response. The declaration inveighed against the Americans’ refusal to condemn the institution of slavery. The Canadians also criticized the “injustice” and “cruelty” of the practice “which,” the statement avowed, “no special cases of kind treatment” on the part of purportedly benevolent slave-owners could “neutralize or excuse.”

The struggle over the issue of slavery, which eventually tore asunder American Presbyterianism, resulted in a lasting breach between Canadian adherents of the denomination and their coreligionists situated in the United States. Canadian Presbyterian objections to American slavery, which found expression in boycotts of denominational publications produced in the United States and in a refusal on the part of the Canadians to

---

100 Ecclesiastical & Missionary Record, July 1845, 98-9. This is not, however, to suggest that American Presbyterianism was devoid an abolitionary sentiment—on the contrary, the Reverend Albert Barnes, a theologically liberal “New School” Presbyterian, condemned the institution of slavery as a violation of “all the laws which God has written on the human soul.” James Holifield, Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 503. For a discussion of the diverse reactions of American Christians to the ethical dilemma of slavery in this era see Harry S. Stout, Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the American Civil War (New York: Viking, 2006).
send delegates to meetings of American Presbyterian bodies, persisted until the official emancipation of the United States’ more than three million blacks in the 1860s.\textsuperscript{101}

Objections to the institution of slavery in the southern United States reinforced the Presbyterians’ sense of providentially ordained denominational purpose. For evidence one need look only to the Presbyterians’ involvement in the Buxton mission, a settlement established in 1849 for black people who had succeeded in escaping slavery in the American republic. Located in Raleigh Township, Canada West, the Buxton mission eventually distinguished itself as one of North America’s largest and most successful free black communities.\textsuperscript{102}

The Reverend William King, a Presbyterian minister and repentant former slave owner, played an integral part in the community’s formation and development. From the raising of funds for the acquisition of the requisite lands; to the oversight of the religious and educational aspects of community life; to the decision to name the settlement in honour of the famed British abolitionist, Thomas Fowell Buxton, King worked ceaselessly to establish a community that would serve as a refuge from the dehumanizing drudgery of slavery—or, as King himself put it, as a “City of God” that would provide ex-slaves with a “haven against social ostracism and legal discrimination.”\textsuperscript{103}

Canadian Presbyterians, for their part, provided the enterprise with vital backing. The Presbyterian Church of Canada offered enthusiastic public support for the project; individual Presbyterians invested heavily in the joint stock company that funded the mission’s initiatives; and the Buxton Mission Fund, a denomination-wide fundraising program, raised additional revenue by soliciting voluntary contributions from individual Presbyterians. Though exhibitions of intolerance by bigoted whites in neighbouring communities were by no means unheard of, the Buxton mission, due to the indispensable ingenuity and vigilance exhibited by the inhabitants themselves, emerged as a bustling

\textsuperscript{101} Moir, \textit{Enduring Witness}, 126-127.
\textsuperscript{103} Fergus M. Bordewich, \textit{Bound for Canaan: The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America} (New York: Amistad, 2005), 390.
community that afforded blacks an opportunity to own land, obtain an education, and forge crucial social networks.104

King, in contrast to slavery’s apologists, rejected the notion that black people were inherently inferior to their white counterparts. An optimistic—if plainly condescending—belief in black peoples’ capacity for improvement informed his vision for the Buxton mission. Rather than attributing enslaved blacks’ subordinate status to innate deficiencies, King maintained that it could more accurately be viewed as the inescapable outcome of sustained servitude. It followed in King’s estimation that if black people were provided with freedom and an opportunity to obtain a formal education, they could shed their alleged inferiority and ascend to a level of intelligence and cultural sophistication that would be comparable to that of whites.105

King was not alone among nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians in his paternalistic attitudes toward people of African descent.106 An article in the May 1854 edition of the Ecclesiastical & Missionary Record underscored the notion that the supposed inferiority of America’s black population sprang not from intrinsic racial shortcomings, but rather from the devastating effects of sustained bondage: “how often,” the article began, are anti-slavery activists confronted with the argument that, “‘[blacks] are incapable of education, and totally devoid of that amount of intellect necessary to raise them to an equal standing with other civilized nations!’ This,” the article countered, “the testimony of experience denies.” Elaborating on the notion that legalized subjugation, rather than an inherent inferiority, was responsible for the sufferings of enslaved blacks, the article affirmed that “it cannot be a subject of very great astonishment, if the ‘cloven-foot’ of… bondage… [makes] some impression on the unfortunate victims of slavery.” Yet responsibility for such “evil,” the article maintained, rested squarely with the “slave-holding oppressor,” and not with the slave.107

The inculcation of Christianity’s enlightening doctrines was essential in the Presbyterians’ understanding to the ex-slave’s transition from subjugation to citizenship. Without this essential element, the argument ran, attempts to encourage the cultivation of

---

104 Hepburn, Crossing the Border, 41-51.
105 Ibid., 5-6.
107 Ecclesiastical & Missionary Record of the Free Church of Scotland, May, 1854, 99.
civility among of black people would invariably be for naught, since the “history of past ages” allegedly demonstrated that Christianity was the only reliable agent of moral and intellectual improvement.

Progress regarding the propagation of the gospels among black people residing in Canada—who were largely Baptists and, to a lesser extent, Methodists—was linked in the Presbyterian consciousness to the symbiotic relationship between providentialism and British imperialism. Adherents of the denomination were convinced that, under the auspices of divine providence and the enlightened sway of the British Empire, the triumph of righteousness over injustice was a virtual inevitability. Presbyterians expressed confidence that “the same God who ‘created all men equal,’” would assuredly liberate a “long oppressed and seriously injured people.” The Buxton Mission was viewed as a “merciful enterprise” that was destined to “rescue” thousands of blacks who, “but for the opportunity of casting themselves on British protection,” would have been the “victims of human cupidity and cruelty” in the American republic. Devout early Canadian Presbyterians were convinced that God himself had facilitated the blacks’ journey from slavery in the American republic to freedom in post-revolutionary British North America.108

Nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians frequently interpreted the American Civil War as a divinely administered punishment meted out by God on account of the United States’ national sin of slavery. Such an interpretation meshes with the notion that God dispenses chastisement to both individual sinners and larger communities. The Almighty in the Presbyterians’ understanding “sustains a moral relation to nations,” and deals with them in accordance with their prevailing ethical character. It followed in their view that, when a given nation allows for the perpetuation of such a gross transgression as slavery, it stands “chargeable with guilt” in God’s eyes. Failure on the part of that nation to eradicate such exhibitions of “national sin,” moreover, would almost certainly elicit “the vengeance of heaven.”109

The United States Civil War, which tore at the fabric of American society between 1861 and 1865, was viewed by nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians as

108 Home & Foreign Missionary Record for the Free Church of Scotland, November 1850, 123.
indicative of God’s providential governance of the universe. Slavery, they were convinced, was “accursed of God.” They were equally certain that it was the Almighty’s “wise and holy plan” to fracture the American union and purge the western world of such an abominable practice.\textsuperscript{110} The United States’ unwillingness to prohibit the institution of slavery was especially galling from the Canadian Presbyterians’ perspective in view of the republic’s deep Christian roots. The Americans’ moral failings would have been less egregious, Canadian Presbyterians reasoned, had they been mired in a “night of darkness” comparable to that which purportedly blanketed the pagans of “Dahomey or Ashantee” in Africa. But such was not the case. American citizens, on the contrary, inhabited a land that enjoyed “the light of gospel truth.” Given this fact, their willingness to countenance the perpetuation of slavery was all the more outrageous—indeed, it went a considerable distance in accounting for the severity of the Civil War, which was perceived by Canadian Presbyterians as a just reprisal engineered by God on account of the Americans’ unconscionable national transgression.\textsuperscript{111}

Ardent nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians harboured little doubt that divine providence would eventually bring about the liberation of America’s enslaved blacks. “Events point to the time as not distant when Jehovah shall cause every yoke to be broken,” they confidently declared. The Civil War was interpreted as a punishment meted out by God on a nation whose inhabitants were at once “the guiltiest of oppression, while the most boastful of freedom.” The Civil War, due to the “foul stigma” taken on by the Americans, was portrayed by the Canadian Presbyterians as evidence of God’s capacity for exacting punishment on both wayward individuals and entire communities.\textsuperscript{112}

Early Canadian Presbyterianism was not a monolithic entity. For the better part of the nineteenth century a seemingly irrepressible penchant for intra-denominational squabbling militated against the establishment of a cohesive body. For evidence of this quarrelsome tendency one need look no further than the dizzying profusion of autonomous subgroups that existed in northern North America prior to the establishment of the dominion-wide Presbyterian Church in Canada in 1875.

\textsuperscript{110} Canadian United Presbyterian Magazine, January 1861, 30.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., April 1861, 97-98.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., September 1861, 259-260.
Yet an investigation of the prevailing anxieties and aspirations that circulated within the denominational consciousness reveals that, divided as they may have been over issues such as the endlessly vexatious church-state question, Presbyterianism’s various constituent parts also shared important common ground. While the lack of institutional uniformity prior to 1875 is undeniable, when it came to the life of the mind the various factions succeeded in rallying around a web of inter-related impulses and convictions.

Conceiving of themselves as a divinely favoured nation analogous to ancient Israel, the early Canadian Presbyterians were galvanized by a widespread belief in the denomination’s providentially ordained destiny. Suffusing the denominational consciousness, too, was a belief in the incomparable greatness of the British Empire. Bound up with these complementary convictions was a pronounced anti-Catholic prejudice and an equally strident critique of the institution of slavery in the southern United States, both of which contributed to a heady sense of mission that transcended the boundaries of British North America and the early Canadian dominion. Such were the moral foundations upon which the denominational identity rested.
Chapter Two: Exiles from their Own Realm? Church, State, and the Politics of Early Canadian Presbyterianism

Then saith he unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s.

—Matthew 22:21

In most civilizations known to us, in most times and places, when human beings have reflected on political questions they have appealed to God when answering them.


William Jenkins, an Upper Canadian Presbyterian minister who settled in Markham township in the early nineteenth century, informed his son in the autumn of 1837 that Tory sympathizers within the Church of Scotland had smashed the windows and “[pulled] down the chimney” of a school that had been used by his congregation for religious purposes. Jenkins, who was an adherent of Presbyterianism’s Secessionist tradition and an unabashed proponent of constitutional reform, attributed the conservatives’ actions to their desire to discourage him from delivering subversive sermons in which he challenged the authority of the colony’s reigning oligarchic elite. Yet Jenkins informed his son that, regardless of the depths to which his Tory detractors within the Scottish Church were willing to descend, they would never succeed in deterring him from publicly denouncing injustice and extolling the virtues of political liberalization.¹

Jenkins’ remarks are illustrative of the deep politico-religious divisions that existed within nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism. Differing perspectives regarding the church-state relationship served as the primary factor contributing to this atmosphere of internecine conflict. Perhaps no issue was a source of greater intra-denominational disunity prior to the formation, in 1875, of the dominion-wide Presbyterian Church in Canada. Members of the denomination espoused an array of attitudes on this polarizing question that varied from active governmental support for religion to the absolute and unequivocal separation of the two. The attendant politico-religious quarrels played a pivotal role in shaping the denominational ethos.

Nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism’s various subgroups did not differ over whether or not theirs was to be a “Christian Nation” or, prior to Confederation, a collection of Christian colonies within the British Empire.\(^2\) It was taken as a matter of course throughout the denomination that Christian tenets should govern both public and private morality, inform the decisions of state officials, and under-gird the authority of governmental institutions. Rather, the issue over which the various nineteenth-century Presbyterian factions differed—both with members of other denominations as well as with one another—was what kind of Christian entity British North America and the Canadian dominion should be.

Should the state actively assist the church in its efforts to promote heightened standards in popular piety by contributing to the payment of its ministers and to the construction of its churches? Or, alternatively, should the church pursue its spiritual objectives in isolation from the state so as to shield itself from the potentially corruptive ramifications of worldly interference? Such politico-religious questions rankled within the Presbyterian community for the better part of the nineteenth century, with intra-denominational tensions reaching a fever pitch between the early 1820s, when one Canadian Presbyterian subgroup, the Church of Scotland, began its pursuit of permanent public support in earnest, and the mid-1850s, when protracted disagreements concerning church-state relations at long last began to subside.

Why was this the case? Why did church-state quarrels prove such a stubborn obstacle to denominational unity? And which factors account for the multiplicity of politico-religious outlooks that circulated within nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism? Answers to these questions lie on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Divergent politico-religious philosophies transmitted from the Old World to the New regarding whether or not civil authorities should involve themselves in the church’s sacred sphere of activity militated against harmonious intra-denominational relations.

---

Compounding matters were division-inducing circumstances that were peculiar to the British North American colonies. A prime example would be the Clergy Reserves endowment, through which tracts of Canadian land as well as the revenues derived from their sale were set aside in order to nurture the development of an ill-defined “Protestant Clergy.” This combination of factors—divergent Old World politico-religious philosophies and division-inducing British North American circumstances—ultimately rendered intra-denominational agreement when it came to the church-state relationship achingly elusive.

Although politico-religious differences existed throughout nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism, schisms, for reasons that will be made clear over the course of this chapter, were especially pronounced in the colony of Upper Canada. By the mid-nineteenth century Presbyterian politico-religious attitudes in that colony typically fell into one of three categories: members of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, who viewed themselves as adherents of a legally established body, supported close church-state relations; supporters of the Presbyterian Secessionist tradition, a faction influenced by the politico-religious philosophy of “voluntarism,” insisted on the strict separation of the two; and, lastly, backers of the Presbyterian Free Church, which came into existence as a result of the “Great Disruption” of 1843, championed an arrangement in which the state is responsible for materially supporting the church but is prohibited from involving itself in any other capacity in its affairs.

The differing church-state outlooks that existed within nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism were informed by widely divergent interpretations of the British political tradition, a fact that attests to the pervasiveness and elasticity of the imperial affiliation within the denominational consciousness. And they were borne out in an equally wide variety of secular political ideologies that ranged from staunch toryism to unabashed liberalism.

Yet for all of the undeniable politico-religious differences that circulated within nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism, a paradoxical unity regarding the church-state relationship can be seen as existing within the denomination as well. This chapter will demonstrate that, while the various Presbyterian factions differed—often sharply—over whether or not secular authorities should actively support the church, they ultimately
shared an important commonality when it came to the acutely contentious church-state question. They sought to harness the authority of the state—albeit in differing ways—in hopes of establishing in northern North America an expressly Christian moral order in which biblical precepts and ordinances would permeate society and such supposed societal blights as Sabbath desecration and the widespread consumption and distribution of alcohol would be curtailed. Thus, in assessing nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterian attitudes toward the relationship between Christianity and public life, it seems that the various factions coalesced around visions of a “Christian Nation.”

Before embarking on an examination of nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterian church-state attitudes it would perhaps be appropriate to begin with a definition of what is meant by the term “state.” Michael Braddick, in accounting for the development of early modern England’s governmental apparatus, has described the state as a “coordinated and territorially bounded network of agents exercising political power.”3 This chapter, in delineating and analyzing Presbyterian views of the state and its relationship to the church, will abide by this definition, which aptly characterizes the function of government in nineteenth-century Canada. Yet one qualification is in order. Significant decisions pertaining to the administration of the various British North American colonies, especially before the attainment of responsible government beginning in the late 1840s, were made in Great Britain itself. This governmental wrinkle—which entailed the physical separation of colonial and metropolitan legislators as well as the attendant potential for miscommunication and differing political objectives—had important implications for British North America’s constitutional evolution. An awareness of this dimension of the nineteenth-century Canadian state informs the arguments articulated in this chapter.4

This chapter will also draw on works pertaining to the process of Canadian “state formation,” through which governmental authority was projected across space and brought to bear in meaningful ways on northern North American individuals and

---

communities. In discussing the expansion and sophistication of civil authority in mid-nineteenth-century Canada, Allan Greer and Ian Radforth have suggested that state formation can be understood as a two-pronged phenomenon consisting, on one hand, of the emergence and elaboration of actual governmental institutions and, on the other, of a comparatively abstract yet equally important process of mystification by which the state and its administrative agencies took on enhanced validity within the popular psyche.⁵ Challenging the notion that the mid-nineteenth century was an era in which civil authority was subordinated to the will of a Canadian citizenry empowered by landmark constitutional achievements, they contended that this period in fact bore witness to unprecedented growth in government influence, as reflected in the formulation of myriad laws and institutions designed to subject the populace to the potentially coercive “control of the state.”⁶ Influenced by such notions, this chapter will perceive the state not as an entity whose authority steadily declined over the course of the nineteenth century, but rather as an increasingly sophisticated governmental instrument that was capable of exerting substantial legal and moral influence over peoples’ lives.

A historical overview of Presbyterian attitudes concerning church-state relations is necessary in order to contextualize the various outlooks and arguments on this matter that intermingled and jostled for supremacy within the denominational consciousness in nineteenth-century Canada. John Calvin, the sixteenth-century theologian whose voluminous writings constitute the conceptual bedrock of Presbyterian orthodoxy, viewed church and state as separate yet complementary entities. Rejecting the allegedly unscriptural hierarchies of the Roman Catholic Church, he called for the implementation within Geneva—the staunchly Protestant city-state in which the French-born Calvin settled during the 1530s—of a decentralized system of church polity. This form of ecclesiastical governance, which was known as the “consistory system,” entailed leadership by lay elders and ministers and represented a contrast to the tiered model of church polity employed by the Roman Church. This system of church governance was

charged with promoting heightened standards in popular virtue by scrutinizing citizens’
behaviour, and with meting out punishments to supposed moral transgressors that
typically ranged from admonishment to banishment. ⁷

Yet in Calvin’s Geneva civil authorities had an important role to play in
bolstering popular morality as well. His beliefs regarding the relationship between sacred
and secular authorities were predicated on the notion that church and state occupy
autonomous yet complementary spheres of activity. The two entities were in Calvin’s
conception involved in a mutually beneficial relationship in which each one is obligated
to support the aims and activities of the other. Calvin’s convictions regarding the
symbiotic affiliation between religious and civil authorities account in large part for the
closeness of church and state in sixteenth-century Geneva. Within the city-state sacred
and secular laws were viewed by religious and civil officials as eminently complementary
and, indeed, inextricably interwoven. Given the pronounced extent to which Calvinistic
morality pervaded the socio-political order, to sin was to commit a crime and to commit a
crime was to sin. Thus, while promoting temporal stability through the enforcement of its
laws, the state inevitably acted as a bulwark of an autonomous church by combating what
Calvin identified as humanity’s innate predisposition towards depravity and
disobedience. ⁸

⁷ H.M. Höpfl, The Christian Polity of John Calvin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982);
William James Bouwsma, John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait (New York: Oxford University Press,
1540-1620 eds., Andrew Petegree, Alastair Duke, and Gilliam Lewis (Cambridge: Cambridge University
Press, 1994).
⁸ John S. Moir, “‘Who Pays the Piper…’: Canadian Presbyterianism and Church-State Relations,” in Early
Presbyterianism in Canada: Essays by John S. Moir ed., Paul Laverdure (Gravelbourg, Saskatchewan:
Gravelbooks, 2003), 13-14.

Political resistance was in Calvin’s conception justified in the event that secular rulers failed to act
in complete accordance with the highest standards in Christian conduct. Yet while he did not deny that in
certain instances pious private citizens were permitted to object to the actions of impious civil authorities,
Calvin refused to countenance expressions of overt insubordination. All forms of government were in his
understanding divinely instituted. To agitate for the overthrow of a reigning earthly authority was thus to
rebel against a system of civil administration that was ultimately of godly origin, a perspective that
accorded with the biblical injunction to obedience enunciated in the thirteenth chapter of Paul’s Epistle to
the Romans. Conscientious individuals could at most “pray for deliverance, petition and remonstrate” in
hopes that a pious ruler would eventually supplant an impious one. The furthest Calvin was prepared to go
when it came to the issue of political resistance was to permit inferior governmental officials to constrain
the actions of an ungodly civil ruler. Modest though it was, this willingness would have important
implications in the years to come for the evolution of Calvinistic political cultures situated elsewhere in the
Early modern Scottish Protestants echoed Calvin in their insistence on the church’s complete and utter autonomy from the state. The Westminster Confession of Faith, which was crafted in 1645 and which serves as the fundamental expression of Presbyterian orthodoxy, was unequivocal in its declaration that “The civil magistrate may not assume to himself the administration of the word and sacraments, or the powers of the keys of the kingdom to heaven.” The encroachments of civil authorities upon the church’s sphere of activity threatened Christ’s sovereignty within the spiritual domain. According to the Westminster Confession, Christ, “as king and head of his church,” delegates ecclesiastical authority to religious “office-holders” whose realm of influence was “distinct” from that of the civil magistrate.9

Yet in keeping with the notion that church and state occupy separate yet complementary spheres of activity early modern Scottish Protestants argued that civil authorities could—indeed, should—play a role in aiding the church in its efforts to propagate and enforce exacting standards in Christian virtue. The civil magistrate, in the words of the Westminster Confession, “hath authority, and it is his duty, to take order that unity and peace be preserved in the church.” Thus, in early modern Scotland, where Presbyterianism took root on a major scale following the Scottish Reformation of 1560, the state functioned as the church’s indispensable ally in its campaign to promote rigorous moral standards among the Scottish citizenry.10

Calvin’s views regarding political resistance are compatible with those put forth by John Knox, the quintessential Scottish Reformer. Though he believed in the divinely instituted nature of earthly as well as religious authority, Knox was also of the opinion that pious citizens—including civil magistrates—were at all times obliged to abide by the most exacting standards in Christian morality. In view of this responsibility the argument could be made that conscientious public officials were duty-bound not only to avoid sinful behaviour, but to actively suppress it as well. It followed in Knox’s understanding that, when a civil ruler acted in an ungodly manner, it was incumbent on pious “inferior magistrates” not only to resist that ruler’s demands, but also to challenge his or her authority. Such beliefs equipped the architects of the Scottish Reformation with a compelling moral justification for politico-religious resistance. Roger A. Mason, *Kingship and Commonweal: Political Thought in Renaissance and Reformation Scotland* (East Linton, Scotland: Tuckwell Press, 1998), 143-155. See also Jane E. A. Dawson, “Knox, John,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* vol. 32 eds., H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 15-30.


10 The church-state partnership arguably went further in early modern Scotland than it had in Geneva. Whereas in the latter punishments for religious offences were typically confined to public admonishment, excommunication or, at most, banishment, clerical authorities in the former, with state authorization, were known to impose fines and even prison sentences on individuals found guilty of ignoring Biblical injunctions and violating the church’s directives. Jane Dawson, “Calvinism and the Gaidhealtachd in
The Presbyterian notion that church and state occupy separate yet complementary spheres of activity would be challenged in the seventeenth century by the Stuart monarchs, who aimed to consolidate their political and religious authority over the Scottish nation following the Union of the Crowns in 1603. In pursuing this objective the Stuarts employed an alternate approach to church-state relations known as Erastianism, which involved the subordination of the church to a sovereign state. The Stuarts viewed Presbyterian traditions—notably the denomination’s decentralized system of ecclesiastical governance and its insistence on the church’s absolute autonomy from the state—as incompatible with the attainment and preservation of coherent monarchical authority. An Episcopalian system of church polity that functioned under the auspices of a sovereign state was in their understanding a *sine qua non* for the maintenance of politico-religious stability, a perspective that found expression in the Stuart adage “no bishop, no king.” Such politico-religious views were abhorrent to orthodox early modern Scottish Presbyterians, who viewed Erastianism as a menace to the spiritual autonomy of the church, and to the attendant “crown rights” of Christ.\(^\text{11}\)

Presbyterianism would not receive formal recognition as Scotland’s national religion until the Glorious Revolution of the late seventeenth century, through which a Stuart monarch, the Roman Catholic James II, was supplanted by his daughter, Mary, and her Dutch Calvinist husband, William of Orange.\(^\text{12}\) William’s acknowledgement of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland was made official through the Revolution Settlement of 1690. The Settlement, in keeping with the Calvinistic politico-religious tradition, officially acknowledged the church’s independence from the state—as reflected in the fact that, henceforth, Presbyterian clergymen would be prohibited from occupying seats in the Scottish parliament—as well as the state’s obligation to support the objectives and

---


activities of an autonomous church—as reflected in the state’s legal responsibility for providing the Church of Scotland with permanent financial backing.¹³

The Church of Scotland received additional legal recognition in the early eighteenth century as a result of the political and economic merger in 1707 of Scotland and England and the attendant creation of a new nation, Great Britain. The merger, which came into effect as a result of the Treaty of Union, officially acknowledged the legal equality within their respective realms of Great Britain’s two religious establishments—namely, the Church of England, an Erastian institution, and the Church of Scotland, a Presbyterian institution whose autonomy from the state was constitutionally affirmed. Yet the Treaty of Union neglected to make explicit whether or not the churches’ status as legally established entities extended to the wider British Empire. To say that the Treaty’s silence on this matter would have implications for the politico-religious history of British North America would be an understatement of the first magnitude.¹⁴

The Revolution Settlement and Treaty of Union did not settle once and for all Scottish debates concerning church-state relations. On the contrary, politico-religious controversies would persist in that country during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Yet in contrast to the inter-denominational quarrels of the seventeenth century, Scottish church-state debates occurring in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were chiefly intra-denominational in nature.

By the mid-nineteenth century three politico-religious ideologies existed within Scottish Presbyterianism. First, adherents of the Church of Scotland advocated close church-state relations, emphasizing their faction’s status as one of Great Britain’s two established churches and the corresponding obligation of public authorities to provide them with official recognition and permanent financial support. Second, followers of the eighteenth-century Secessionists objected to secular intrusions into the church’s sacred sphere of activity, and called with increasing fervency for voluntarism, which emerged during the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the principal politico-religious watchword within this Scottish Presbyterian subgroup. And third, supporters of the Presbyterian Free Church, which came into existence in 1843 as a result of the “Great

Disruption,” championed an arrangement in which the state, on account of Christ’s sovereignty over both nations and civil rulers, is responsible for aiding the church, but is strictly prohibited from involving itself in any other capacity in its affairs—or, in the whimsical phrasing of John S. Moir, the church is obligated to “pay the piper,” but is barred from “calling the tune” for fear of imperiling the purity of its teachings.¹⁵

Each of these politico-religious outlooks made its way across the Atlantic Ocean by way of the countless commercial, migratory, and intellectual circuits that bound together Great Britain and its North American colonies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Rather than serving as archaic remnants of a civilization that had been left behind, the church-state attitudes that had been transmitted from Great Britain to British North America acted as dynamic conceptual agents that influenced the various colonies’ politico-religious evolution in profound ways.

Presbyterian debates over religious establishments were muted in the Maritime colonies of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island. Yet such entities certainly existed in the Maritime region. Religious establishments, as Stewart J. Brown has observed, were integral to the British constitution. On an abstract level they embodied the state’s “religious identity,” and attested to the popular conviction that Britain’s physical security and material prosperity hinged on the attainment and retention of godly favour. Religious establishments were no less significant on a practical level, where they were charged with propagating Protestant virtue among the British citizenry and with presiding over the symbolic watersheds—baptisms, weddings, funerals—that punctuated and conferred legitimacy on peoples’ lives.¹⁶ Additionally, when it came to British colonies of settlement imperial officials and local elites hailed religious establishments as mechanisms through which loyalty and deference could be systematically inculcated in the popular consciousness. Anglicanism, as a result, was legally established in Nova Scotia following its elevation to the status of royal colony in

¹⁵ Moir, “‘Who Pays the Piper…,’” 16.
1758; in New Brunswick shortly after that colony’s creation in 1784; and in Prince Edward Island by the early 1790s.\textsuperscript{17}

Colonial authorities’ belief in the social and political utility of religious establishments intensified in the aftermath of the American Revolution. An insufficient emphasis on state-aided religion was identified by British officials in both church and state as largely responsible for the radical insubordination that brought about the demise of the First British Empire.\textsuperscript{18} Thus, figures such as Thomas Carleton, New Brunswick’s first Lieutenant-Governor, were decidedly in favour of Anglican establishments, which in his understanding served to promote social stability and to discourage radical rebelliousness. Charles Inglis, who was installed as Anglican Bishop of Nova Scotia in 1787, echoed Carleton in arguing that state-aided religion was eminently conducive to the promotion of a hierarchical social order. “Whosoever is sincerely religious toward God,” Inglis explained, “will also… be loyal to his earthly Sovereign, obedient to the laws, and faithful to the government which God hath placed over him.” By contrast, religious dissent, which in Inglis’ view proliferated in the absence of a richly endowed state church, invariably gave rise to “wild notions… which militate against Order” in both the religious and civil spheres.\textsuperscript{19}

Yet controversies regarding religious establishments failed to elicit the degree of acrimony in the Maritime region that they did elsewhere in British North America. Three factors account for this discrepancy. First, in the aftermath of the Acadian expulsion it was deemed advisable by colonial officials to avoid overt displays of religious favouritism in order to promote dissenting—that is, non-Anglican—Protestant migration to northeastern British North America. Imperial policymakers felt that a state-sanctioned religious hierarchy that exalted Anglicanism over other Protestant denominations would likely discourage the migration to Nova Scotia of non-Anglican groups—chiefly


Congregationalists—from New England, which in turn would hinder the colony’s settlement. Second, the Church of Scotland had little representation in the Atlantic region prior to the 1820s, when the Glasgow Colonial Society, a missionary agency operated by the Scottish church’s residual evangelical wing, began vigorously promoting its interests in British North America. The great majority of Maritime Presbyterians prior to that decade were drawn from the Secessionist tradition. Doctrinally opposed in numerous instances to close church-state ties, this Presbyterian subgroup made no attempt whatsoever to gain recognition for itself as an established entity. And third, there was no lucrative public endowment comparable to the Clergy Reserves over which the Maritime colonies’ various Protestant denominations—including the Presbyterians—could squabble. The absence of such an entity meant that, even after the Church of Scotland’s growth in the Atlantic region beginning in the 1820s, no campaign was mounted by members of that Presbyterian faction to attain formal recognition for themselves as one of Great Britain’s two state churches.20

It would be erroneous to suggest that nineteenth-century Maritime Presbyterians did not find themselves embroiled in heated politico-religious quarrels at all. On the contrary, such disputes were significant issues within the denomination. The three following controversies, each of which fomented sectarian discontent in the Maritime colonies during the first third of the nineteenth century, proved particularly problematic: the debate concerning which denominations’ clergy would be permitted to perform marriages; public funding for Pictou Academy, a Presbyterian educational institution that struggled to obtain reliable support from the colonial legislature; and access to King’s College, Windsor, a controversial Anglican institution of higher learning. Yet when it came to the issue of religious establishments, politico-religious debates in the Maritime colonies were rather subdued.21

In 1825 British Colonial Secretary Lord Bathurst proposed creating Upper Canadian-style clergy reserves in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. The proposal was supported by New Brunswick’s Lieutenant-Governor, Howard Douglas, but was opposed by his Nova Scotia counterpart, James Kempt. The latter felt that the establishment of such an endowment would likely stoke the fires of sectarian resentment and hostility, a perspective that was shared by Nova Scotia’s Anglican Bishop, Charles Inglis. The possibility of creating Clergy Reserves in the Maritime colonies evaporated in 1827 due in large part to Bathurst’s resignation in that year. Ibid., 53-57.

The same cannot be said for Upper Canada. The critical issue distinguishing that colony from its Maritime counterparts when it came to the issue of religious establishments was the Clergy Reserves endowment, which elicited acrimony in Upper Canada during the first half of the nineteenth century. Similar to the Maritime colonies, Upper Canada’s institutional development was largely shaped by imperial policymakers’ desire to insulate this fledgling British colony from radical republicanism.22 Canadian-based colonial officials viewed state-aided Christianity as a mechanism through which hierarchy could be promoted and radical republicanism could be thwarted. Accordingly, John Graves Simcoe, Upper Canada’s first Lieutenant-Governor, informed the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury in the late eighteenth century that “Every establishment of Church and State that upholds the distinctions of rank and lessens the undue weight of the democratic influence, ought to be introduced [in this colony].” John Strachan—who would go on to serve as Upper Canadian legislative councilor, Anglican Bishop of Toronto, and fulcrum of the archconservative Family Compact—echoed Simcoe, observing in the early nineteenth century that a virtuous “Christian nation” without a religious establishment was a “contradiction.”23 William Grenville, the British colonial secretary who was responsible for crafting the 1791 Constitutional Act that created the British North American colonies of Upper and Lower Canada, was influenced by comparable convictions. In formulating that document he took pains to create a religious establishment in an attempt to neutralize the insidious republican impulse that had engendered the American Revolution.

The Constitutional Act’s thirty-sixth clause, consistent with such conservative aims, called for “a permanent Appropriation” of one-seventh of Canadian lands, which would be reserved “for the Support and Maintenance of a Protestant Clergy.”24 While it was unclear as to which Protestant group(s) the Constitutional Act had in mind, a subsequent clause within the document empowering colonial governors “to constitute and erect, within every Township or Parish… One of more Parsonage or Rectory… according

22 Moir, Church in the British Era, 61; Gerald M. Craig, Upper Canada: The Formative Years 1784-1841 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1963), 14.
23 Moir, Church in the British Era, 86; 116; Craig, Upper Canada, 21.
24 Setting aside lands for the purposes of various denominations had been a common practice among colonial land agents in pre-revolutionary America as well among imperial authorities presiding over the British North American colonies of Quebec and Nova Scotia. Alan Wilson, The Clergy Reserves of Upper Canada (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association Booklet No. 23, 1969), 4.
to the Establishment of the Church of England” indicated that imperial authorities envisioned the Anglican Church in the Canadas enjoying the benefits that derived from establishment status.25

Fine. But what about the Clergy Reserves? In mentioning a “Protestant Clergy,” was the Constitutional Act referring exclusively to the Church of England? Or, alternatively, could access to the endowment potentially be extended to Great Britain’s other religious establishment, the Church of Scotland? And what about other, non-established Protestant denominations like the Methodists and Baptists? Could they gain access to the reserves, or were such prizes necessarily off limits on account of their inferior constitutional status? The Constitutional Act’s ambiguity on this matter, which was largely attributable to metropolitan politico-religious tensions revolving around the privileged status of the Anglican Church within Great Britain itself, would eventually plunge Canadian society into a lengthy politico-religious dispute that lingered as a source

---


In Lower Canada, the Church of England existed as a “quasi-establishment” alongside the Roman Catholic Church, whose legal privileges had been enshrined in the Quebec Act of 1774. Efforts by such Lower Canadian Anglicans as Archbishop Jacob Mountain to attain for their church the status of that colony’s sole religious establishment came to naught. Metropolitan officials recognized—correctly—that stripping the Catholic Church of its rights would foment resentment among the French-Canadian majority. The traditional privileges accorded to the Roman Catholic Church coupled with the paucity of Protestant churches and limited territorial extent of the endowment rendered the Clergy Reserves relatively uncontroversial in Lower Canada. Moir, Church in the British Era, 61; John S. Moir ed., Church and State in Canada…, 162.

It would perhaps be a mistake to portray the Constitutional Act as an expression of reactionary ultra-conservatism—after all, it extended to the inhabitants of post-revolutionary British North America elective legislative assemblies for the first time. A more nuanced characterization has been put forth by Michel Ducharme, who has posited that the Constitutional can be understood as an attempt to counter a radical “Rousseauiian” conception of freedom with a comparatively moderate “Blackstonian” conception of freedom, with the latter expressing itself in an emphasis on British loyalty and constitutionalism. Still, the Constitutional Act’s provisions—which vested tremendous powers in the hands of the colonial Governors’ appointive advisory coteries and which called for the creation in the Canadas of a permanently endowed Protestant establishment—attest to the desire on the part of late eighteenth-century imperial authorities to prevent radical republicanism from cropping up on a major scale in the residual British North American colonies. See Ducharme, “Canada in the Age of Revolutions: Rethinking Canadian Intellectual History in an Atlantic Perspective,” in Contesting Clio’s Craft: New Directions and Debates in Canadian History, eds. Dummitt and Michael Dawson (London: Institute for the Study of the Americas, 2009).
of ill will for several Protestant groups even after the introduction in 1854 of legislation
calling for the Clergy Reserves’ secularization.26

The Treaty of Union’s silence on the status of Great Britain’s two religious
establishments—the Churches of England and Scotland—in British colonies of
settlement contributed to the confusion surrounding the Clergy Reserves. Anglicans like
Strachan contended that, as a result of the Treaty’s failure to address this issue, the
Church of England—which, after all, was explicitly singled out for special privilege in
the Constitutional Act—should be recognized as Canada’s sole Protestant establishment.
It followed in his understanding that the Clergy Reserves were the exclusive “property of
the Church of England.”27 Devout adherents of the Church of Scotland bristled at such
arguments, which in their estimation disregarded the Scottish Church’s constitutionally
grounded claims to co-establishment status.

Questions regarding which churches were entitled to a share in the Clergy
Reserves endowment were more than academic in nature. By 1838 the reserved lands
amounted to more than three million acres of largely fertile territory in the Great Lakes-
St. Lawrence basin, the majority of which were located in Upper Canada. The question of
who controlled these lands—which could be used in order to build churches and
seminaries or, alternatively, sold for a profit—became increasingly contentious over the
course of the nineteenth century as the Canadian population expanded and arable territory
grew scarce. The Clergy Reserves controversy proved especially divisive in Upper
Canada, where the fate of more than two million acres of land was at stake. Beginning in
the 1820s and persisting well into the mid-nineteenth century, the Upper Canadian Clergy
Reserves served as a major politico-religious controversy that aggravated tensions
between several of the colony’s Protestant factions.28

The Clergy Reserves controversy spilled over into the political domain. Politically
conservative Tories—many of whom were adherents of the Churches of England and
Scotland—struggled with one another over control of the endowment, while politically

26 British Prime Minister William Pitt was reluctant to formally acknowledge the Anglican Church as
Canada’s sole religious establishment for fear that it would exacerbate intra-Protestant tensions within
British political culture. Alan Wilson, The Clergy Reserves of Upper Canada, 6.
27 John Strachan, A Speech of the Venerable John Strachan, D.D., Archdeacon of York, in the Legislative
Council... on the Subject of the Clergy Reserves (York, Upper Canada: 1828), 26-7.
28 John S. Moir, ed., Church and State in Canada..., 162.
liberal Reformers—many of whom were evangelical dissenters inclined towards voluntarism—denounced the reserves as physical impediments to the colony’s settlement, and as antithetical to civil equality in a religiously pluralistic North American setting.\(^29\)

Yet debates pertaining to the Clergy Reserves entailed substantially more than petty squabbling over plots of land scattered across the Canadas. To be sure, bickering and narrow self-interest featured prominently within disputes over which churches—if any—were entitled to a share in the reserves. Yet loftier principles and convictions were also at play. Indeed, contested politico-religious ideas served to greatly exacerbate animosities surrounding this enormously contentious endowment.

The Upper Canadian Clergy Reserves debates ultimately bore upon such fundamental moral considerations as justice, respectability, equality and the degree to which the state should assume responsibility for cultivating a virtuous citizenry. For representatives of the Churches of England and Scotland, who conceived of their institutions as bulwarks of order and tradition in a dangerously democratic New World context, control over the Reserves attested to their status as Canadian society’s permanent moral guardians. For the Reformers—many of whom sympathized with the politico-religious creed of voluntarism and were galvanized by an evangelical enthusiasm—the Reserves represented state-sanctioned religious favouritism. Such prejudice was in their estimation not only unjust, but also ill-suited to a religiously diverse colony in which the great majority of the population looked to better their lot in life through toil and enterprise rather than inherited privilege and elite pedigrees. At the heart of the Clergy Reserves dispute, then, lay diametrically opposed conceptions of Canadian society—one was static, aristocratic, and unapologetically hierarchical, while the other was fluid, meritocratic and oriented towards an egalitarian individualism. The Upper Canadian Clergy Reserves debates therefore threw into relief the existence within the colony of a pitched ideological battle between classical forms of conservatism and liberalism.

Compounding politico-religious rivalries was the presence in Upper Canada of clashing Christian moralities. Establishmentarians in the Churches of England and Scotland typically advocated the gradual, systematic inculcation of Protestant virtue in the minds of the populace by a highly educated, permanently endowed clergy. Such an

approach, they reasoned, was essential in order to instill in the Upper Canadian citizenry a sober-minded appreciation of the Gospels that would be conducive to the proliferation of righteousness and to the preservation of social stability. Voluntaristic evangelicals, conversely, stressed the primacy of spontaneous, cathartic conversion experiences and the corresponding importance of individual sinners pursuing—and eventually achieving—personal relationships with God. The establishmentarians’ staid approach was in their understanding inimical to the emotional intensity of an authentic, unmediated Christian faith.30

Canadian Presbyterian demands for recognition as members of a legally established church—which implicitly entailed a permanent share in the Clergy Reserves endowment—began in earnest during the 1820s. Upper Canadian adherents of the Church of Scotland argued with increasing shrillness during this decade that they were every bit as entitled to the benefits of state support as members of the Church of England. They demanded formal recognition for themselves as members of a legally established religious body, not least because adequate financial assistance from individual Upper Canadian congregations was notoriously difficult to obtain.31

The campaign for Presbyterian co-establishment was led in the Upper Canadian legislature by William Morris, a Perth merchant of conservative political leanings who emerged in the 1820s as the Church of Scotland’s principal lay spokesperson. The Church of Scotland’s quest for co-establishment status would be enhanced beginning in the later stages of that decade as a result of the activities of the Glasgow Colonial Society (GCS), which came into existence in 1825. This Presbyterian agency, which served as a counterpart to the Anglican Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and which was backed by the metropolitan church’s evangelical contingent, contributed to an enlarged Church of Scotland presence in Upper Canada. During its first decade of existence the GCS dispatched to that colony twenty-one missionaries, virtually all of whom would urge

the Upper Canadian government to honour its purported constitutional obligation to materially support the Scottish Church in its efforts to promote heightened standards in popular virtue in post-revolutionary British North America.32

Central to the Canadian Church of Scotland’s quest for recognition alongside the Church of England as a legally established institution was a yearning for “respectability.” The Reverend William Bell, a clergyman affiliated with the Presbytery of the Canadas, an indigenous British North American institution that would eventually be absorbed by the Church of Scotland, expressed misgivings in the early 1820s regarding the attempt on the part of an Upper Canadian soldier to characterize him as a “[dissenter] from the established church of Scotland.” The soldier, who had had a child with a “servant girl,” privately entreated Bell to baptize the child in 1823. Bell, who objected to the circumstances under which the child had been conceived, refused the soldier’s request. The soldier, in response, submitted a petition to the colonial Governor in which he called for Bell to be relieved of his position, in view of the fact that he was “connected with Burghers [a Secessionist faction], who… [espouse] political principles very different from the Church of Scotland.” Though the petition was disregarded, the soldier’s actions nevertheless rankled with Bell, as they implicitly called into question his attachment to a respectable institution—the legally established Church of Scotland—whose equality with the Church of England was enshrined in the Treaty of Union.33

The Canadian Church of Scotland’s yearning for recognition as a respectable institution was undiminished more than three decades later. Montreal’s Alexander Mathieson, a prominent Church of Scotland minister, arrived at an official gathering for the Prince of Wales that took place during the latter’s North American tour of 1860. Mathieson, who intended to publicly deliver an address to the Prince on the Scottish Church’s behalf, was informed by the Canadian Governor General, Sir Edmund Head, that he would not be permitted to read the statement aloud, and that he would have to settle instead for simply submitting his remarks to the Prince. Mathieson, who had already heard an Anglican delegate deliver an address on the English Church’s behalf,

32 Moir, “Loyalty and Respectability,” 89-94
Bell, prior to joining the Presbytery of the Canadas in 1818, insisted that the body adopt “the doctrines, discipline, and worship of the Church of Scotland.” Moir, Enduring Witness, 70-71.
objected vociferously to the second-class status to which the Scottish Church had in his estimation been subjected. Such treatment, which prevented the Church of Scotland from receiving public recognition as a respectable established institution, blatantly disregarded that institution’s constitutionally enshrined right to legal equality with its English counterpart.³⁴

Politico-religious disputes concerning the Clergy Reserves intensified during the later 1820s and 1830s. While conservative adherents of the Churches of England and Scotland quarreled with one another during this era over whether one or both bodies would have access to the endowment, ever-expanding numbers of Upper Canadians—and especially reform-oriented Protestant dissenters—criticized the reserves as an intolerable bulwark of politico-religious injustice. Rejecting the very notion of state-sanctioned religious hierarchy as inimical to the progressive development of a multi-denominational colony, they increasingly called for the Reserves to be sold off in toto, with the proceeds being channeled into public education. An address composed by the Upper Canadian legislative assembly and submitted to King William IV in early 1828 attests to the existence within the colony of substantial support for the liquidation of the Clergy Reserves. The address affirmed that, “it is the general desire of Your Majesty’s subjects in this Province, that the monies arising from the sale of any of the lands set apart in this Province for the support and maintenance of a Protestant clergy, should be entirely appropriated to purposes of education and internal improvement.”³⁵

Resentments regarding the Clergy Reserves served as one of the catalysts for the Upper Canadian Rebellion of 1837-38. The bitterness engendered by the endowment among Upper Canada’s dissenting Protestants, who constituted a majority of the Upper Canadian population and who played a disproportionately large role in the violent insurrection engineered by William Lyon Mackenzie, was acknowledged by Lord Durham in his influential Report on the Affairs of British North America. The speedy resolution of the Reserves’ controversy, Durham declared in the uprising’s aftermath, was “essential to the pacification of Canada.” Failure to defuse the issue in a timely manner, he elaborated, threatened to elicit further expressions of political radicalism,

³⁴ Ian Radforth, Royal Spectacle: The 1860 Visit of the Prince of Wales to Canada and the United States (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 134.
³⁵ John S. Moir, ed., Church and State in Canada…, 169-175.
which in turn could potentially bring about “the loss of the Colony” as a result of acts of insubordination that had been brought on by widespread disenchantment with the British regime.\(^{36}\)

Among the many disgruntled Upper Canadian voluntarists was the Presbyterian Minister John Jennings. An adherent of the Secessionist tradition, Jennings offered an impassioned criticism of close church-state relations in the late 1840s at Knox Presbyterian Church, Toronto, on the occasion of the opening meeting of the multi-denominational—and decidedly voluntaristic—Anti-Clergy Reserves Association. Jennings’ denunciation of what he identified as the religious and temporal injustice inherent in the Clergy Reserves endowment was representative of the politico-religious outlook that prevailed throughout much of Canadian Secessionist Presbyterianism.\(^{37}\)

What of the Presbyterian Free Church? If members of the Church of Scotland demanded co-establishment status—and, with it, access to the Clergy Reserves—and adherents of the Secessionist tradition such as John Jennings advocated the tenets of voluntarism, what was the position on the Clergy Reserves debate of the Presbyterian subgroup that came into existence in Scotland as a result of the “Great Disruption” of 1843? The Presbyterian Free Church, or “Free Kirk,” emerged in British North America one year after the Scottish rupture in consequence of opposition within the colonies to the metropolitan practice of lay patronage. This phenomenon, in the estimation of substantial segments of British North American Presbyterianism, amounted to unscriptural civil interference in the Scottish Church’s sovereign domain. While the colonials were by no means obligated to replicate the metropolitan secession—British North American Presbyterianism was not legally subordinate to the Scottish Church, and the practice of lay patronage was itself a non-issue within the colonies—they nevertheless opted beginning in 1844 to create autonomous Free Churches across British North America in an exhibition of solidarity with their aggrieved overseas co-religionists.\(^{38}\)

Scottish Free Church supporters maintained that, while the state was obligated to “pay the piper” by providing the church with permanent financial aid and legal

---


\(^{37}\) Ibid., 100-1.

recognition, it should not “call the tune” for fear of undermining the integrity of its teachings. Yet it remained to be seen whether or not this distinctive politico-religious outlook—which stressed Christ’s sovereignty over both nations and civil rulers—would take root in British North America. The answer, perhaps appropriately given the labyrinthine complexity of Presbyterian attitudes concerning the church-state relationship, was “yes…and no.” Supporters of the Canadian Free Church theoretically shared their metropolitan counterparts’ conviction that the state was obligated to provide the church with permanent legal recognition and financial support, but was at the same time prohibited from intervening in any other capacity in its affairs. Yet Canadian Free Church Presbyterians simultaneously recognized the existence within their ranks of divisions regarding whether or not they should accept state support in the form of Clergy Reserves revenues. They ultimately elected not to accept such assistance lest it elicit further internal disunity, thus gravitating to a position of de facto voluntarism when it came to the Clergy Reserves.39

Yet the Canadian Free Church’s decision not to accept state aid in the form of Clergy Reserves revenues was actuated by more than mere reluctance on the part of the subgroup’s leadership to exacerbate internecine rifts. Central to the Free Church’s refusal of a share in the endowment was an increasingly pronounced philosophical objection on the part of the subgroup’s membership to the very notion of religious establishments. Public endowments such as the Clergy Reserves were seen by many Free Church Presbyterians—including influential laymen like Peter and George Brown—as synonymous with potentially corruptive state domination, and as antithetical to the liberal-egalitarian ethos with which they came to be associated. Such views accelerated this Presbyterian faction’s drift toward de facto voluntarism.40

40 The Browns’ liberalism, which conditioned their views regarding state-aided Christianity, was intertwined with an ingrained anti-Catholicism. This animus was fuelled in the mid-nineteenth-century by developments occurring on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. In Britain, the decision of Robert Peel’s Conservative government to provide public support for a Roman Catholic seminary in Maynooth, Ireland was interpreted as an abandonment of the state’s traditional—and constitutionally embedded—Protestantism. And in British North America, the union of Upper and Lower Canada via the 1840 Act of Union supposedly brought with it the spectre of Roman Catholic “domination.” Compounding anxieties in both instances was the rise of “ultramontanism,” a doctrinaire manifestation of Roman Catholicism championed by Pope Pius IX and the Bishop of Montreal, Ignace Bourget. Frequently expressed in opposition to a nineteenth-century surge in liberalism and the impious individualistic materialism for which
A final settlement designed to bring the Clergy Reserves saga to an end was introduced in 1854 by the Canadian government headed by Sir Alan MacNab and A.N. Morin. In response to the agitations of Canadian Reformers, including the increasingly radical Clear Grit faction, the Clergy Reserves Act of that year decreed that the proceeds eventually generated by unsold reserved lands would be made available to Canadian municipalities in the form of development loans. The settlement also stipulated that clergy currently receiving stipends drawn from the endowment would retain them for the remainder of their lives, and would be given the option of trading them in for lump-sum payments, which in turn could be invested “by commutation” in new endowments. The Clergy Reserves Act’s provisions proved highly controversial. It ultimately upset both voluntarists, since it permitted the various churches receiving public support to continue doing so even after the death of the clerical beneficiaries through the investment of their stipends in new endowments, as well as establishmentarians, who denounced the reserves’ dissolution as a violation of their churches’ constitutionally enshrined rights to permanent public assistance. Yet controversial though its terms may have been, the Clergy Reserves Act was nevertheless responsible for bringing about the eventual secularization of one of the most deeply divisive entities in Canadian constitutional history.41

Divergent politico-religious philosophies continued to militate against harmonious intra-Presbyterian relations even after the controversy surrounding the Clergy Reserves had subsided.42 Lingering internecine schisms regarding the degree to which civil authorities should involve themselves in the church’s affairs prevented it was thought to stand, ultramontanism asserted the political supremacy of the Papacy over the state. In consequence of these developments, zealous Upper Canadian Free Church Presbyterians—including the Browns—thought it necessary to shield themselves and their church from the encroachments of what they saw as potentially corruptive, increasingly depraved public authorities. The result was an objection on their part to state support in the form of a share in the Clergy Reserves endowment. Gauvreau, “Reluctant Voluntaries,” 152-5.

41 Wilson, The Clergy Reserves of Upper Canada, 20-21; Moir, Church in the British Era, 180-3; John S. Moir, Church and State in Canada West: Three Studies in the Relation of Denominationalism, 1841-1867 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959), 79. The secularization of the Clergy Reserves also contributed to the phenomenon of intra-denominational reconciliation that allowed for the creation of the Presbyterian Church in Canada in 1875. For additional information on this issue see above pp. 29-30. The impact of the Clergy Reserves’ secularization on Canadian Church of Scotland clergymen is discussed in R.D. Gidney and W.P.J. Millar, Professional Gentlemen: The Professions in Nineteenth-Century Ontario (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 112-114.

42 Moir, “‘Who Pays the Piper…’,” 21.
Canadian Presbyterians from settling on terms that would allow for the creation of a nation-wide union that included their Maritime counterparts until 1875. During the negotiations that resulted in the establishment in that year of the dominion-wide Presbyterian Church in Canada, provisions for “forbearance” on the issue of Christ’s “headship” over nations were instituted in an attempt to neutralize longstanding politico-religious differences of opinion. The provisions proved efficacious. The politico-religious impediments that had separated northern North American Presbyterians for several decades were at long last surmounted, and a national institution came into existence.43

Arguably no issue posed a greater obstacle to intra-Presbyterian harmony over the course of the nineteenth century than differing attitudes toward the church-state relationship. Such differences, as we shall see, were informed by divergent understandings of the British political tradition, and were reflected in an equally wide-ranging variety of secular political viewpoints that ran the gamut from conservatism to liberalism. The denomination’s penchant for internecine politico-religious squabbling was evident in both the Canadas and the Maritime colonies. Despite the absence in the latter of heated disputes over religious establishments, philosophical differences regarding church-state relations nevertheless served as a major source of both inter- and intra-denominational tension in the Atlantic region.

Yet for all of the undeniable differences that existed within nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism regarding church-state relations, a paradoxical politico-religious unity existed within the denomination as well. While the various Presbyterian factions differed—often starkly—when it came to the involvement of civil authorities in the church’s sacred domain, they ultimately had a significant tendency in common when it came to the ever-contentious affiliation between sacred and secular authorities. They attempted to harness the authority of the state, albeit in differing ways, in order to establish in northern North America an unambiguously Christian moral order in which biblical precepts and ordinances would reign supreme.

Let us now take a closer look at the array of politico-religious ideologies that circulated within nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism. This investigation will involve surveying the divergent church-state attitudes evinced by the Church of Scotland,

43 Ibid.
Secessionist, and Free Church constituencies, and will be followed by an illumination of the paradoxical unity of thought that existed within the denomination regarding the various subgroups’ desire to utilize the authority of the state in an attempt to bring about the diffusion throughout northern North America of an uncompromising Protestant piety.

Members of the Church of Scotland viewed state-aided religion as vital not only to the interests of their faction, but also to the progressive development of northern North American society. They frequently identified a causal relationship between publicly supported Christianity and political, economic, and cultural advancement. One Church of Scotland backer, writing in 1848, deployed the following rhetorical question in an attempt to underscore the supposed correlation between state-aided Christianity and temporal progress:

Where are men the most intelligent, the most orderly, the most industrious?—Which is the nation that takes the lead in the progress of civilization, that stands preeminent in wisdom and power, and by invention and enterprise enriches itself with the commerce of the world?

“It is not,” the author continued, “the nation that owned the largest extent of territory, the greatest number of inhabitants, [or] the greatest physical resources.” Rather, the nations that were most responsible for political, economic, and cultural progress were the ones that took pains to embrace religious “truth.” It went without saying in the author’s understanding that such truth was inherent in the tenets of Protestant Christianity, the purest expression of which was Presbyterianism. Yet it would be a mistake, the author cautioned, to assume that religious verities would spontaneously come to permeate society on their own. Rather, civil authorities should officially assume responsibility for their propagation by providing permanent financial support for ministers and by bringing into effect godly laws.44

The author added that the alternative to state-aided religion was rampant impiety and social disintegration. The disappearance of state-aided Christianity would unleash a litany of ills—“deeds of rapacity and cruelty” would abound; society’s moral foundations would crumble; and industriousness would be discouraged due to a pervasive lack of confidence in social stability. Selfishness, the author explained, “uncontrolled by the fear of God, by righteous law and good government, and partially restrained only by natural

44 *The Presbyterian*, April 1848, 54.
affection and the fear of retaliation, rends asunder the confidence that should unite society.” Conversely, wherever Christianity received reliable state support, it would function “as eyes to the blind and feet to the lame,” enforcing discipline, promoting stability, and emboldening enterprising individuals to apply themselves. The temporal realm, as a result of close church-state ties, would be transformed from a chaotic “marshy jungle” into an orderly “fruitful field.”

The Church of Scotland’s campaign for co-establishment status contained legal and historical dimensions. Regarding the legal dimension, Church of Scotland Presbyterians emphasized the fact that the Treaty of Union explicitly acknowledged the constitutional equality of “the established Church of Scotland and the established Church of England.” The perpetual legal parity of these two institutions was in the Scottish Church’s understanding “a fundamental and unalterable part” of the document that had ushered Great Britain into existence. As for the historical dimension, members of this Presbyterian subgroup asserted that northern North America had been conquered after the Treaty of Union’s implementation, which meant that Great Britain as a whole—including both of its established churches—enjoyed dominion over British North America, not simply England and its state church. The Treaty of Union’s silence on the status of Britain’s two state churches outside of the British archipelago did little to hinder Canadian Church of Scotland demands for co-establishment status. In the absence of explicit guidelines pertaining to the legal standing of Britain’s religious establishments in the colonies, Canadian Church of Scotland adherents reasoned, their equality with the English Church should be honoured in full. Drawing on this two-pronged contention, adherents of this Presbyterian subgroup affirmed that, “adherents of the Church of Scotland, in any British colony, are entitled to a communication of all civil and religious rights, privileges, and advantages, equally with the adherents of the Church of England.”

46 Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives (PCCA) 1973-1044-1-4 Presbyterian Church in Canada in Connection with the Church of Scotland papers. “Meeting of Delegates at Cobourg Regarding the Clergy Reserves.” Unpaginated.
47 PCCA 1973-1044-1-5 Presbyterian Church of Canada in connection with the Church of Scotland papers. Petition Concerning Establishment, 1838.
48 PCCA 1973-1044-1-4 Presbyterian Church of Canada in connection with the Church of Scotland papers. Meeting of Delegates at Cobourg Regarding the Clergy Reserves, 1837.
Upper Canadian adherents of the Scottish Church stressed their faction’s unswerving devotion to the British Empire in northern North America in an effort to strengthen their campaign for recognition as an established institution. Upper Canadian Lieutenant-Governor Sir George Arthur was informed in an 1838 appeal that Scottish Presbyterians, who purportedly constituted “the great mass of British emigrants” residing within the colony, had in numerous instances “[devoted] their lives and fortunes” to the task of transforming a “remote and desert despondency” into “a fertile Province.” In doing so these Scottish Presbyterians “rested in full confidence that the guardian power of the Parent state would be watchfully extended over them,” especially when it came to their constitutionally enshrined religious privileges. Scottish Churchmen residing in Upper Canada were therefore “grievously disappointed” by the fact that they were denied the legal equality with the Church of England to which they were entitled by virtue of the Treaty of Union. When it came to “religious rights,” the petition concluded, “Scotchmen have been in Canada as exiles from their own realm—as aliens in the land of the stranger.”

Political conservatism was in numerous instances an outgrowth of the Church of Scotland’s tendency toward establishmentarianism. While Scottish Churchmen objected to their English counterparts’ efforts to monopolize the Clergy Reserves, members of the two bodies nevertheless managed to find common cause with one another on more than a few occasions. The conservative Church of England-Church of Scotland alliance contained both social and political aspects. Regarding the social aspect, as S.F. Wise has explained, members of the two churches “met and mingled easily in society and business.” Disproportionately represented among early and mid-nineteenth-century Canada’s political and economic elite, they comprised the membership of a small colonial “upper class.”

As for the political aspect, Canadian adherents of the Churches of England and Scotland regularly banded together in an effort to resist the purportedly pernicious

49 PCCA Presbyterian Church of Canada in connection with the Church of Scotland papers. 1973-1044-1-5. “Petition Concerning Establishment, 1838.” See also Home and Foreign Missionary Record for the Church of Scotland, May 1838, 102-103.
influences of political radicalism and religious dissent. To that end, members of both
denominations united in the Upper Canadian assembly and legislative council to defend
the principle of state-supported religion, and to prevent the clergy of such dissenting
denominations as the Methodists—whose reputation for religious exuberance and
extensive links to the United States rendered them potentially subversive in the
estimation of numerous Upper Canadian conservatives—from attaining the right to
perform marriage ceremonies, which signified respectability in the eyes of the state.\textsuperscript{51}

Tories from the Churches of England and Scotland were motivated in their exclusionary
actions by a desire to protect their privileges, which attested to their esteemed social
status. They were also spurred on by a suspicion of unchecked religious enthusiasm and
republicanism, both of which were viewed as antithetical to the preservation in post-
revolutionary British North America of social stability.\textsuperscript{52}

The deep-seated connection between the Church of Scotland and Toryism, so
often borne out in an alliance with members of the Church of England, would persist until
at least the mid-nineteenth century. Indeed, the Toronto \textit{Leader} reported in 1864 that
Upper Canadian followers of the Scottish church—which boasted John A. Macdonald as
a member—were “almost exclusively Conservative.”\textsuperscript{53}

Church of Scotland conservatism manifested itself in a rhetorical emphasis on the
institution’s steadfast opposition to radicalism, and on its equally stout support of the
British Empire in northern North America. Supporters of this Presbyterian subgroup
argued that these complementary traits were especially evident in Upper Canada, where
the “blood and energies” of Scottish Presbyterians had been expended “in no scanty

\textsuperscript{51} The initial Upper Canadian Marriage Law of 1793 gave Anglicans a virtual monopoly over the
performance of marriage rites. The right to perform marriage services was extended to Lutherans, clergy of
the Church of Scotland, and other “Calvinists” later that decade due in part to the fact that such traditions
were established elsewhere, and were therefore viewed by imperial policymakers as unlikely to challenge
the status quo. However, unlike Anglicans clergy of these traditions were required to obtain permission
from local justices of the peace in order to perform marriage ceremonies. Moreover, the numerically
substantial Methodists as well as other “dissenting” groups were denied the right to perform marriages until
1831, when a combination of factors including the rise of a Reform movement and a corresponding surge
in popular opposition to state-sanctioned religious hierarchy resulted in the liberalization of Upper
Canada’s marriage laws. Moir, ed., \textit{Church and State in Canada, 1627-1867...}, 142-148. See also Peter
Ward, \textit{Courtship, Love and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century English Canada} (Kingston and Montreal:

\textsuperscript{52} Wise, “Upper Canada and the Conservative Tradition,” 175-176.

\textsuperscript{53} P.B. Waite, \textit{The Life and Times of Confederation 1864-1867: Politics, Newspapers, and the Union of
measure” in defending the colony against radical “enemies of the empire” during the War of 1812 and the Rebellion of 1837-8. Accordingly, Canadian Church of Scotland adherents saw no reason at all why they should be forced to occupy an “inferior” legal position and denied that governmental “assistance” to which they were entitled as members of an established body.54 Anything less than complete legal equality with the English Church amounted to an insult to members of a church who had sacrificed so much in resisting the scourge of republicanism and safeguarding the British connection in northern North America.

Representatives of the Church of Scotland, writing in the aftermath of the ill-fated Upper Canadian Rebellion, struck a similarly conservative chord. They informed a metropolitan readership that governmental recognition of their status as one of the Empire’s two state churches would surely be conducive “to the preservation of good order” in the colonies.55 This assertion was followed by an appeal to the recently crowned Queen Victoria in which Canadian-based Scottish Churchmen implored Britain’s new monarch to do away with the civil “disabilities” under which they toiled, since they were confident that she had no “desire to protect and cherish one class of people of the united empire” by depriving another of the “national and constitutional rights” to which they were entitled under the auspices of the Treaty of Union.56

Secessionist Presbyterians viewed the issue of church-state relations in a dramatically different light. Whereas Canadian members of the Church of Scotland argued that their institution was legally entitled through the Treaty of Union to co-establishment status, Canadian adherents of the Secessionist tradition denounced state involvement in the sacred sphere as a violation of the church’s divinely ordained sovereignty, and as a catalyst for temporal injustice.

The interference of secular authorities in the church’s domain amounted in the Secessionists’ view to a violation of the spiritual sovereignty of individual congregations. Religion in their understanding was the domain of God and “the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ,” who enjoyed universal dominion as “king of kings” over “all the events of time.” Efforts by civil officials to meddle in the religious sphere consequently

54 Home and Foreign Missionary Record for the Church of Scotland, May 1838, 102-3.
55 Ibid., 29.
56 Ibid., 58.
represented a violation of “Christ’s royal prerogative.” Additionally, since they were of
divine origin, the church’s “laws and institutions” were thought to be “absolutely
perfect.” For voluntaristic Secessionists, “Every thing necessary for the regulation of the
affairs of the church in all places, at all times, and in all circumstances, is amply provided for.”
Governmental intrusions into the church’s sphere of activity therefore represented
a violation of a godly—and thus faultless—system of ecclesiastical governance.

What is more, worldly authorities in the Secessionists’ conception had no legal
authority over the church. Individuals received the church’s teachings not as “subjects of
any particular civil government,” but rather as human beings “involved by nature in one
common ruin, and as standing in absolute need of the one common salvation.” Civil
officials and institutions, in implementing and enforcing laws, did so as authorities over
the worldly “body politic” and not over the church, an entity over which it had no legal
jurisdiction whatsoever. Civil officials, on account of their intrinsic sinfulness, were
“utterly incapable to legislate in the kingdom which is not of this world.” Secessionists’
therefore denounced the Church of Scotland for willingly accepting support in the form
of Clergy Reserves revenues from an earthly “civil power.” This willingness, which in
the Secessionists’ view entailed the deliberate subordination of the church to the state,
vitiates the Scottish Church’s claims to “spiritual independence.” For effectively
acquiescing to the principle of “human headship” over the church, the Church of Scotland
was ultimately denounced by the Secessionists as “constitutionally antichristian.”

The corruptive ramifications of close church-state ties extended in the
Secessionists’ estimation to the temporal realm. Civil authorities, argued one observer,
“are just the world itself, as distinguished from the church of Christ,” and were therefore
irredeemably corrupt, acting wherever they existed as “the seed of the serpent.” It came
as no surprise, then, that the intrusions of intrinsically sinful state authorities into the
church’s sacred sphere of activity served as “the bane of just legislation,” and as the
“prime agent” in stoking the sectarian resentment and violence that had blighted so much
of western history. Secessionist Presbyterians therefore criticized close church-state

---

58 Ibid., 123-4.
59 Canadian Presbyterian Magazine, June 1855.
relations not only for violating the church’s divinely ordained sovereignty, but for aggravating sectarian tensions in the temporal sphere as well.\textsuperscript{60}

Nineteenth-century Canadian Secessionist Presbyterians, many of whom were unabashed evangelicals enamoured of the politico-religious doctrine of voluntarism, shared much in common with the vigorous Protestant culture that developed in the American republic during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{61} Despite these similarities, however, the Secessionists mirrored members of the Church of Scotland in invoking aspects of the British tradition in attempting to justify their faction’s politico-religious outlook. Yet whereas adherents of the Church of Scotland invoked such British constitutional statutes as the Treaty of Union in an effort to invest their campaign for co-establishment status with enhanced validity, Secessionists, in arguing against such purportedly pernicious entities as the Clergy Reserves endowment, emphasized alternate phenomena that threw into relief their pro-British orientation. For example, the Secessionists stressed the authority of the British monarch to alter the Canadian constitution (and, in particular, the Clergy Reserves endowment); and they highlighted the legal equality of all Britons in the eyes of the state, a principle that in their conception extended to British colonies of settlement. Thus, while the Secessionists paralleled their Scottish establishmentarian counterparts in invoking British traditions and principles, they did so in markedly different ways, and with a radically different politico-religious objective in mind. That this was so attests to the pervasiveness and malleability of the British tradition within the nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterian consciousness.

Interpreting the Clergy Reserves as a form of state-sanctioned religious favouritism, Canadian Secessionists denounced the endowment as “exceedingly

\textsuperscript{60} The Secessionists’ objections to close church-state relations were not limited to the pretensions of the Church of Scotland. On the contrary, they also criticized Britain’s other religious establishment, the Church of England, for attempting to legally exalt itself over other denominations by pursuing exclusive control over the Clergy Reserves. Monopolistic Anglicanism, “so exclusive and so arrogant,” represented in the Secessionists’ understanding an assumption of powers to which the original “Apostolic” church “had never laid claim,” and which in fact belonged to “none but the Redeemer himself.” Such efforts, the Secessionists’ maintained, were unfounded in scripture, and were responsible for undermining religious integrity and sowing seeds of sectarian discord and resentment within the temporal domain. \textit{Presbyterian Magazine}, January 1843, unpaginated.

injurious” to the “welfare of the Province.” One argument proffered in an effort to bring about the Reserves’ secularization was that the British Crown, in creating the endowment through the Constitutional Act, had committed not the private property of King George III, but rather that of the entire British “nation.” Accordingly, so long as it was advocated by actual Britons, including those situated in northern North America, radically altering the Clergy Reserves—by, say, dissolving the endowment and devoting the proceeds to public education—was portrayed by the Secessionists as an entirely valid course of action.62 In advocating the secularization of the Clergy Reserves, then, Secessionist Presbyterians did not call for the endowment to be arbitrary liquidated by colonial lawmakers. Nor did they advocate the severing of cultural and constitutional ties to the metropolitan authority that had been responsible for the Reserves’ creation. Rather, in attempting to legitimate their anti-Clergy Reserves contentions, the Secessionists invoked the authority of the British monarch to do away with the contentious endowment and replace it with something that in their view would be more just.

William Jenkins, a Secessionist, appropriated the British tradition in calling for the Clergy Reserves’ secularization. He belonged to a non-denominational group known as the “Friends of Religious Liberty” that boasted as members such reform-oriented luminaries as William Warren and Robert Baldwin, Jesse Ketchum, and William Lyon Mackenzie. Jenkins, as well as the other members of the Friends of Religious Liberty, denounced the Reserves as religiously and politically unjust, and called for them to be liquidated and channeled into such ventures as public education. Yet despite objecting to the Clergy Reserves, which had been crafted and implemented by imperial authorities, Jenkins and his associates did not couch their opposition to the endowment in the rhetoric of anti-British republicanism. Rather, they portrayed their campaign against the Clergy Reserves as a concerted effort to safeguard such quintessentially “British rights” as freedom of conscience and assembly, and the equality of all citizens in the eyes of the state.63

62 Canadian Presbyterian Magazine, July 1851, unpaginated.
Secessionist Presbyterians in the Maritime colonies also laid claim to the British tradition in an attempt to render more compelling their politico-religious contentions. Presbyterian involvement in debates over religious establishments in the Maritime region, as noted, was relatively tepid in comparison to the acrimonious disputes on this matter that occurred in the Canadas. Yet it would be a mistake to conclude that the region’s Presbyterians did not become embroiled in rancorous politico-religious quarrels at all. On the contrary, one need look only to the debate over which churches’ clergy would be permitted to perform marriages for evidence of Presbyterian involvement in heated church-state controversies. This right, which was not fully extended to non-Anglican clergy until the early 1830s, existed as a major source of irritation for members of Presbyterian Secessionism—not to mention members of other dissenting denominations—during the opening decades of the nineteenth century.64

The Secessionists identified the influence exerted by a conservative Anglican element within the colonial government as responsible for their mistreatment. Yet rather than denouncing the status quo and citing the injustice allegedly wrought by their Anglican rivals as grounds for acts of rebelliousness, Nova Scotia’s Secessionists pointed to their continued allegiance to the British Crown as evidence of their unimpeachable loyalty. The Nova Scotia Secessionists’ continued fidelity to the British connection, despite the purported “violation” of their “natural and constitutional right” to equality as Britons in the eyes of the state, was interpreted as evidence that they were a truly “loyal people.” For, “Men who are loyal to Britain’s King in spite of every indignity… are loyal indeed.”65 Thus, Nova Scotia’s Secessionist Presbyterians, in criticizing the colony’s exclusionary marriage laws, portrayed their objections to perceived politico-religious injustice not as an attack on the existing British regime, but rather as evidence of their unswerving devotion to the Empire and the ennobling principles for which it was thought to stand.

64 The Church of England, despite a limited supply of clergymen, attained a monopoly over the performance of marriage rites in Nova Scotia in 1758. However, Justices of the Peace were allowed to perform the ceremonies, as were the clergy of “dissenting” Protestant sects so long as marriage banns were read and both the bride and groom were members of the same congregation. The same essential policy regarding marriage rites was adopted by New Brunswick following that colony’s creation in 1784, and by Prince Edward Island in the early nineteenth century. Marriage laws were liberalized throughout the Maritime colonies in the early 1830s. Moir, Church and State in Canada, 58-63.
65 Colonial Patriot, February 29, 1828, 97.
The Secessionists’ opposition to state control in the religious realm was accompanied in numerous instances by a tendency toward political liberalism. Representative of this phenomenon were the views of William Jenkins. The Friends of Religious Liberty, the reform-oriented group to which Jenkins belonged, called for the complete elimination of state-sanctioned religious hierarchy in Upper Canada. Accordingly, they demanded a series of reforms that were plainly informed by both voluntaristic and egalitarian sentiments. These included the removal of all religious officials “from places of political power”; the extension of equal legal rights to the clergy of “all denominations” regarding such issues as the performance of marriage rites; and the allocation of funds derived from the sale of Clergy Reserves’ lands to “general education.” The Friends of Religious Liberty’s essential objective in advocating these reforms was the elimination of constitutionally enshrined barriers to civil and religious equality. Their liberal-egalitarian objectives contrasted sharply in Jenkins’ conception with the hierarchical politico-religious agenda pursued by Tory sympathizers within the Church of Scotland.66

Secessionist Presbyterians in the Maritime colonies were inclined in many instances toward political liberalism as well. Early nineteenth-century Pictou County, which boasted a substantial Secessionist contingent, has been described as “eminently… Liberal” in its political orientation.67 The politico-religious arguments put forth by Nova Scotia Secessionists in this period regarding disputes over religious control in the realm of education are consistent with such an assertion. Consider the dispute surrounding Pictou Academy, a school founded in the early nineteenth century by the Secessionist clergyman and educator, Thomas McCulloch. The Academy encountered difficulty during the early nineteenth century in attempting to obtain financial support from the colonial government.68 McCulloch based his arguments in favour of state assistance for

---

68 Such requests were viewed by the Secessionists’ as uncontroversial due to the virtual absence in the Maritime provinces of a Church of Scotland campaign for co-establishment. This meant that expressions of
Pictou Academy on the fact that the school, which was open to members of all denominations, was agreeable to the majority of the colonial population, which viewed its existence as entirely “just and reasonable.” Thus, when McCulloch attempted in 1816 to obtain a charter from the colonial assembly through which Pictou Academy would be elevated from the status of grammar school to that of college, he encountered scarcely any opposition. However, McCulloch reported that Pictou Academy’s attempts to gain regular financial assistance were subsequently met with “violent opposition” from the unsympathetic Church of England contingent that was concentrated within Nova Scotia’s legislative council. This constituency in McCulloch’s conception viewed the school’s growth as a threat to its own institution of higher learning, King’s College, Windsor, which had come into existence in 1788.69

McCulloch denounced government favouritism for King’s College, Windsor, as illiberal and unjust. A statute introduced in 1802 stipulated that no student of King’s “shall frequent the Romish mass, or the meeting houses of Presbyterians, Baptists, or Methodists, or the… places of worship of any other dissenters from the Church of England.” This exclusionary requirement prohibited the vast majority of the Maritime colonies’ religiously diverse population from matriculating.70 Moreover, King’s College received a generous annual grant of £1750 from the colonial legislature despite the fact that its enrolment was half the size of Pictou Academy’s. Largely as a result of the English Church’s “interference and influence,” governmental support for Pictou Academy, which had previously been made available to the school on an ad hoc basis, was suspended in 1827. For McCulloch, exclusionary Anglican hostility to Pictou Academy was unacceptable, as it disregarded the will of the people in favour of the interests of a parochial elite. His defence of liberty and pluralism, and his accompanying public support for religion were not linked in the Maritime Presbyterian consciousness to corruptive civil encroachments into the church’s sphere of activity.

69 Dalhousie University Archives (henceforth DUA), Thomas McCulloch fonds. Collection No. ms-2-40. Box 1, File a-4. Thomas McCulloch “To the Senate of the University of Edinburgh,” undated, unpaginated.
objections to manifestations of political and religious hierarchy, attest to the liberal political leanings of this influential Nova Scotia Secessionist.\textsuperscript{71}

Canadian backers of the Presbyterian Free Church, for their part, espoused church-state attitudes that differed markedly from those advocated by supporters of both the Church of Scotland and the Secessionist tradition. The essence of the Free Church’s position when it came to relations between sacred and secular realms ran as follows: the state, consistent with the Westminster Confession, should provide the church with reliable financial support, but should refrain from meddling in its affairs for fear of compromising its spiritual integrity.

For allowing lay patrons to foist ministerial appointments onto individual congregations, the Church of Scotland was in the Free Church’s estimation guilty of repudiating the doctrine of Christ’s “supreme headship” over the church. To remain a part of such a sinful body, British North American Free Church adherents reasoned, would be “to become a partaker of her sin.” Thus, if they hoped to avoid such a fate, Free Church supporters had no choice but to part company with the Scottish Church. While they were not legally required to replicate the metropolitan secession, to maintain ties to the Church of Scotland would be to knowingly flout the “proper” relationship between sacred and secular, which entailed honouring in every instance the church’s inviolate sovereignty. The Church of Scotland, for allowing sordid temporal authorities to influence its affairs, was effectively guilty in the Free Church’s conception of denying Christ’s “headship” in exchange for access to such “state endowments” as a share in Clergy Reserves revenues. The result was the Scottish Church’s \textit{de facto} subordination to an inherently sinful temporal authority.\textsuperscript{72}

The essence of the Free Church critique was conveyed to the metropolitan Church of Scotland in an 1845 letter. With “much sorrow of heart,” Canadian Free Church sympathizers informed their erstwhile parent church that, as a result of its continued willingness to permit civil interference in the church’s domain, it had failed to adequately safeguard the spiritual sovereignty of the “Great Head of the Church.” This failure

\textsuperscript{71} C. Campbell and R.A. MacLean, \textit{Beyond the Atlantic Roar: A Study of the Nova Scotia Scots} (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), 208.
\textsuperscript{72} \textit{Ecclesiastical and Missionary Record for the Presbyterian Church of Canada}, August 1844, 1-2; \textit{Ibid.}, November 1844, 26.
necessitated disruption on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. The Church of Scotland, the
dispatch elaborated, was guilty of acquiescing to “practical Erastianism,” which in
counter to Presbyterian tradition, acknowledged the “supremacy of the civil ruler over
the church.” The Scottish Church’s willingness to tolerate civil intrusions into the
church’s sacred sphere of activity allegedly attested to this fact. Such offences amounted
in the Free Church’s estimation to a denial of Christ’s “sole headship” over church and
state, the inescapable result of which was the fracturing of “our national Zion.”73

The Canadian Free Church, as noted, ultimately elected not to take up its share in
the Clergy Reserves endowment. This decision sprang from two impulses: a reluctance
on the part of the subgroup’s leadership to aggravate internal politico-religious divisions;
and an increasingly pronounced philosophical aversion within the faction’s ranks to
potentially corruptive acts of civil manipulation. Yet for all of the Free Church’s
misgivings regarding the potential pitfalls associated with state-aided Christianity,
members of the denomination were not voluntarists either. Though they eschewed Clergy
Reserves revenues, Free Church supporters continued to advocate the notion that the
state, due to Christ’s “headship” over both nations and civil rulers, is duty-bound to
permanently support the church’s aims and activities.

Free Church adherents charged that voluntarism was tantamount to religious
neutrality, which in their understanding represented the thin edge of an irreligious wedge.
Godly societies, the Free Church community explained, should explicitly “acknowledge
God and honour His Son, who is King of Kings, and King of Nations.” Anything less
amounted to an abandonment of Christian principle, which would surely result in the
proliferation throughout society of immorality and injustice. Voluntarism, extended to its
logical conclusion, was capable of no such acknowledgement. On account of its doctrinal
aversion to state support, this politico-religious doctrine “forbids the recognition of any
one religious standard—Bible any more than Koran—Protestantism any more than
Romanism.” Thus, while the Free Church denounced civil interference in the church’s
domain as a recipe for religious corruption, its supporters also inveighed against

73 Ibid., June 1845, 81.
voluntarism, which was allegedly incapable of recognizing Protestantism’s spiritual supremacy and indispensable temporal importance.\textsuperscript{74} 

The Free Church, in contrast to their voluntaristic co-religionists, acknowledged the vital significance of formal state recognition of Christianity. Members of this Presbyterian faction asserted that “individual conscience, and ecclesiastical freedom” would be most secure in those polities that took pains to recognize Protestantism as “the supreme standard of public as well as private virtue.” While the state should refrain from “dictating to men what they shall believe, or how they shall worship,” it should nevertheless remain cognizant at all times of Protestantism’s capacity for promoting virtue and for discouraging sinfulness.\textsuperscript{75} The state, in sum, should not impose its religious preferences on its citizenry. But it should draw on Christian teachings in formulating and enforcing public policy, while at the same time respecting the church’s autonomy so as to allow for the propagation of an unalloyed Protestant piety. Thus, while the Canadian Free Church gravitated toward a \textit{de facto} voluntarism when it came to the Clergy Reserves, it did not renounce the idea of state-aided religion \textit{per se}. Rather, members of this Presbyterian faction clung to the notion that civil authorities were obligated to base their conduct on Christian tenets and traditions, while respecting in all instances the church’s inviolate sovereignty.

Similar to adherents of both the Church of Scotland and the Secessionist tradition, members of the Free Church invoked the British tradition in order to accentuate the perceived validity of their politico-religious contentions. Members of the Free Church, who criticized the policies of “High Church” Anglicans opposed to religious and political reform, portrayed their arguments as entirely consistent with the freedoms enshrined in the British constitution. Their tendency to appropriate British principles in an effort to invest their arguments with enhanced legitimacy attests to the pervasiveness and potency of the imperial affiliation within the denominational psyche.

Isaac Buchanan, an influential Upper Canadian businessman and Free Church Presbyterian, criticized perceived Anglican insolence regarding the Clergy Reserves endowment and the sectarian character of King’s College, Toronto, in the mid-1840s.

\textsuperscript{74} Ecclesiastical and Missionary Record, February 1850, 56-7.  
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 57.
Buchanan, in leveling his criticisms, pointed out that his arguments flowed from a deep-seated sense of loyalty and were entirely consonant with Britain’s constitutional tradition. He denounced the English Church’s policies regarding both the Clergy Reserves and King’s College—which, though liberal by European standards, required students of divinity as well as the institution’s governing elite to adhere to Anglican doctrinal standards—as at least as great a threat to the British Empire in North America as republicanism. This was due to the fact that the Anglican “High Church” faction’s monopolistic objectives, which in Buchanan’s view were championed by Upper Canada’s Tory elite, served to alienate Upper Canada’s dissenting Protestants, who constituted a majority of the colonial population.

“High Church” exclusivity was in Buchanan’s conception at least as grave a threat to the British regime in northern North America as the radical republicanism that circulated in the United States. In view of Upper Canada’s close physical proximity to the American republic, Buchanan elaborated, it was inevitable that inherently anti-monarchical manifestations of republicanism would occasionally bubble to the surface and “become an alarming element to us.” Arguably more disconcerting, however, were the “wrong… illiberal principles” embodied in Anglican attempts to control the Clergy Reserves and to maintain King’s College’s sectarian character. Such efforts, in Buchanan’s view, were every bit as “anti-British” in their disregard for the wishes of the colony’s non-Anglican majority as the purportedly anarchic political views that circulated in the American republic. To resist the pretensions of the “High Church” faction and to call for the reform of the Clergy Reserves and King’s College was in Buchanan’s conception neither subversive nor disloyal. Defending the interests of Upper Canada’s non-Anglicans was viewed, on the contrary, as consistent with the religious tolerance

78 [Isaac Buchanan], First Series of Five Letters; Against the Baldwin Faction, by an Advocate of Responsible Government, and of the New College Bill (Toronto: Printed at the British Colonist Office, 1844), 36-7.
accorded dissenting Protestants in Britain, and as a means through which Upper Canada’s British character could be affirmed and perpetuated.

An equally pro-British chord was struck in an 1843 edition of the *Banner*, the publication owned and operated by Peter and George Brown that would come to be affiliated with the Free Church in the aftermath of the “Great Disruption.” In making the case for greater democratization, the Browns likened the hierarchical policies employed by Canada’s Tories to those of “Roman and High Church Priests, and Jacobite bigots.” Implicit within this assertion is an intense suspicion of hierarchical forms of church governance, whether Roman Catholic or Episcopalian, which translated into an aversion on the part of these Free Church supporters to perceived oligarchy in the civil sphere.

The Browns’ criticism of authoritarian governance turned on the conviction that this form of political authority was antithetical to the liberties that were enshrined in the British constitution. Britain’s greatness was attributable in their understanding to its broad-minded laws and institutions, which included legal provisions for freedom of conscience and assembly. Indeed, a “free range of intellectual exertion” was instrumental to the remarkable accomplishments of individual Britons, including James Watt’s “wonderful discoveries” and Isaac Newton’s ability to “scale the heavens.” An absence of liberty, by contrast, “cramps the freedom of thought… represses commercial enterprise and industry, and dries up the springs of human understanding.” In addition to being unfounded in the “Word of God,” the oligarchic tendencies exhibited by Upper Canada’s staunchest Tories—who opposed the granting of responsible government—were portrayed by the Browns as inimical to the dynamic, enlightened British tradition.

As strongly intimated in the remarks of both Buchanan and the Browns, the nineteenth-century Canadian Free Church constituency was inclined in many instances toward political liberalism. This was particularly true in Upper Canada, where Free Church supporters, who were concentrated in Toronto and the bustling villages and towns situated to its west, were “largely Liberal” in their political leanings. The Free Church’s liberalism derived from two key impulses: a doctrinal antipathy to ecclesiastical

---

79 *Banner*, 1 September 1843.
80 *Ibid*.
hierarchy and the accompanying spectre of state domination; and an equally emphatic opposition to acts of elite interference in the church’s reputedly inviolate sphere of activity. Drawing on such convictions, Free Church liberalism found expression in demands for the secularization of the Clergy Reserves and in an opposition to the sectarian character of King’s College, Toronto. Both entities were viewed by Free Church adherents, not to mention many other Reform-oriented Upper Canadians, as bulwarks of hierarchy and privilege, and as obstacles to the progressive development of a multi-denominational society.

Upper Canadian Free Church supporters maintained that liquidating the Clergy Reserves endowment and channeling its proceeds into public education would at once do away with a bastion of state-sanctioned religious injustice while simultaneously fostering the educational development of all Upper Canadian children, irrespective of denominational background. Their views on this matter ran contrary to those of political conservatives in the Churches of England and Scotland, who perceived the preservation of the Reserves as essential to the promotion of deference and to the maintenance of social hierarchy. The 1854 settlement, which led to the Reserves’ eventual dissolution, was viewed by Free Church adherents as a disappointment since it permitted clergymen who had traditionally received Clergy Reserves revenues to reinvest their share of the proceeds “by commutation,” thus creating new endowments. The result, in the estimation of the Free Church’s *Evangelical & Missionary Record*, was the “perpetuation of… evils [the complete elimination of which] was long and earnestly sought by a large proportion of the people.” Echoing the *Record’s* sentiments, George Brown’s *Globe* castigated the so-called “commutation clause” as “the very injustice, against which we have desired to guard.” The *de facto* persistence of the Clergy Reserves, which in the Free Church’s view was synonymous with an illiberal religious hierarchy and with civil interference in the church’s sovereign realm, was a source of substantial dissatisfaction for this Presbyterian subgroup.

The Free Church’s liberal tendencies were also evident in the debate over King’s College, Toronto. Members of this Presbyterian faction objected to what they identified

---

82 *Evangelical & Missionary Record*, February 1855, 69.
83 Moir, *Church in the British Era*, 182.
as the institution’s sectarian exclusivity. As an alternative Free Church adherents advocated a non-denominational university that would be open to adherents of all denominations. This included Roman Catholics, despite the fact that members of the Free Church admitted to a “dislike” of that church’s doctrines and liturgies. Liberalism and anti-Catholicism therefore coexisted as influential intellectual impulses within nineteenth-century Canadian Free Church Presbyterianism. Such undisguised disdain from a liberal faction is perhaps less counterintuitive than one might think, given the tendency of the Free Church—not to mention several other mid-nineteenth-century Protestant factions—to criticize Catholicism’s purportedly autocratic system of ecclesiastical polity, and to caricature the Roman Church as Protestantism’s spiritually oppressive antithesis.

Free Church supporters objected to what they identified as a “narrow and contracted” ethos associated with King’s College, which in their conception was antithetical to the “spirit” of both Christianity and “the British Constitution.”

A non-denominational college that was accessible to the entire colonial population would be vastly preferable, Free Church backers maintained. By drawing together students from a multiplicity of religious groups such an institution would contribute to “harmonizing the heterogeneous… elements of which Canadian society is composed.” Indeed, it was felt by Free Church supporters that a non-denominational institution of higher learning would serve as a “great common foundation” upon which an integrated society would ultimately be based. The Free Church’s emphasis on such an objective, based as it was on a progress-oriented egalitarianism and corresponding anti-elitism, attests to the liberal thrust that invigorated this nineteenth-century Presbyterian constituency.

The various factions that comprised nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism differed frequently, profoundly, and in a multiplicity of ways. This fractious tendency was perhaps nowhere more evident than in disputes concerning church-state interactions, with members of the denomination championing everything from establishmentarianism to voluntarism. Presbyterian church-state differences were informed by divergent understandings of the British political tradition, which attests to the potency and protean

---

84 Ecclesiastical and Missionary Record, October 1843.
85 Ibid., January 1848 [“special edition”].
character of the imperial affiliation within the denomination’s mental world. And they were borne out in an equally wide-ranging variety of secular political viewpoints that ran the gamut from conservatism to liberalism.

Yet for all of the undeniable church-state differences that circulated within nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism, a paradoxical politico-religious unity existed within the denominational consciousness as well. While the various factions differed regarding whether or not secular authorities should furnish one or more churches with material assistance and legal privileges, they ultimately sought to deploy the authority of the state in order to establish in northern North America an unambiguously Christian moral order. Within such an order biblical precepts would determine standards in public and private morality, condition the decisions of lawmakers, and buttress the authority of governmental institutions. This impulse found expression in the belief that Christian morality should constitute the foundation of public life, and in an accompanying desire to bring about the eradication of such perceived societal blights as Sabbath desecration and the widespread consumption of alcohol. While they differed as to how this objective should be achieved, nineteenth-century Canada’s various Presbyterian factions coalesced around the notion of a “Christian Nation”

Alexander Mathieson, a Church of Scotland clergyman, viewed the “religious institutions” of a given polity as indispensable to the promotion of virtue and to the preservation of societal order. Statesmen, he stated, would do well to acknowledge “the intimate connection” of secular and religious institutions as “at once the highest glory and the greatest privilege of their nation.”86 It was the duty in Mathieson’s view of “every Christian state” to infuse its civil institutions with Christian morality—indeed, he went as far as to call for Christian principles and ordinances to be made “the foundation of all… public proceedings.” The failure of a given state to draw on Christian teachings in exercising its authority was tantamount to a renunciation of “allegiance to the King of kings,” the inevitable result of which would be the proliferation in society of “the most disgusting fanaticism” and “the most deplorable infidelity.”87

86 PCCA AR5 M6S4, A Sermon, Preached in St. Andrew’s Church, Montreal, on the Thirtieth Day of November, 1836, (St. Andrew’s Day) by the Reverend Alexander Mathieson, A.M. (Minister of that Church, and one of the Chaplains of St. Andrew’s Society, Montreal), 28-9.
87 Ibid., 43-5.
John Machar, Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Canada in Connection with the Church of Scotland, expressed comparable sentiments regarding the importance of making Christianity the foundation of public life. Machar, in a mid-1830s letter to the Upper Canadian Lieutenant-Governor, John Colborne, asserted that there was an “inseparable connexion” between a given community’s spiritual and temporal “prosperity.” The effectiveness of religion, he explained, was greatly enhanced by the “fostering care” of magistrates and civil institutions that acted in accordance with Christian principles. Implicit within this assertion was the belief that a virtuous community was a stable, prosperous community. When Christianity permeated public life, Machar explained, it threw into relief the mutual “political, moral, and religious” obligations that act as “the most intimate and indissoluble bond” between a given community and its government.88

A desire to render Christian morality the foundation of public life informed attitudes within the Canadian Church of Scotland toward such issues as Sabbath desecration and excessive alcohol consumption. Both issues took on enhanced urgency in the eyes of virtually all British North American Christian groups during the mid-nineteenth century. Technological innovations during this period elicited concerns regarding such phenomena as the operation of railway lines on Sundays, while increasing urbanization brought into sharper focus the social ills attendant upon immoderate drinking. While little would be achieved in the way of prohibitory legislation until the late nineteenth century, both issues emerged in this era as compelling concerns for a great many British North American Christians.89

Enhanced emphasis on such issues as Sabbatarianism and Temperance are illustrative of a crucial conceptual shift that occurred within mid-nineteenth-century British North American Christianity. Christian—and, especially, Protestant—groups underwent a transition in this period from an “other-worldly” orientation that entailed deliberately distancing themselves from the affairs of an intrinsically sinful temporal

88 QUA Presbyterian Church of Canada in Connection with the Church of Scotland Fonds, 1818-35. Motions and Minutes, n.d. [1831-5?]. Moderator John Machar to Lieutenant-Governor John Colborne.
89 For further information on nineteenth-century Canadian temperance initiatives see Jan Noel, Canada Dry: Temperance Crusades Before Confederation (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995). For Sabbatarianism see Paul Laverdure, Sunday in Canada: The Rise and Fall of the Lord’s Day (Yorktown, SK: Gravelbooks, 2004).
realm to one that increasingly sought to bring about moral reform through active involvement in the public sphere. Spurred on in their activities by a compelling synthesis of evangelicalism and proto-middle-class social values, many mid-nineteenth-century British North American Protestants strove to create the millennial “Kingdom of God” on earth by launching a vigorous, systematic assault on sinfulness.90

Presbyterians were no exception to this pattern of increased mid-nineteenth-century Protestant activism in the public domain. While Sabbatarian and Temperance campaigns are typically associated with radical denominations like the Baptists and Methodists, Presbyterians certainly participated in such crusades. On balance, however, it was the unabashedly evangelical Secessionist and Free Church constituencies that were the keenest contributors to the moral reform movement. Adherents of the Church of Scotland, for their part, were in many instances suspicious of emotionally unchecked evangelicism, which was widely regarded within this Presbyterian subgroup as religiously anarchic and socially uncouth.91 This sense of suspicion accounts in large part for the Scottish Church’s comparatively tepid attitude toward the causes of heightened Sabbath observance and teetotalism in mid-nineteenth-century British North America.

Yet this is not to suggest that Canadian followers of the Church of Scotland were indifferent to moral campaigns that sought to bring about the Christianization of British North American society. On the contrary, members of this Presbyterian subgroup exhibited explicit support during the mid-nineteenth century for the enforcement of stricter laws regarding both Sabbath observance and the availability of alcohol. Their advocacy for these causes underscores the pronounced extent to which mid-nineteenth-century British North American Presbyterianism was part of the larger pan-Protestant culture that crystallized in this period. It also reflects this Presbyterian faction’s desire to harness the authority of the state as a means of transforming nineteenth-century Canada into a Christian nation.

The Canadian Church of Scotland contingent’s Committee on Sabbath Observance petitioned the provincial legislature in 1861 regarding “the sacred character

91 Moir, Enduring Witness, 124-5.
of the Sabbath as a Divine Institution.” They called for the “abolition of labour on that
day” in all government departments as well as all public works under state control.
Comparable sentiments were conveyed to the heads of major railway and steamboat
companies. The directors of these enterprises were reminded “of the great power
possessed by them in the providence of God” to encourage the “right observance of the
Sabbath,” and were urged to wield their authority in a manner that would shield both
themselves and their fellow British North Americans from the “guilt of desecrating that
day which God, in his wisdom and grace, has authoritatively required all men to keep
holy.”92 The Church of Scotland, in short, implored government officials and the heads of
major transportation companies to take seriously their obligation, as social leaders, to
honour the Sabbath. Doing so would shelter both themselves and the communities in
which they lived from sinfulness and the accompanying stigma of guilt. Members of the
Church of Scotland looked to the state, which possessed the power to suspend labour on
Sundays, as a means of eliciting greater awareness of the crucial importance of rigorous
Sabbath observance.

Church of Scotland attitudes toward temperance campaigns offer further evidence
of this Presbyterian subgroup’s desire to utilize the authority of the state in order to foster
the development in northern North America of a Christian nation. The Reverend William
Bell, who joined the Canadian Church of Scotland contingent in the 1830s, wrote in an
1843 diary entry of a Temperance meeting held that year in eastern Upper Canada in
which members of the Scottish Church participated. An address was delivered by the
Reverend George Romanes, another Church of Scotland Minister, in which he
enumerated what in his understanding were the three fundamental principles upon which
the “Temperance cause” was based: first, that “prevention is better than cure”; second,
that “we are bound to remove all cause of temptation from ourselves and others”; and
lastly, that “intoxicating drinks are not only unnecessary, but pernicious.”93 The fact that
Church of Scotland clergy were in favour of curbing access to alcohol, and were
convinced of the necessity of removing “temptation” from both themselves and others,
suggests that members of this Presbyterian subgroup were at least open to the possibility

92 The Presbyterian, October 1861, 158.
93 QUA William Bell Diaries, volume 4, April 1843.
of sweeping legislation that would constrain the production, distribution, and consumption of strong drink.

While they espoused markedly different ideas when it came to church-state relations, adherents of the Secessionist tradition echoed their establishmentarian co-religionists in calling for the transformation of nineteenth-century Canada into a Christian nation. Adherents of this Presbyterian constituency called for the creation of a society in which religious principles would inform the actions of public officials and institutions and the authority of the state would be deployed in order to promote more rigorous standards in popular piety. Skeptical though they were of secular intrusions into the sacred sphere, Secessionist Presbyterians nevertheless looked to governmental agencies as so many mechanisms through which nineteenth-century Canada’s fundamentally Christian character could be affirmed and perpetuated.

The Secessionist Canadian Presbyterian Magazine declared in 1855 that, “the Almighty sustains a moral relation to nations.” This assertion was predicated on the belief that a potentially vengeful God metes out punishments to wayward communities in the same way that he chastises sinful individuals. Thus, when a given nation’s laws “give sanction or encouragement” to such societal ills as “atheism or superstition… gambling or licentiousness… Sabbath-breaking or slavery, or any sort of injustice or oppression,” it invariably “stands chargeable with guilt in the sight of God.” Failure to eradicate such evils, the author continued, constituted instances “of national sin, which if persevered in… must without fail bring down the vengeance of heaven upon the guilty nation.” It was thus the responsibility of any pious state to formulate and abide by laws that encourage virtue and discourage vice so as to avoid divinely administered chastisement, which could be visited upon both individual sinners and entire communities.94

It followed in the Secessionists’ understanding that there was a need for godly public officials to ensure that the laws and institutions of the state maintained the highest standards in Christian morality. Accordingly, the Magazine called in 1851 for zealous Christians “to stand at the next election as Members for Parliament.” Once empowered, such figures would have the opportunity to craft and enforce legislation that would bring about British North American society’s Christianization. With this fundamental objective

94 Canadian Presbyterian Magazine, January 1855, 13.
in mind, the Magazine asserted in no uncertain terms that it hoped to see “Christian men” assume public office, ones who took their political and ethical cues “from the Bible—the statute-book of Heaven.” The result of their election to office would be the infusion of scriptural tenets and injunctions into public life, the very essence of which would be made palpably Christian. Plainly, then, voluntaristic convictions did not stand in the way of Secessionist Presbyterians’ calling for the injection of Christian morality into British North America’s public life.

The Secessionists’ campaign to transform nineteenth-century Canada into a Christian Nation in which religious virtue would suffuse the socio-political order was reflected in their attitudes toward both Sabbath observance and Temperance campaigns. When it came to both phenomena, members of this Presbyterian subgroup sought to utilize the power of the state in order to purge society of sinfulness. Much more so than their establishmentarian counterparts, their arguments on these matters derived enhanced fervour from an evangelical zeal.

The Canadian Presbyterian Magazine observed in 1843 that the Sabbath was “given to man before he fell.” If Sabbath observance was necessary before that event, the Secessionist organ asserted, it must be infinitely more so “now that he has become a sinner, ignorant, apt to forget God.” Human beings, on account of their innate sinfulness, routinely disobeyed God’s injunction to honour the Sabbath. It was therefore necessary for the state to intervene so as to discourage transgressors from violating a divine commandment. In view of the fact that God sustains a “moral relation to nations,” failure to curb Sabbath desecration through the enforcement of prohibitory laws designed to counter humanity’s intrinsic predisposition toward sinfulness would likely result in punitive manifestations of divine disappointment.

Secessionist Presbyterians expressed comparable sentiments regarding the necessity of curbing Sabbath desecration in an 1851 petition to the Canadian Legislative Assembly. The Sabbath, members of the Secessionist United Presbyterian Synod observed, is a “divine institution, given to man while in a state of primeval perfection.” If it was necessary to set aside a day for rest and reflection when humanity was in such a

---

95 Ibid., August 1851.
96 Ibid., March 1843, 13.
glorious state, the petition implied, it was all the more so subsequent to Adam’s fateful act of disobedience in the Garden of Eden. The Sabbath, the petition added, ought to be observed by individuals “in their private, professional, and commercial relations.” This injunction extended to the activities of government. It was necessary, the petitioners’ explained, to view the “the transaction of business” in any “Public Departments” on the Sabbath “as sinful as it relates to God, unjust as it relates to man, and as setting a bad example to the entire community.” The petitioners concluded by asserting that, in order to promote humanity’s “spiritual… good” and maintain “our country’s reputation and prosperity,” governmental activity should be legally prohibited on that day. To allow the state and its officials, who represented the wider community, to function on the Sabbath was in the Secessionists’ view an affront to none other than God himself.97

The Secessionists’ desire to utilize the state’s authority in order to Christianize British North American society extended to Temperance campaigns as well. Members of this Presbyterian subgroup denounced immoderate alcohol consumption for engendering humanity’s degradation. This pernicious tendency, one Secessionist observer noted, was evident in the drunkard’s “bloated countenance… trembling, palsied limbs… poverty… [and] despair.” Particularly heart-rending from the Secessionists’ perspective was the fact that drunkenness eliminated “the light of understanding and conscience” instilled in individuals by God. Consequently, the drunkard’s status “as among God’s rational creatures” was lost, as he assumed “his place among brutes.”98 Similar to many other British North American Christian groups, Secessionist Presbyterians criticized excessive alcohol consumption’s capacity for bringing about humanity’s debasement. They called for the deployment of the prohibitory power of the state in an attempt to counter its harmful societal effects.

The Secessionists’ desire to channel the authority of the state in order to curb immoderate alcohol consumption was evident in the 1855 remarks of an unnamed clergyman drawn from this Presbyterian subgroup. The minister, reflecting on a layover that he had taken in a hotel in Napanee, Canada West, recalled “with special pity” an encounter with several young males “of genteel exterior, in manifest haste to become men

97 Ibid., October 1851.
98 Canadian United Presbyterian Magazine, October 1854.
of a certain and unreputable character.”99 “There is something peculiarly painful to the pious and patriotic,” the observer noted, “to witness… such conduct on the part of the young,” who represented in the minister’s estimation “the hope of the Church and the country.” After lamenting the imminent degradation of these young men, the observer proceeded to rail against the ills of alcohol. The government’s willingness to permit its sale and distribution was nothing short of “monstrous and politically insane,” constituting as it purportedly did the most efficacious device ever created “by men or devils, for destroying… individual and social peace and prosperity [and] for securing the moral debasement and physical degradation of a community.” The observer denounced what were seen as Canada’s deplorably permissive liquor laws, which amounted to a “disgrace to our country and our age.” The best means by which to prevent further deterioration, the author concluded, was “Prohibition”—indeed, binding measures designed to suppress alcohol’s distribution and consumption were deemed to be a social “necessity.”100

Adherents of the Free Church, for their part, echoed their establishmentarian and voluntaristic co-religionists in calling for the creation in British North America of a Christian nation. Much like their fellow Church of Scotland and Secessionist Presbyterians, they advocated a cultural and constitutional arrangement in which Christianity would constitute the foundation of public life and the authority of the state would be harnessed in order to achieve more rigorous standards in popular morality.

One Free Church observer, writing in the winter of 1850, argued that British North American society should formally “acknowledge God and honour His Son.” Doing so in the author’s view required basing “the whole structure of the political fabric… [on] a recognition of God’s word, and on the Christian law.”101 The author went as far as to assert that nations and their “rulers” are “guilty of criminal disregard of the Divine authority” when they fail to entrench in their statutes and governmental institutions the “the morality of God’s word and the ethics of Christianity.” The Gospels in the Free Church’s estimation should underpin public life. Once this was achieved, scriptural precepts and injunctions would come to dictate standards in personal morality, determine the decisions of public officials, and buttress the authority of governmental agencies.

99 Canadian Presbyterian Magazine, December 1855, 356.
100 Ibid.
101 Ecclesiastical and Missionary Record, February 1850, 56.
The Free Church’s conception of a Christian nation, similar to members of the Church of Scotland and the Secessionist tradition, manifested itself in objections to Sabbath desecration and widespread alcohol consumption. One Free Church observer, writing in the mid-1840s, observed that the “Sabbath is frequently desecrated by the visiting of friends or the receiving of visitors, without any spiritual end in view.” Such a tendency, the author noted, was disconcerting for several reasons—namely, it “tends to destroy any good impression made upon those persons by the public services in which may have engaged, to indispose their minds for further duty, to bring guilt upon the conscience, and to expose the soul to spiritual barrenness.” “Vital religion,” the author added, will proliferate in Canadian society only when individual sinners “devote their whole attention on the Sabbath to spiritual things, and to the public and private duties enjoined in the Word of God.”102 Widespread Sabbath desecration, expressed in irreverent socializing, was thus criticized as an obstacle to increased popular virtue and Christian solemnity among the Canadian populace.

Free Church Presbyterians looked to the state as a means of promoting heightened Sabbath observance and, with it, enhanced societal virtue. Concerns regarding the alleged pervasiveness of Sunday labour on the part of governmental officials prompted this Presbyterian subgroup to urge the state to rein in acts of publicly sanctioned Sabbath desecration. A Canadian Free Church publication, the Ecclesiastical & Missionary Record, observed in an 1854 editorial that a society that purports to “recognize God” should not “[go] so far as to compel [its] public servants to violate his Holy day.” Such a practice was in the Free Church’s view regrettably pervasive. The Canadian state was consequently “robbing both God and man” of greater piety, thus “directly committing a sin, which is a reproach to any people.”103 It was necessary in the author’s view for the state to put an end to the practice of public officials labouring on Sundays, which amounted to a communal display of irreligion. Failure to curb this pernicious tendency, in view of God’s capacity for meting out punishments on sinful communities, would likely precipitate manifestations of divine disapproval.

102 Ibid., August 1845, 107.
103 Ibid., February 1854, 57.
Followers of the Presbyterian Free Church also looked to the state to curb alcohol consumption. An editorial published in an 1849 edition of the *Ecclesiastical & Missionary Record* described pervasive drunkenness as a “sin” that has “fixed a stain upon our national character.” So egregious was the problem that “strangers” visiting Canada were inclined to view the colony “unfavourably” in comparison with the United States. The reason? The profusion in Canada of “low tippling houses,” which were purportedly condoned “by an almost indiscriminate system of licensing.” The editorial, betraying an evangelical Protestant belief in the Bible’s indispensable importance to individual and communal redemption, was quick to point out that “nothing but the gospel” could bring about the eradication of such societal blights as widespread drunkenness. It added, however, that “prudential external rules” deployed by pious authorities could function as “instruments” in God’s “hand,” ultimately contributing to the “moral regeneration of souls.” Thus, while public officials “cannot make a drunkard a sober-man, they may do much toward making him so, by removing temptations, and abridging the opportunities of gratifying his depraved appetite.” Responding to a similar politico-religious impetus, an editorial published in the same journal the next year called for the implementation of legislation that would bring about the “entire suppression of the traffic in intoxicating drinks as a beverage.” Thus, while individual piety and vigilance were vital to a “drunkard’s” moral regeneration, the state in the Free Church’s estimation could—indeed, should—play a supporting role in this critically important process.

The congregation of Hamilton, Canada West’s Central Presbyterian Church, a “Free Kirk” congregation, expressed its support for the introduction of legal impediments to the distribution and consumption of alcohol in the winter of 1858. Describing the “present traffic in intoxicating liquors” as inimical to the “social, industrial, and moral” welfare of the community, members of the congregational Session unanimously called for “the suppression of the traffic and for the discontinuance of the use of intoxicating drink.” It was necessary in their estimation to unleash the authority of governmental

---

104 Ibid., November 1849, 7.
105 Ibid.
106 Ibid., February 1850, 57.
officials and institutions in order to counter the degrading effects of widespread drunkenness.\footnote{PCCA 1973-8022 (incorrectly listed as 1973-8002); Hamilton, Ontario. 1841-1990. Central Presbyterian Church Session Minutes, 18 February 1858.}

Perhaps no issue was a greater source of intra-Presbyterian disunity in nineteenth-century Canada than that of church-state relations. Differing politico-religious philosophies transmitted from Scotland to British North America pertaining to whether or not civil authorities should involve themselves in the church’s sacred sphere of activity militated against intra-denominational harmony. Aggravating cleavages regarding this matter were division-inducing circumstances unique to British North America, the most glaring example of which was the Upper Canadian Clergy Reserves endowment. This combination of factors—differing Old World philosophies and division-inducing New World circumstances—accounts in large part for the fundamental and persistent rifts that existed within nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism when it came to the church-state relationship.

While politico-religious schisms existed throughout nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism, divisions were particularly pronounced in the colony of Upper Canada. By the mid-nineteenth century three distinct politico-religious philosophies existed within that colony: members of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, conceiving of themselves as a legally established entity, advocated close church-state ties; followers of the Presbyterian Secessionist tradition, who frequently drew on the politico-religious doctrine of voluntarism, insisted on the absolute separation of sacred and secular realms; and supporters of the Presbyterian Free Church, which emerged in the aftermath of the Scottish “Disruption” of 1843, exalted an arrangement in which the state is charged with supporting the church but is prohibited from becoming involved in any other capacity in its affairs. These differing church-state outlooks were informed by widely divergent interpretations of the British political tradition, which testifies to the elasticity and abiding importance of imperial enthusiasm within the denominational imagination. And they manifested themselves in an equally wide variety of secular political ideologies that ranged from hidebound conservatism to unabashed liberalism.
Yet for all of the inarguable politico-religious differences that circulated within nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism, a paradoxical unity regarding church-state relations can be seen as existing within the denomination as well. Although the various Presbyterian factions differed—often dramatically—over whether or not civil authorities should materially support the church, they ultimately shared a desire to harness the power of government. They aimed to create in northern North America a decidedly Christian moral order in which scriptural precepts and ordinances would suffuse society and acts of Sabbath desecration and drunkenness would be sharply curtailed. Nineteenth-century Canada’s various Presbyterian factions, in the last analysis, coalesced around visions of a “Christian Nation.”

Nineteenth-century church-state debates, bound up as they were with constitutional minutiae and arcane legislative maneuverings, can perhaps be dismissed as one of the more soporific aspects of Canada’s past. Yet one could plausibly arrive at a dramatically different understanding of their significance as well. Disputes pertaining to the involvement of civil authorities in the church’s sacred sphere of activity, which were compounded by lingering Old World ideologies and by divisive New World peculiarities, intersected with such critically important ethical considerations as justice, equality, respectability, and the extent to which governmental agencies should assume responsibility for fostering popular virtue. And they brought into focus the existence in northern North America of struggles between such competing ideologies as establishmentarianism and voluntarism and conservatism and liberalism for control of the commanding heights of politico-religious authority. Given these heady circumstances it is hardly surprising that church-state quarrels elicited substantial controversy throughout British North America during the first half of the nineteenth century. An examination of the conceptual underpinnings of such disputes sheds important light on the attitudes of nineteenth-century Canadians—including Presbyterians—toward religion, politics, and the complex interplay between the two.
Chapter Three: Beneath the Canopy of Heaven: Nature, Order, and the Presbyterian Conception of the Northern North American Wilderness

The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.  
—Isaiah 40:3

Nature seen as dead, or alive but indifferent, or alive and actively hostile towards man is a common image in Canadian literature. The result of a dead or indifferent Nature is an isolated or “alienated” man; the result of an actively hostile Nature is usually a dead man, and certainly a threatened one.  

An editorial published in the July 1855 edition of the *Home & Foreign Missionary Record of the Free Church of Scotland* described the bustling settlements sprawled along the banks of Lake Huron as “a smiling scene” of villages. So swift was their development that it was as though they had been brought forth instantaneously from the land by the stroke of an “enchanter’s wand.” The author excitedly added that, on account of the brisk, seemingly irreversible pace at which the region was progressing, “the wilderness” was receding and “man,” spurred on by “his hopes, his activities, and his destiny,” was inexorably “taking its place.”

Blunting the editorial’s enthusiasm, however, was an unmistakably solemn sense of moral obligation. The author took pains to emphasize the necessity of bringing Presbyterianism’s spiritually nourishing doctrines not only to the budding villages situated along the shores of Lake Huron, but to the rapidly multiplying frontier communities scattered throughout the British North American colonies. “A glance at what is going on in this part of Canada,” the author stated, provides the metropolitan observer with “no mean idea of the mighty future in reserve for the people beyond the Atlantic,” and brings into focus the profound importance of our church’s “colonial scheme.”

To the author’s sentiments were added the agitated remarks of an unnamed Presbyterian minister, who was labouring within the region itself. Writing from Southampton, Canada West, the minister decried the lack of Presbyterian clergy in the area, lamenting that he was separated by a distance of approximately thirty miles from

---

1 *Home & Foreign Missionary Record of the Free Church of Scotland*, July 1855, 330-1.
the nearest permanently settled clergyman. It was imperative that Presbyterian missionaries undertake to “enter upon [that] field” with alacrity and determination, the minister asserted. Failure to do so would result in the settlers being deprived of Presbyterianism’s incomparably righteous tenets and traditions. Nothing less than the fate of the settlers’ immortal souls, then, was thought to be at stake. Underscoring the importance of promulgating the Gospels as vigorously as possible along the colonial frontier, the minister impatiently asserted that “[what] we need for this land—and indeed for all lands—is men of energy—men of piety—men of prudence—men of prayer—in short, men of God. May the Lord of the Vineyard,” he concluded, alluding to the evocatively apt biblical allegory, “thrust forth labourers into the field, white unto the harvest.”

Language and imagery that invoked aspects of the natural world—as evidenced by the author’s description of the retreat of the “wilderness” as well as in the minister’s emphasis on such terms as “vineyard,” “field,” and “harvest”—enjoyed pride of place within nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism’s mental world. This was especially true when it came to the denomination’s efforts to subdue what they identified as the untamed northern North American environment. Yet it is important to recognize that within the Presbyterian imagination the uncultivated natural world was more than simply a formidable physical reality with which settlers, missionaries, and pioneer ministers alike were frequently forced to contend. The wilderness—which was interpreted as a moral as well as a physical entity—also existed within the denominational consciousness as a metaphor for zealous Presbyterians’ desire to assert spiritual sovereignty over northern North America.

This impulse dovetailed with the Presbyterians’ vision of an expansive godly polity in which biblical tenets and ordinances would suffuse society and determine standards in both public and private morality. The Presbyterians’ desire to promote Protestant precepts and practices throughout northern North America was mapped out by members of the denomination onto their conception of the natural world. That is, their desire to bring about the Christianization of nineteenth-century Canadian society was mirrored by a desire to subdue what adherents of the denomination identified as the

---

2 Ibid., 331.
anarchic wilderness. The Presbyterians ultimately sought to transform the undomesticated environment into an orderly New Eden.

The early Canadian Presbyterians’ efforts to tame northern North America’s alleged waste places qualifies the notion that members of the denomination were unenthusiastic when it came to the issue of missionary endeavour. The argument has been made that, when it came to propagating Christian tenets and traditions in backwoods communities, Presbyterians exhibited substantially less missionary fervour than groups like the Methodists, who reputedly possessed a “genius” for adapting to challenging cultural and environmental circumstances in rough-hewn northern North American settings. Observers have attributed the Presbyterians’ supposedly tepid approach to the propagation of Christianity in backwoods communities to several phenomena, including an insistence on the part of the denomination’s leadership that ministers obtain a formal education prior to entering the mission field; and the time-consuming establishment of Presbyterianism’s distinctive system of church polity, which reputedly inhibited the ability of the denomination’s standard-bearers to move quickly from one spiritually starved community to another. The alleged result was a “lack of missionary spirit” that contrasted with the enthusiastic exertions of other denominations.3

The sustained emphasis placed by members of the denomination on the wilderness motif counters such an interpretation. Though groups like the Methodists may well have been quicker off the mark when it came to pursuing the evangelization of backwoods communities, the tremendous stress placed by Presbyterians on the wilderness theme reveals a deep-seated desire on the part of the denomination’s membership to bring about the moral transformation of nineteenth-century Canadian society. Ardent early Canadian Presbyterians were determined to assert spiritual sovereignty over northern North America through the propagation of the denomination’s distinctive doctrines and liturgies, thus contributing to the reconciliation of nature and divinity.

3 S.D. Clark, Church and Sect in Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1948), 133. See also Fred Landon, Western Ontario and the American Frontier (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1967 [1941]), 104-5. British North America’s Protestants were by no means unique in their efforts to promote Christianity in backwoods settings. For the involvement of a prominent Roman Catholic in such activities see Mark G. McGowan, Michael Power: The Struggle to Build the Catholic Church on the Canadian Frontier (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005), especially chapter three.
Zealous Presbyterians were hardly exceptional when it came to their desire to promote Christian principles and practices throughout nineteenth-century Canadian society. Other denominations—including such hard-driving evangelical groups as the Methodists—envisioned a similarly dramatic metamorphosis, calling for the infusion of Christian morality into virtually every aspect of northern North American society. Such demands for moral reform became increasingly shrill during the mid-nineteenth century. The inter-denominational squabbling that had plagued British North American Protestantism throughout the first half of the century—as epitomized by the protracted struggles that surrounded the church-state controversy—gave way in this era to a comparatively coherent pan-Protestant culture. Following the settlement of such rancorous church-state quarrels as the Upper Canadian Clergy Reserves dispute many British North American Protestants managed to coalesce in the mid-nineteenth century around the objective of moral reform. This yearning for ethical improvement manifested itself in two principal impulses—first, an intensified campaign against such longstanding evangelical concerns as Sabbath desecration and the widespread consumption and distribution of alcohol; and second, a more recent yet equally fervent opposition to the institution of slavery in the southern United States and the rise of reputedly despotic ultramontane Catholicism within western Christendom. The result was the emergence of a Protestant culture that drew together adherents of differing denominational traditions, and that increasingly conceived of itself as an island of decency and virtue amid a sea of sinfulness and moral decay.⁴


In what sense, then, were Presbyterian contributions to nineteenth-century Canadian moral reform crusades unique? In which ways, if any, did adherents of the denomination differ from other Protestant groups when it came to their desire to bring about the proliferation throughout northern North American society of Christian virtue? The Presbyterians’ desire to purge nineteenth-century Canada of sinfulness admittedly overlapped in important ways with the views and actions of several of their Protestant counterparts, particularly during the mid-nineteenth century. The Presbyterians’ efforts to promote heightened standards in popular morality were unique inasmuch as they expressed themselves in an unyielding Calvinistic morality and in a pronounced emphasis on the denomination’s distinctive liturgical practices. Nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians therefore differed from their Protestant counterparts not in their desire to render northern North American society more virtuous, but rather in the means by which they hoped to realize that objective.

Presbyterian efforts to bring about the moral transformation of nineteenth-century Canadian society found expression in a two-pronged strategy. The first component involved the widespread diffusion of Presbyterian doctrine. This would be accomplished, members of the denomination reasoned, through the exertions of Presbyterian missionaries and pioneer ministers that had been dispatched to religiously neglected hinterland communities. This aspect of the Presbyterians’ strategy entailed efforts to promote the denomination’s doctrines among religiously neglected North Americans of British birth or descent as well as certain Aboriginal Nations, whose culture Presbyterian missionaries aimed to transform.

Adherents of the denomination believed that the propagation of Presbyterian principles throughout the British North American backwoods would result in an audible transition. That is, zealous members of the denomination felt that as Presbyterian doctrines came to permeate sparsely populated frontier settlements irreverent sounds of merrymaking and Sabbath desecration would be replaced by either pious stillness or vocal articulations of Christian zeal. The penetration of Presbyterian doctrines into remote northern North American settings was also associated within the denominational imagination with material advancement, which was identified as a corollary to the propagation within spiritually starved communities of Christian tenets and traditions.
Ardent nineteenth-century members of the denomination believed that patterns of economic progress and civic sophistication inevitably accompanied the proliferation throughout northern North America of an uncompromising Protestant virtue, an outlook that meshed with a broader emphasis throughout much of the western world during this period on the righteousness and necessity of economic and technological “improvement.”

The second component of the Presbyterian campaign to bring about the moral transformation of nineteenth-century Canadian society centred on the implementation of the denomination’s distinctive liturgical traditions. This aspect of the Presbyterian program was spectacularly exhibited in “communion festivals” in which the sacrament was administered to congregants outdoors beneath what was commonly described as “the canopy of heaven.” It was also evident in the formation and activities of disciplinary church, or “kirk,” courts of session. These institutions, which aimed to promote heightened standards in popular morality, chastised alleged transgressors for such perceived ethical offences as illicit sexual activity and drunkenness. Such measures served to consolidate the denomination’s moral influence within northern North America’s embryonic villages and burgeoning towns. They also nurtured a sense of cultural cohesiveness among Presbyterian immigrants and their North American-born descendants through the perpetuation of metropolitan traditions that had been planted anew in Britain’s North American colonies.

The Presbyterians’ two-pronged campaign to bring about the moral transformation of nineteenth-century Canadian society attests to the denomination’s desire to facilitate God’s achievement of spiritual dominion over what was widely interpreted as the northern North American wilderness. In seeking to subdue what members of the denomination viewed as the uncultivated environment, zealous Presbyterians felt that they were contributing to the reconciliation of the natural world and its omnipotent creator. It will be argued in this chapter that the wilderness theme functioned within the Presbyterian imagination as a catalytic metaphor for the

---

denomination’s desire to render virtuous northern North America’s reputedly untamed waste places and Christianize nineteenth-century Canadian society.

Two qualifications are in order before we delve into nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism’s two-pronged campaign to render submissive the natural northern North American environment. First, it is important to note that “wilderness” existed within the denominational consciousness as a malleable imaginative construct. As mentioned, the northern North American wilderness was perceived by Presbyterians as both a physical and a moral entity. It also lacked a fixed geographic location. Wilderness, depending on the era, could be located in a variety of settings ranging from the undomesticated recesses of early nineteenth-century Nova Scotia to the sparsely populated hinterland communities of the late nineteenth-century Canadian west. Yet the ill-defined nature of the wilderness construct did not detract from its rhetorical and symbolic forcefulness. On the contrary, its malleability allowed it to be deployed for differing reasons, and in differing chronological and geographic contexts. This lack of definition ultimately enhanced the effectiveness of the wilderness as a metaphor for the Presbyterians’ desire to propagate an unalloyed Protestant piety throughout northern North America.

Second, it should be noted that the very idea of a northern North American wilderness is itself a fraught notion, given its implicit disregard for the sophistication of North America’s Aboriginal societies. Nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians—much like members of other Euro-Canadian groups, religious and secular—viewed remote territories that lacked western institutions and substantial white-skinned populations as uncultivated physical environments, as evidenced by the frequency with which they deployed the term “wilderness.” Such an interpretation obscures the agency and cultural complexity of northern North America’s indigenous inhabitants, many of whom inhabited lands that were viewed by European and Euro-Canadian observers as entirely undomesticated. To suggest that North America’s Aboriginals lived on pristine “virgin land,” as Richard White and William Cronon have observed, “not only ignores the human influences that had long reshaped pre-Columbian North America but also
‘naturalizes’ Indians in a way that denies both their histories and their cultures.”6 North America’s Aboriginals employed sophisticated agricultural techniques for centuries prior to the arrival beginning in the early modern era of European colonizers. As a result of their efforts, significant changes were wrought in the land. This chapter therefore conceives of the term “wilderness” not as a verifiable reality, but rather as a salient abstraction that brought substantial influence to bear on the attitudes and actions of Canadian Presbyterians throughout the nineteenth century.

The Presbyterians’ two-pronged strategy to achieve moral dominion over northern North America’s untamed outer reaches was formulated in response to the perceived challenges posed by the natural environment itself, which was perceived as a sinful space in which chaos and depravity proliferated. Nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterian attitudes toward the natural world fit comfortably within a western intellectual tradition that has tended to perceive the undomesticated environment as subordinate to the sphere of human existence and enterprise. “[A]lmost from the onset,” Max Oelschlaeger has argued, western culture “has thought of nature as designed for the human species.”7 Due to the Fall, he elaborates, the Edenic paradise benevolently set aside for humankind by God was purportedly lost. The untamed environment therefore came to be seen throughout much of western society not only as flawed, but also as inferior to the essential metaphysical sequence of sin, redemption, and salvation. Oelschlaeger goes as far as to assert that, under the auspices of the western intellectual tradition, the

---


purportedly corrupt natural world has frequently been viewed antagonistically—that is, as an adversary that is to be struggled against and wrestled into a state of submission.⁸

Oelschlaeger’s arguments regarding the antagonistic manner in which much of western society has traditionally viewed the undomesticated natural world are consonant with those of Roderick Nash. In *Wilderness and the American Mind* Nash posits that within the Judeo-Christian tradition wilderness has rarely been viewed as something to be valued on its own accord. Rather, it has frequently been portrayed as a wasteland that is isolated from humanity and forsaken by God. While, to be sure, wilderness occupies a prominent position within both the Hebraic and Christian narratives—as the site of the Israelites’ wanderings for forty years following their flight from Egyptian captivity and as the place where Jesus was tested for forty days following his baptism in the River of Jordan, respectively—Nash maintains that it was deemed valuable only insofar as it was an unoccupied area that afforded both entities an opportunity to undergo processes of catharsis, and to be made ready for their glorious destinies. Assessed strictly on its own merits, however, there has traditionally been in Nash’s understanding “little fondness” within the western cultural tradition for the untamed environment itself.⁹

---

⁸ Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*.
⁹ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 16.

The writings of Frederick Jackson Turner are illustrative of the western tendency to view the natural world as subordinate to the sphere of human activity. Occasioned by the official closing of the American frontier, 1893’s elegiac “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” posited that North America’s uncultivated western periphery provided the United States throughout its history with an indispensable reservoir of national vigour. The challenges posed by a rugged frontier existence furnished the westward-bound American pioneer—and, by extension, the expanding American nation—with an energizing alternative to the excessive cultivation, decadence, and effeminacy that in Turner’s conception inevitably afflicted densely populated metropolitan societies. Yet while Turner celebrated the frontier as a perpetual catalyst for national regeneration, he refrained from appreciating it on its own terms. The untamed natural environment was thought to be valuable in his view not because of its own intrinsic characteristics, but rather because of its purportedly indispensable contribution to the American republic’s attainment of national greatness. Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in *The Frontier in American History* ed., Turner (New York Holt, Rinehart, and Winslow, 1962).

It is arguably within the domain of religious scholarship that the “Canadian experience” has been depicted as cleaving closest to the contours of Turner’s “frontier thesis.” The influence of the “frontier” paradigm is evident, for example, in the writings of Canadian church historian Edmund H. Oliver, who contended that Canada’s untamed western periphery functioned as the site of Christian civilization’s triumph over the chaos and moral waywardness that had hitherto suffused the undomesticated environment. Edmund H. Oliver, *The Winning of the Frontier* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1930). See also Clark, *Church and Sect in Canada*.

J.M.S. Careless put forth a formidable rejoinder to Turner’s “frontier thesis,” arguing in 1954 that North America’s undomesticated western fringe cannot exist as a site of innovation and invigoration without the indispensable resources, capital, and infrastructure of the eastern metropolis. Careless,
The attitudes expressed by nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians accord well with the antagonistic western conception of the untamed environment. Adherents of the denomination, comparable to members of other groups both religious and secular, frequently portrayed the natural northern North American environment as a harsh physical wilderness that was to be struggled against and eventually rendered submissive. For example, the early Presbyterian inhabitants of Pictou, Nova Scotia—many of whom were British immigrants—allegedly met with great “toil and privation” in their attempts in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to subdue the natural northeastern North American landscape. A dense “primeval forest” impeded their efforts to cultivate the terrain, while the cold winters were thought to be “[of] a severity of which they had in the old country no conception.” Colonial Nova Scotia’s environmental circumstances—which were explicitly described by members of the denomination as a “wilderness”—were therefore thought by at least one Presbyterian observer to be “truly appalling.”

Presbyterians situated in Upper Canada lamented the harshness of the northern North American environment as well. The Reverend David McAllister of Lanark, Upper Canada expressed frustration regarding the colony’s seemingly endless forests, lamenting in an 1831 exchange with a Glaswegian colleague that the terrain was “unvaried and exceedingly confined—nothing but trees, trees, trees continually.” Due to their prevalence and height, he added, Upper Canada’s vast wooded areas were virtually impenetrable and, worse, intolerably “dreary.” Such unfavourable environmental circumstances prompted McAllister to conclude that only men of “decided piety” would be able to endure the numerous hardships that characterized life in the British North American backwoods.

Yet in addition to viewing northern North America’s natural environment as a forbidding physical wilderness, nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians conceived of

---


it as a God-forsaken moral wilderness as well. An absence of Christianity rendered the natural terrain in the opinion of numerous Presbyterian observers on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean an anarchic geographic expanse over which disorder and depravity held virtually uninterrupted sway. The supposed unrulefulness of remote communities, in conjunction with the orthodox Calvinistic belief in humanity’s innate depravity, elicited substantial uneasiness in the minds of nineteenth-century Presbyterians when it came to the spiritual welfare of their co-religionists struggling to make do along the northern North American frontier.

Indicative of this sense of uneasiness are the observations of the Presbyterian missionary James Fettes, whose remarks regarding the immorality that reputedly pervaded rough-hewn northern North American communities betray an unmistakably Calvinistic worldview. He noted in April of 1848 that the essential “moral, spiritual, and mental” character of the typical Canadian settler could most accurately be viewed not in cities or towns, but in what he described as “the bush.” Within Canada’s “partially cleared and settled districts,” Fettes elaborated, “all those influences, which restrain open vice in cities, are removed, [and] human nature is found in all its naked deformity and degradation.” The dreadfulness of the situation in Fettes’ view could scarcely be overstated. Given the dearth of religious authority and the corresponding pervasiveness of “evil” within British North America’s frontier settlements, he asserted that he had frequently “been made to tremble” for the fate of the inhabitants’ “immortal souls.”

The remedy to this anxiety-provoking scenario, Fettes stated, was a vigorous campaign of evangelism that would make its way into geographically peripheral northern North American communities. Failure to act quickly would result in the intensification of sinfulness and religious apathy within such settings, he cautioned. “Canada [will] never be evangelised,” Fettes concluded, “nor the wants of her people, as regards either mental or spiritual instruction, at all adequately met,” until determined Christian missionaries, educators, and clergymen render submissive “her forest settlements.”

Comparable sentiments regarding the alleged prevalence of sinfulness within British North America’s hinterland regions were expressed by the Nova Scotia

---

12 The Presbyterian, April 1848, 51.
13 Ibid., 52.
Presbyterian minister and educator Thomas McCulloch in an early nineteenth-century address to the United Presbyterian Synod of Scotland, a metropolitan body. McCulloch’s objective in composing the address was to elicit enthusiasm and financial support among Scottish Presbyterians for Pictou Academy, a fledgling educational institution with which he was actively involved. Nova Scotia is portrayed within the address as a physical and moral wasteland in desperate need of Christian enlightenment. Describing the colony as “a wilderness and solitary place,” McCulloch noted that with the exception of a few “miserable patches” of territory that had been reclaimed from the forest it contained scant evidence of either cultural “civilization” or economic “improvement.” He implored his metropolitan co-religionists to support Pictou Academy by showering “the rays of science” and the “sun of righteousness” upon their fellow Presbyterians struggling to “subdue the forest” on the British Empire’s outskirts. McCulloch concluded by asserting that it was in the power of his metropolitan counterparts to bring about the moral transformation of the “solitudes” of Nova Scotia’s untamed territories, which in turn would “make the wilderness glad.”

Likewise, an editorial published in the February 1846 edition of the Ecclesiastical & Missionary Record of the Free Church of Canada stressed the importance of extending Presbyterian missionary efforts to Canada’s spiritually neglected hinterland regions. For the author, religious “destitution” prevailed over the colony’s “vast fields,” as evidenced by the fact that the Christian Gospels had seldom if ever been heard within many of Canada West’s backwoods communities. The author called for the creation of “Ladies’ Missionary Societies” within individual Canadian Presbyterian congregations that would be devoted to raising funds in support of the efforts of the denomination’s evangelists serving in northern North America’s sparsely populated settlements.

Following the editorial was a missive penned by the “Female Association” of Knox’s Church, Toronto and addressed to the Presbyterian Female Colonial Committee of Edinburgh, Scotland. The authors’ remarks stressed the necessity of propagating Christianity—and especially Presbyterianism—among the inhabitants of embryonic

14 NSARM Thomas McCulloch papers, 554, 37; Address to United Presbyterian Synod, Scotland on behalf of Pictou Academy. “Remarks Upon the Religion and Education of Nova Scotia from the time of its occupation by the British till the present. Undated, unpaginated.
15 Ibid.
16 Ecclesiastical & Missionary Record, February 1846, 162.
settlements scattered throughout the Canadian wilderness. The colony’s spiritual
destitution was attributable in their view not to a lack of religious enthusiasm on the part
of the settlers, but rather to a lack of clergy serving in remote Canadian communities. “It
is not that ministers are waiting for people,” the authors explained, “but [that] people are
waiting for ministers—flocks are gathered, but there are no shepherds.” Given these
distressing circumstances, they noted that many of Canada’s rough-hewn settlements
amounted to little more than a spiritual “wilderness.” The authors concluded by urging
their Scottish counterparts to include in their prayers Canada’s “infant institutions” in
hopes that God would “bless Canada” and render it a “fruitful corner of his own
vineyard.”17

Anxieties regarding the spiritual destitution that reputedly prevailed over
nineteenth-century Canada’s fledgling settlements were not unique to North American-
based commentators. On the contrary, an editorial published in the February 1855 edition
of the Ecclesiastical & Missionary Record of the Free Church of Scotland, a metropolitan
publication, portrayed Canada’s frontier communities as a spiritual wilderness in need of
evangelistic cultivation. The author focused on the importance of propagating the
Gospels among the inhabitants of Port Sarnia, Saugeen, and Port Stanley, which were
described as “outposts” of the presbytery of London, Canada West. Within such
communities, the author reported, the “cords” of the transnational Presbyterian “Zion”
were extending. Entire counties which had hitherto been little more than “ranges of
unbroken forest are now being most rapidly filled up with settlers from the Old Country,
as well as from various parts of Canada.”18

The author proceeded to stress the importance of making available to the
inhabitants of such spiritually starved communities the tenets and traditions of
Presbyterianism. Such sentiments were couched in language and imagery that invoked
aspects of the natural world. The author called upon the “Lord of the Harvest” to send
forth to British North America zealous Presbyterian missionaries, who would “scatter
abroad the good seed of the kingdom, …water those athirst, and… gather the fruit which

17 Ibid., 163.
18 Ecclesiastical & Missionary Record of the Free Church of Scotland, February 1855, 69.
may be produced to the praise and glory of God.”

The author was convinced that in order to bring about the Christianization of Canada’s moral wilderness zealous Presbyterian missionaries and pioneer ministers would need to be dispatched post-haste to the colony’s expanding frontier settlements.

How did influential metropolitan Presbyterians respond to such appeals? Which measures, if any, were undertaken in order to shore up the religious welfare of their co-religionists situated in religiously neglected northern North American settings? One of the principal institutions established by metropolitan Presbyterians as a means of addressing the settlers’ supposed spiritual vulnerability was the Glasgow Colonial Society (GCS), a missionary agency established in that city in 1825. The activities undertaken by this institution attest to the denomination’s desire to bring about the moral transformation of British North American society. They included a campaign led by ardent missionaries and pioneer ministers to propagate Presbyterian principles among the religiously neglected inhabitants of British North America’s geographically peripheral communities.

The attempts of institutions like the GCS to promote Calvinistic tenets in religiously neglected British North American settings constitute the first component of the two-pronged Presbyterian strategy to Christianize the northern North American wilderness, which involved the widespread diffusion of Presbyterian doctrine. The GCS provided British North America’s Presbyterians with missionaries, educators, ministers, bibles, and religious tracts between its creation in 1825 and its absorption fifteen years later into a larger missionary agency. It was established largely as a result of the efforts of the Church of Scotland’s restive evangelical wing. This constituency, which eventually broke ranks with the national church during the “Great Disruption” of 1843, advocated an emotionally charged alternative to what many Scottish evangelicals identified as the staid attitudes exhibited by the Church of Scotland’s religiously moderate elite. Members of the evangelical constituency also sought to promote Presbyterian principles among adherents of the denomination whose spiritual welfare was reputedly neglected by the

19 Ibid.
national institution, including adherents of the denomination situated in the Scottish Highlands and British North America.20

The evangelistic enthusiasm displayed in the activities of missionary agencies like the GCS was fomented in the early and mid-nineteenth century by two key factors. The first was the lingering influence throughout much of the Protestant world of an evangelical revival. This phenomenon galvanized Protestants the world over in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Christian fervour generated by the revival manifested itself among fervent Protestants in such traits as spontaneous outbursts of religious enthusiasm, a belief in scriptural inerrancy, and an oratorical emphasis on the indispensable importance of Christ’s atonement and inevitable return. The influence of this phenomenon continued to reverberate within Protestant communities worldwide well into the nineteenth century as a result of the vast network of bible and missionary societies that had been created under its auspices. The second factor fomenting interest in Christian evangelism in the early and mid-nineteenth century was the widely publicized activities of such missionary celebrities as David Livingstone and Alexander Duff, both of whom happened to be British. Their exploits in places like western Africa and India received extensive coverage throughout Protestant communities the world over. Such accounts served to whet the appetites of numerous devout Christians for evangelism in exotic locales.21

Canadian Presbyterians were no exception to this pattern of heightened enthusiasm for Protestant evangelism. As the nineteenth century unfolded and the denomination grew larger, adherents of Presbyterianism located in northern North America became evermore involved in missionary activities. The participation of members of the denomination in evangelistic activities was evident within northern North America itself, where Presbyterian standard-bearers served among religiously neglected Euro-Canadians as well as Aboriginal Nations like the Cree (about which more will be said). But it was also evident abroad, with adherents of the denomination serving as

20 McDougall and Moir, eds., *Selected Correspondence of the Glasgow Colonial Society*, xix-xv.
missionaries in such far-flung fields of activity as the Polynesian “New Hebrides” and South Asia. So enthusiastic were Presbyterians when it came to overseas evangelism that members of the denomination occupied more foreign mission stations than any other Canadian Protestant group by the early twentieth century.22

The GCS, following its creation in 1825, was inundated with appeals from British North American Presbyterians anxious to obtain for their communities access to regular ministrations. The authors of such appeals, which came from throughout the British North American colonies, typically stressed the lack of Presbyterian clergy serving in remote communities as well as the perceived spiritual vulnerability of the settlers residing within them. Such sentiments were frequently couched in language and imagery that evoked aspects of the natural world.

The Reverend P. McIntyre of St. James, New Brunswick drew on aspects of the natural world in an 1835 appeal to the GCS. In attempting to elicit metropolitan support for Presbyterian evangelism in northeastern North America he asserted that “expatriated” Scots in the New World were bogged down in a “trackless wilderness.” Comparable to the untamed environment itself, he explained, these Scottish-born New Brunswickers were “left to the care of nature, without the labour of a single vine-dresser to prepare them for the vineyard above.” Due to a lack of Christian ministrations, McIntyre continued, Scottish Presbyterian immigrants and their descendants living in British North America were either “growing up in heathen ignorance” or, equally distressing, “lamenting the loss of those religious privileges which they once enjoyed.”23 The wilderness served in McIntyre’s view as an apt metaphor for the perilous spiritual status occupied by such peoples. Failure on the part of metropolitan Presbyterians to promote the denomination’s tenets and traditions in northeastern North America’s hinterland settlements was almost certain in his understanding to result in the intensification of religious ignorance and in the evaporation of Protestant virtue.

Yet it would be a mistake to conclude from the preceding statements that Presbyterians were indifferent to the spiritual welfare of the inhabitants of backwoods northern North American communities prior to the establishment of the GCS. The

22 Brouwer, New Women for God, 16.
indefatigable efforts of such figures as the Reverends James MacGregor and Robert McDowall reveal a deep-seated desire on the part of the denomination’s British North American-based clergymen to propagate Presbyterian principles in sparsely populated hinterland settings before the advent of that influential Scottish missionary agency. Noteworthy is the fact that these individuals’ travels across stretches of northern North American territory in search of spiritually starved Presbyterians occurred before the proliferation of railways, meaning that they were obliged to rely on such comparatively unsophisticated modes of transport as walking, sailing, swimming, and the riding of horses. MacGregor and McDowall, in traversing the largely undomesticated northern North American landscape, were determined to bring about the moral transformation of British North American society, which in turn would facilitate the reconciliation of the natural world and its omnipotent creator.

James MacGregor arrived in Pictou, Nova Scotia as an unsalaried missionary by way of Perthshire, Scotland in 1786. He devoted himself thereafter to the vigorous propagation of the Gospels through his efforts as an agent of the British and Foreign Bible Society and as a minister of the Anti-Burgher constituency of the Presbyterian Secessionist tradition. MacGregor’s itinerant ministrations, which were reputedly “proverbial for their hazards and hardships,” included extensive travels along Nova Scotia’s Gulf Shore as well as journeys to Cape Breton and Prince Edward Island. A journey undertaken by MacGregor in 1790 to Prince Edward Island is illustrative of the lengths to which this Presbyterian minister was willing to go in order to evangelize his co-religionists situated in remote northeastern North American settings. His destination was Princetown, a community that was thought to have been without access to regular Christian ministrations for roughly twenty years. At one stage of his journey, which is ultimately thought to have involved walking, sailing, and riding, MacGregor purportedly traveled for many miles on foot along “expansive beach” and “almost impassable rock” in search of his religiously neglected co-religionists.

On another occasion MacGregor was obliged to cross a brook by way of a fallen tree while traversing Nova Scotia’s heavily forested terrain in search of spiritually vulnerable Presbyterians. Maintaining his balance as he made his way across the fallen tree purportedly required “the whole skill of a rope dancer.” MacGregor, who was perhaps more determined than he was nimble, lost his equilibrium mid-way and tumbled into the water beneath him. He emerged from the water and managed to scale the banks of the brook by taking hold of the shrubbery that covered much of the landscape, which permitted MacGregor to pull himself upward. After clambering up the banks of the brook a soggy MacGregor resumed his journey in search of Nova Scotia’s religiously neglected Presbyterians. Such was his determination to promote the denomination’s doctrines within northeastern North America’s hinterland communities.26

The experiences of Robert McDowall, an early Upper Canadian Presbyterian missionary who travelled extensively throughout that colony between his arrival by way of New York in the late eighteenth century and his death in 1841, are similarly indicative of the determination of early nineteenth-century British North American Presbyterian missionaries to promote the denomination’s tenets and traditions in rough-hewn settings. (McDowall was dispatched to Upper Canada by the Albany Classis of the Dutch Reformed Church, but joined the indigenous Presbytery of the Canadas in the early nineteenth century.) McDowall concentrated his missionary activities on the territory stretching along Lake Ontario’s northern shore between Belleville and Brockville. Yet his evangelistic efforts routinely carried him further westward as well. For example, on several occasions McDowall travelled to the colonial capital of York, and in at least one instance he is rumoured to have travelled as far west as Sandwich (later Windsor), which lay approximately 550 kilometres away from his primary area of missionary activity. In pursuing Upper Canada’s spiritually starved Presbyterians McDowall travelled either on horseback or on foot along many of the colony’s “miserable backwoods trails.” And in making his way across rivers for which bridges had yet to be built he frequently resorted to swimming or, alternatively, the use of a canoe. McDowall, who gained a reputation for summoning unsuspecting Presbyterians residing in backwoods communities to unscheduled church services through the use of a moose horn, ultimately presided over

26 Patterson, MacGregor, 226-7.
more than 1600 christenings and perhaps as many as 1300 marriages in an attempt to Christianize Upper Canadian society.27

The wilderness motif featured prominently in McDowall’s remarks regarding the religious hardships to which late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Upper Canadians had in numerous instances been subjected. The colony’s early Protestant inhabitants, McDowall observed in the late 1830s, had settled amid “a vast unbroken wilderness” where for many years they lived in “great privations… without a preacher of the Gospel.” The creation of new settlements during the early nineteenth century only served to compound Upper Canada’s “moral desolations” as a result of the diffuse nature of the population and the “badness of the roads,” which in both cases hindered Christian standard-bearers’ efforts to propagate the Gospels in remote communities. Yet unfavourable though such circumstances were, McDowall lauded the few late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century missionaries—presumably including himself—who had courageously “ventured into our moral wilderness” in hopes of bringing about the spiritual reinvigoration of religiously neglected settlers inhabiting remote communities.28

Metropolitan Presbyterians bestowed plaudits on their early nineteenth-century colonial counterparts for their zealous efforts to evangelize recently settled British North American communities. A group of Scottish Presbyterian students informed members of the Presbytery of Canada in September of 1837 that they viewed the Canadians’ “labours of love” regarding the promotion of the Gospels among their spiritually starved compatriots residing in backwoods British North American settings with “intense interest.” The Scots congratulated their colonial co-religionists for “reclaiming” certain religiously neglected Presbyterians from “Heathenism” while preventing others from becoming mired in such a soul-imperiling condition in the first place. Canadian Presbyterian standard-bearers, they concluded, were responsible for planting anew in the northern North American “wilderness” the “worship and discipline of our forefathers,”

and for bringing forth “from the banks of the St. Lawrence and the shores of the land-locked lakes of America” the sacred songs of the “sweet singer of Israel.”

As the nineteenth century wore on and the British North American Presbyterian community expanded, adherents of the denomination called with increasing fervency for the evangelization of non-Presbyterian groups as well. The following editorial, drawn from the May 1861 edition of The Home and Foreign Missionary Record of the Presbyterian Church of the Lower Provinces of British North America, reveals the desire harbouried by members of the denomination in the mid-nineteenth century to propagate Presbyterian tenets as extensively and as vigorously as possible throughout British North American society. The author began by lamenting the pervasiveness within backwoods northern North American settlements of sinfulness, superstition, and “dense ignorance.” This lamentation was followed by a discussion that emphasized the Presbyterians’ obligation, as a uniquely righteous people, to counter such vices wherever they existed. The author declared that, in order to effectively combat such pernicious phenomena, the Gospels would need to be brought by determined Presbyterian standard-bearers to

the fisherman’s hut, the lumberer’s camp, the navvy’s shantie… to the farmer’s comfortable home, and to the princely merchant’s luxurious palace—to the rum-shops and gin-palaces, [and] to the nameless dens of vice in our towns…

The editorial went as far as to affirm that Presbyterians were imbued “by the all powerful will of God” with a responsibility for nothing less than the moral transformation of literally “every family.” Accordingly, members of the denomination were urged in no uncertain terms to propagate the Gospels until the most obscure “fragments and outskirts of settlements” resounded with the heavenly “songs of Zion.” The Presbyterians’ ambitious evangelistic design thus had implications for the entirety of northern North American society.

Responsibility for bringing about the diffusion throughout British North America of an unalloyed Protestant piety did not in the author’s view rest exclusively with

---

30 Home and Foreign Missionary Record of the Presbyterian Church of the Lower Provinces of British North America, May 1861, 113.
31 Ibid., 113-4.
Presbyterian missionaries and ministers. Rather, every “Presbyterian man, woman, and child” was purportedly obligated, as “soldiers” in Christ’s army, to devote themselves to the glorious cause of Protestant evangelism. Those who shirked their duties regarding the propagation of Protestantism throughout northern North America, the author reported, could expect to be subjected to the severe punishments that would inevitably be meted out to “mutineers, or cowards or base deserters” on the “Day of Reckoning.”

Nor was the Presbyterians’ desire to propagate the Gospels confined to the British North American colonies. On the contrary, ardent adherents of the denomination envisioned a literally worldwide campaign of evangelism that would ultimately result in the absolute eradication of sinfulness. The Reverend Mark Young Stark expanded on this notion in 1844 at a meeting of a multi-denominational evangelical prayer group that took place in Dundas, Canada West. He emphasized the necessity of promulgating an unalloyed Protestant piety among the “millions of peoples” situated in Africa and Asia that were in his understanding bogged down in “heathen darkness, superstition, and idolatry.” Throughout both continents, he noted, “spiritual destitution” and “infidelity” exerted substantially more influence than “evangelical truth.” An allusion to the natural world occupied a prominent position within the sweeping injunction that followed. Smart informed his audience that the “entire world” lay before them as a potential field of missionary activity. Only through the concerted efforts of zealous Presbyterians and their evangelical Protestant allies, he reasoned, could such spiritually desolate locales be “cultivated and fertilized” and transformed from spiritual wastelands into Christian gardens.

The Presbyterians’ ambitious evangelistic design had significant implications for northern North America’s Aboriginals. Presbyterian missionaries in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were principally concerned with addressing the spiritual needs of their geographically isolated co-religionists and, to a lesser extent, those of other British Protestants. As a result they trailed Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and Methodists when it came to promoting Christianity among northern North America’s indigenous

---

32 Ibid., 115.
33 UCA Mark Young Stark Fonds; Box 2, File 6: Lecture (on “the present state of the missionary enterprise of the Church of Scotland”); March 29, 1844, Delivered at 1st Monthly Prayer Meeting, Dundas, Canada West.
peoples. Yet as the ranks of British North American Presbyterianism swelled and the
denomination became more institutionally sophisticated, adherents of the denomination
placed evermore emphasis on the importance of propagating Christianity among northern
North America’s Aboriginal peoples. This objective consequently assumed a position of
prominence within the Presbyterians’ campaign to assert moral sovereignty over northern
North America.34

The denomination’s enthusiasm for the evangelism of nineteenth-century
Canada’s indigenous inhabitants, which emerged during the mid- and late nineteenth
century, mirrored their perceptions of the northern North American environment itself.
Through the vigorous propagation of Protestant piety members of the denomination were
convinced that both entities would be transformed and brought under godly auspices.
Such a transition would in turn contribute to the reconciliation of nature and divinity.

Indicative of the Presbyterians’ sense of responsibility for the spiritual elevation
of northern North America’s indigenous peoples are the remarks of the Reverend John
Black, who was dispatched by the Presbyterian Church of Canada to the Red River
settlement in the mid-1840s. In an 1864 letter to a Canadian Presbyterian counterpart
Black lamented the fact that their denomination lagged behind “other communions” in
the grand task of converting Aboriginals to Christianity. As a result of Presbyterianism’s
missionary apathy, he added, vast territorial tracts traditionally occupied by northern
North America’s indigenous peoples lay spiritually uncultivated. Black went as far as to
suggest that, in giving such short shrift to the status of the Aboriginals’ immortal souls,
Presbyterians had failed to take seriously what in his conception was the “chief end” of
Christian devotion—namely, aggressively propagating the Gospels among any and all
peoples.35

Black underscored the Presbyterians’ perceived responsibility for bringing about
the conversion of western Canadian Aboriginals in late 1870, noting in a letter to a
Presbyterian colleague that “the native tribes whose country we occupy” ought to have
“the first claim” upon our denomination’s attention and resources. Western Canada in

34 John Webster Grant, Moon of Wintertime: Missionaries and the Indians of Canada in Encounters since
1534 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 148; George Bryce, John Black: The Apostle of the Red
River; or, How the Blue Banner was Unfurled on Manitoba Prairies (Toronto: William Briggs, 1898), 93-94.
35 John McNab, They Went Forth (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1933), 84-5.
Black’s view amounted to a “great heathen field” which Presbyterians as a uniquely righteous denomination have been enjoined by God to “cultivate.” Thus, in making the case for intensified evangelism among western Canada’s Aboriginals, Black drew on language and imagery that invoked aspects of the natural world.36

Underlying Black’s commitment to the conversion of the Red River region’s Aboriginals was a mutually reinforcing combination of racism and paternalism. The local indigenous peoples, who were described by Black as members of the “Ojibway and Chippeway tribe,” were in his estimation a “poor miserable race for whom little had been done.” Such peoples in Black’s understanding eked out a living “partly by begging and partly by working and partly by what they can take with their nets, hooks, snares, and guns.”37 He was convinced that the conversion to Christianity of such an “ignorant, intemperate, degraded, and neglected” race was imperative if they were to have any chance of avoiding eternal damnation.38

Presbyterian missionaries, spurred on in their activities by the sense of duty articulated in Black’s remarks, intensified their efforts to bring about the Christianization of northern North America’s Aboriginals beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. Western nations such as the Plains Cree, who had previously had little contact with Christian evangelists and were reputedly mired in a state of “absolute heathenism,” were targeted by members of the denomination for conversion and eventual absorption into Euro-Canadian society. Accordingly, the first sustained Aboriginal mission undertaken by Canadian Presbyterians was established among that nation on the northern banks of the Saskatchewan River in 1866. James Nisbet, who had previously acted as Black’s assistant at the Red River settlement, served as the denomination’s principal representative.39

Nisbet had initially been dispatched to the region as an itinerant minister in the early 1860s. However, comparable to adherents of other denominations, Nisbet and his Presbyterian coreligionists soon came to the realization that the creation of a permanent

38 UCA Black Letters. Letter no. 621. 4 December 1875. Black to McLean.
39 Bryce, John Black, 93-4. See also Hartwell Bowsfield, John Black, Dictionary of Canadian Biography, vol. XI.
settlement on the banks of the Saskatchewan would serve as a more effective mechanism for bringing about the conversion and eventual assimilation of the local Cree. Adherents of the denomination decided that this settlement would ultimately include schools in which boys would receive instruction in farming techniques and in which girls would be acquainted with a variety of domestic responsibilities. The settlement would also include farms through which the region’s indigenous peoples would be weaned off their nomadic lifestyle. Members of the denomination were convinced that the establishment of such institutions on the banks of the Saskatchewan would accelerate the Aboriginals’ absorption into the Euro-Canadian mainstream through the systematic inculcation in the indigenous peoples’ minds of prevailing western attitudes concerning gender roles, and through an emphasis on the superiority of sedentary agriculture over a peripatetic existence. Thus, Nisbet observed that one of his primary objectives in serving as a Presbyterian missionary on the banks of the Saskatchewan River was to persuade the Cree to adopt a “settled” western-style existence and to cultivate the land along the lines of their Euro-Canadian counterparts. In addition to ending their dependence on the allegedly unreliable results of “the chase,” such transitions would in his conception complement the enormously important process of Aboriginal evangelism.40

Seeking to accelerate the absorption of the Cree into Euro-Canadian society, Nisbet contacted the Presbyterian Church in Canada in the late 1870s regarding the possibility of attaining for the mission, which they named “Prince Albert” in honour of Queen Victoria’s deceased consort, the services of a teacher who could potentially inculcate Anglo-Celtic Protestant values in the minds of the region’s children. In response, Lucy Baker, a teacher and devout Presbyterian from Glengarry County, Ontario, was dispatched to the settlement, where her minister had recently been named missionary. Baker, who was described in a contemporary journal article as “a little lady—one of the old school, the kind done up in ecru lace and black silk,” became involved in substantially more than primary education. Between her arrival in the North-West territory in the late 1870s and her retirement more than two decades later, Baker worked tirelessly among western Canadian Aboriginals—initially the Cree and, later, a group of Sioux—providing instruction to people of virtually all ages in a staggering range

40 Bryce, John Black, 94-6.
of fields that varied from the teaching of basic literacy skills to cattle-raising. Over the course of her time in the region Baker routinely invited the local Aboriginal women, with whom she often forged close relationships, to the mission house in which she resided. There, Baker availed herself of the opportunity to share with the region’s indigenous women the glad tidings of Christianity. So significant was Baker’s influence in the region as a reputed paragon of British Protestant virtue that the Sioux reputedly dubbed her their “Queen,” and hoisted the Union Jack in her honour.  

The attempts of such Presbyterian standard-bearers as Lucy Baker to Christianize western Canada’s Aboriginal inhabitants mesh with arguments put forth by Myra Rutherdale, who has suggested that nineteenth and early twentieth-century Christian missionaries serving in the Canadian west and north sought to bring about the moral improvement of the indigenous communities in which they served. This emphasis on improvement, she explains, manifested itself in attempts on the part of the missionaries to promote within the indigenous communities the virtues of Anglo-Celtic Protestant culture and sedentary agricultural. Yet in Rutherdale’s understanding it also involved the missionaries’ efforts to bring about the cultural improvement of western and northern Canada’s Aboriginal peoples. This dimension of the missionaries’ involvement in indigenous northern North American communities involved attempts to alter rhythms of life through the regular celebration of Christian holidays as well as an emphasis on such symbolic acts as the distribution of western clothing and trinkets as gifts. Such measures in Rutherdale’s conception served to convert the mission field into a “theatrical” environment in which missionaries and Aboriginals literally acted out the process of cultural transformation.  

Baker’s attempts to bring about the conversion and assimilation of western Canada’s Aboriginals dovetail with Rutherdale’s contentions. Her efforts to promote

---

British Protestant values within indigenous communities contributed to a process of cultural transformation that was borne out in her anointment by the Sioux as “Queen,” and in the ceremonial unfurling of the Union Jack in her honour. They ultimately attest to the Presbyterians’ desire to bring about God’s attainment of moral sovereignty over Aboriginal communities situated in the Canadian west.\(^43\)

Nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians believed that through the vigorous promotion of Protestant tenets northern North America’s indigenous peoples could be transformed from uncultivated heathens into virtuous Christians. This notion accords with the Presbyterian belief that the natural world itself could be made righteous and reconciled with its divine creator. Members of the denomination believed that through the uncompromising promotion of Protestant piety both entities could be purged of sinfulness and brought under godly auspices.

The remarks of an unnamed Presbyterian missionary serving in Saugeen, Canada West in the mid-nineteenth century reveal the belief harboured by zealous adherents of the denomination that both Aboriginals and the northern North American wilderness could be rendered submissive and Christianized. The missionary recounted his experiences at a feast held by converted “Saugeen Indians” the previous Christmas. Red Cloud, presumably a prominent male, delivered the evening’s final address, which the missionary purported to recapitulate. Red Cloud allegedly expressed heartfelt gratitude for the “favourable” developments that had been wrought in the “Indian character” as a result of the efforts of Protestant evangelists who had served in their midst. Prior to the proliferation of Christianity within his community, he explained, when communal

\(^{43}\) Nineteenth-century Presbyterians took the superiority of western civilization over Aboriginal traditions as a matter of course. Consider the denomination’s staunch support for central Canadian authorities during the Red River Rebellion of 1869-1870 and the North-West Rebellion of 1885. Métis and Aboriginal exhibitions of violent resistance were flatly denounced by Presbyterian authorities as unacceptable displays of “defiance to queen and empire.” Their reputed insubordination was also identified—tellingly—by members of the Presbyterian community as an intolerable threat to the security of “Ontario settlers.”

John Webster Grant has argued that the North-West Rebellion emboldened Canadian Presbyterians to pursue the conversion and eventual assimilation of western Aboriginal groups with unprecedented assertiveness. The intensification of the Presbyterians’ missionary efforts is evident in the fact that, in response to the conflict’s outbreak, the Canadian Presbyterian Foreign Mission Committee resolved that missionary work among such groups as the Cree should be ratcheted up “as rapidly as possible” so as to prevent further acts of rebelliousness and to expedite the “Indians’” absorption into Euro-Canadian society. Grant, “‘Two-Thirds of the Revenue’: Presbyterian Women and Native Indian Missions,” 102-3; Grant, Moon of Wintertime, 160-162. See also Daniel Francis, The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1992), 49-53.
gatherings took place the women of the party would take pains to hide the men’s “bows and arrows, guns, axes, spears, and scalping knives.” Why? Because, “they were well assured that as liquid fire was to form a prominent article of the feast, there was the greatest danger of the one brother imbruing his hands in the blood of the other, in the course of the uproarious [proceedings].” Yet as a result of the proliferation within the community of “the peace speaking Gospel” such precautionary measures were in Red Cloud’s estimation no longer required, as the “uninterrupted concord of brotherly love” had largely replaced the uncivilized exhibitions of the past. The missionary, reflecting on the content of Red Cloud’s address, reported that he departed from the feast in a state of intense gratification. “I waded my way homeward,” he noted, “knee deep in snow… rejoicing the long solitary way.”

While there is scant evidence to suggest that these particular Aboriginals were Presbyterian—indeed, this seems unlikely as the recounted events preceded the establishment of the Presbyterian mission at Prince Albert by more than a decade—the missionary’s recollections are nevertheless revealing. They encapsulate the notion that northern North America’s indigenous peoples, through sustained exposure to Christianity, could be transformed from uncouth savages into civilized human beings. Nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians were in many instances convinced that a comparable transformation could take place within the natural environment itself.

The missionary enthused about the natural environment as he made his way home. His remarks bring into focus the Presbyterian belief that, through the diffusion of religious virtue, the natural environment itself could be transformed from an anarchic wilderness into a righteous garden. The missionary observed that the natural scenery’s magnificence was emblematic of the reconciliation of the hitherto corrupt natural world and divinity. Lake Huron’s “wide bosom” was reputedly “crusted over” with snow for the first time that season, and bore a resemblance to “an ample robe of purest white,” the reflection of which “girdled the picture with a transparent belt.” “[V]arying and changing in its active form,” the scenery reminded the missionary by turns of “a numerous rejoicing company” or, alternatively, of “a stillness which showed that order and

---

44 Ecclesiastical & Missionary Record, April 1850, 86-7.
harmony were there.” Implicit within the missionary’s rhapsodic description of the natural northern North American environment was the belief that the region itself—much like the Aboriginals who resided within it—had undergone processes of Christianization.

The projection of Christian piety into British North America’s undomesticated outer reaches was seen by zealous nineteenth century Presbyterians as contributing to the redemption of the natural world. Aware that Christianity had made great strides in the region—as evidenced by the Aboriginals’ apparent conversion—the missionary came to view the natural landscape in a manner that differed dramatically from the antagonistic conception to which I have referred. Rather than denigrating the natural environment as a God-forsaken wasteland he came to appreciate its aesthetic merits as so many awe-inspiring manifestations of God’s providential handiwork.

The belief that British North America’s natural environment could undergo a transition from a physical and moral wilderness into a righteous new Eden is also evident in the writings of George Patterson, a nineteenth-century Presbyterian minister and historian of colonial Nova Scotia. In describing the experiences of the colony’s early Presbyterian inhabitants Patterson asserted that its settlement had involved tremendous “toil and privation.” He attributed this difficulty to the denseness of the seemingly indomitable forest, which routinely stymied the colonists’ efforts to subdue and cultivate the land, and to the harshness of Nova Scotia’s winters, which in Patterson’s conception were so severe as to be at times unbearable.

Yet as a result of a combination of resourcefulness and determination the settlers eventually prevailed over such unfavourable environmental circumstances. Illustrative of this triumph was the “improvement” that was thought by Patterson to have been wrought in the land. This pattern of progressive development was exhibited in his view in the felling of trees; in the sowing of wheat and potatoes; and in the hunting and fishing of the colony’s moose and fish, respectively. As a result of the settlers’ efforts productive farms and bustling villages began to replace the ominous northeastern North American wilderness.

---

46 Patterson, Memoir of the Rev. James MacGregor…, 64-5; 77.
47 Ibid., 80.
Colonial Nova Scotia’s natural terrain was also thought to have undergone a stark moral transformation. Central to this process in Patterson’s opinion was the missionary fervour exhibited by such figures as James MacGregor, the pioneer Presbyterian missionary and tireless champion of the British and Foreign Bible Society from whom—not insignificantly—Patterson happened to descend. Following his arrival in the colony in the late eighteenth century, MacGregor was confronted by what he described as a physically and morally unruly “wilderness” in which regular Christian ministrations were virtually unknown.

In seeking out the colony’s spiritually starved backwoods inhabitants MacGregor was frequently obliged to make his way into undomesticated regions equipped with little more than a bible and a pocket compass. Upon encountering the inhabitants of Nova Scotia’s religiously neglected settlements MacGregor set about eradicating “the carelessness and indifference” that reputedly prevailed over their lives. Through MacGregor’s ministrations many of the settlers were purportedly alerted to their inherent sinfulness and corresponding spiritual vulnerability. The contrast between the “dark ground” of their innate depravity and the “brighter colours” of Christ’s teachings was laid bare. Thus, in addition to the radical alteration witnessed in Nova Scotia’s physical landscape—as evidenced by the fact that farms and villages were increasingly replacing the ominous wilderness—an ethical transformation was thought by Patterson to have occurred as well as a result of the inculcation in peoples’ minds of a Calvinistic morality. Nova Scotia’s “moral wilderness,” Patterson declared, was “rejoicing and blossoming as the rose” due to the efforts of such determined Presbyterian missionaries as James MacGregor.

As evidenced by Patterson’s remarks, zealous early Canadian Presbyterians believed that through the propagation of the denomination’s theological tenets the natural world would eventually be made righteous. This redemptive process occasioned a dramatic shift in their perceptions of the northern North American environment. Whereas the undomesticated natural world had once been viewed by ardent Presbyterians as fundamentally corrupt, through the efforts of such dogged Christian standard-bearers as

---

48 Ibid., 226-239.
49 Ibid., chapter twenty-two.
James MacGregor it was thought by members of the denomination to have undergone a process of Christianization.

For zealous nineteenth-century Presbyterians the moral transformation of the northern North American wilderness was an audible phenomenon. That is, the ethical change undergone by religiously neglected hinterland communities was in their understanding paralleled by an aural transition. This development was allegedly evident in a shift from an irreligious din—which according to devout nineteenth-century Presbyterians was scandalously pervasive on Sundays—to either a serene silence or vocal expressions of Protestant piety, both of which were interpreted as evidence of the Christianization of the natural environment. Such a transition was in the Presbyterians’ conception indicative of the fact that Christian virtue was steadily vanquishing northern North America’s moral wilderness.

Sabbath desecration was viewed by Presbyterian observers as one of the principal transgressions perpetrated by the denizens of the British North American backwoods. Alongside other vices such as perceived sexual immorality and alcohol abuse, it was seen as epitomizing the depravity that prevailed within religiously neglected settlements. A Presbyterian minister, one Rev. John Bethune, noted in the mid-1840s that, while traveling along a plank road that ran through Ancaster, Canada West to a service that would take place in Caledonia he routinely encountered displays of “contempt” for the Sabbath. For example, on one occasion he purportedly crossed paths with a man near Ancaster who was belting out the words to a “merry song” with such fervour that the lyrics echoed throughout the adjacent forest. Bethune purportedly overtook the man and asked “Is it the Lord’s praise you are singing on the Lord’s Day?” After several moments of uneasy silence the man replied that, yes, he had indeed been extolling God’s virtues. Bethune, who was unconvinced, conveyed his doubts to the man before continuing with his travels. No sooner had Bethune resumed his journey to Caledonia than he noticed two more men making their way into the nearby forest, “one of whom carried a gun” and was thus almost certainly bound for a sacrilegious afternoon of hunting.50

Yet as Christian virtue came to permeate fledgling British North American communities a marked change was thought to have occurred when it came to the

50 Ecclesiastical & Missionary Record, February 1846, 156.
behaviour of their inhabitants. The noisy impiety that so irked figures like Bethune was increasingly replaced by either pious stillness or heartfelt articulations of Christian zeal. George Patterson described the way in which heightened Sabbath observance had altered the aural culture of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Nova Scotia. On Sabbath mornings, he explained, for “miles around” devout Presbyterians congregated and wound their way along “rude bridle paths,” eventually arriving at the location of the holy service where they found God’s “tabernacle” situated amid “the fields of the wood.” For the remainder of the day, Patterson added, all “instruments of labour” as well as all children’s toys were set aside and expressions of light-heartedness were suppressed.51

The Nova Scotia Presbyterians’ solemn observance of the Sabbath was in Patterson’s estimation indicative of the reconciliation of the natural environment with its divine creator. Representative of this phenomenon was the pious silence that prevailed over the land. Patterson observed that the natural world “seemed to sympathize” with the worshippers’ solemnity, adding that the “unbroken stillness” of the scene attested to the intensity of the colonial Presbyterians’ religious reverence. In “checking the merry laugh of childhood and hushing the tongue of volatile youth,” their piety was thought by Patterson to have lent a “tone of quiet” not only to the congregants themselves, but to the activities of animals and to the songs of birds as well. This reverential soundscape served in Patterson’s view to “soothe the soul of devout contemplation.”52

Nor was silence the only audible indication of the fact that Protestant morality had gone a considerable distance in rendering submissive northern North America’s moral wilderness. The sounds of an animated sermon in the estimation of ardent nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians signalled the triumph of religious reverence over noisy impiety. The Reverend Robert Burns delivered numerous sermons in a variety of backwoods British North American locations between his emigration from Scotland to Canada in the mid-1840s and his death in the late nineteenth century. Within such settings he reputedly used a tree-stump for a pulpit and “the canopy of heaven” as a “sounding board,” against which his “clear, sonorous voice” reverberated and carried the

51 NSARM, George Patterson Fonds; MG 1, vol. 742, being a biographical sketch of all the Presbyterian ministers who labored in the maritime provinces previous to 1817…”; vol. 742, #7: “Reverends Daniel Cock and David Smith.
52 Ibid.
Gospels to the region’s spiritually neglected inhabitants. These religiously starved individuals allegedly absorbed his orations with “throbbing hearts” and “tearful eyes.” The reverberations of Burns’ addresses throughout northern America’s “forest cathedrals” were interpreted as representative of the denomination’s attainment of moral sovereignty over an ever-expanding swathe of northern North American territory.53

Within nineteenth-century Presbyterianism’s mental world the moral transformation of the British North American landscape was associated with a pattern of material advancement, which was perceived by devout members of the denomination as the inevitable corollary to the proliferation within geographically peripheral communities of an uncompromising Protestant piety. Economic and civil progress, which were frequently portrayed by thoroughgoing members of the denomination as symbiotic phenomena, were tethered within the Presbyterian consciousness to the attainment of enhanced moral authority within expanding frontier communities. An editorial published in the February 1836 edition of the Missionary Record of the United Presbyterian Church described Upper Canada’s western extremities as a “finely situated, and rapidly rising country—a country which will soon come to occupy an important place among the nations [of the world].”54 The author added that the “rough mode of life” that had initially typified colonial existence was rapidly disappearing on account of the settlers’ efforts to “cut down their huge trees, and open spaces for cultivation.” Their industry and ingenuity had in the author’s opinion brought about a remarkable change in the surroundings, as evidenced by the fact that the “axe, the plough, [and] the steam engine” were in the midst of vanquishing the unruly wilderness and furnishing the region’s inhabitants with many of the sophisticated amenities of “European life.”55

For Robert Burns the progress exhibited in the settlements sprawled along the Lake Huron’s shores were similarly indicative of inter-related patterns of moral and material improvement. Burns, reflecting in the mid-1860s on his initial encounters with the region roughly twenty years before, noted that he was left with a sense of “astonishment” at the magnitude and rapidity of the “physical and moral changes” that

54 Missionary Record of the United Presbyterian Church, February 1836, 20.
55 Ibid., 21.
had occurred. He recalled that during his first visit to the region it had been little more than “an unbroken forest,” whereas it was now a land that was “‘all taken up’” with thousands of British and Canadian settlers. These settlers, he elaborated, had established several villages that were bejewelled with churches and schools. Such developments were linked in his understanding to the proliferation throughout the region of Protestant virtue. For Burns, the region’s material progress was tightly intertwined with its moral progress, both of which were linked in the nineteenth-century Presbyterian imagination to the transformation of the untamed northern North American wilderness into an orderly garden.56 Such views accord with an emphasis, which exerted influence throughout much of the western world during the nineteenth century and beyond, on the importance of improving undomesticated settings through settlement, agriculture, and industry.57

Vital to the Presbyterian campaign to tame the reputedly anarchic northern North American environment was the implementation of the denomination’s characteristic liturgies and institutions. Their introduction into British North American society constitutes the second component of the Presbyterians’ two-pronged campaign to attain moral sovereignty over the untamed environment.

The dispensation of communion by way of outdoor “festivals” featured prominently in the denomination’s efforts to Christianize the uncultivated natural terrain, contributing in the Presbyterians’ understanding to the redemption of the natural world. Such festivals, which occurred throughout the British North American colonies, also served to nurture a sense of communal inter-connectedness among members of the denomination through the perpetuation of longstanding denominational traditions. These elaborate gatherings bound together Presbyterians of Highland birth or descent in their new homeland while simultaneously strengthening their sense of sentimental attachment to their old one.58 The establishment of Presbyterian church courts also served to consolidate the denomination’s ethical influence within a multitude of British North American communities through the promotion of heightened standards in popular virtue.

57 Weaver, The Great Land Rush; Samson, Spirit of Industry and Improvement.
The activities of such institutions, which were established in both embryonic villages and bustling towns, attest to the denomination’s desire to systematically purge northern North American society of sinfulness.

Laurie Stanley has emphasized the contribution of outdoor communion festivals to the development of a vigorous Presbyterian culture in mid-nineteenth-century Cape Breton. During the first third of the century, she has explained, a “spiritual destitution” prevailed over the island’s Presbyterian population. A paucity of Presbyterian clergy (and especially a lack of ministers who were capable of speaking Gaelic), a large Roman Catholic population, and the infrequent dispensation of communion served to stifle the denomination’s growth. Yet as a result of the efforts beginning in the 1830s of several energetic British North American-based ministers as well as enthusiastic metropolitan organizations like the GCS and the Edinburgh Ladies’ Association, Cape Breton Presbyterianism was invigorated.59

Integral to the process of Presbyterian invigoration that occurred in Cape Breton was the proliferation of large-scale communion festivals in which members of the denomination travelled from far and wide in hopes of participating in the elaborate series of events that surrounded the sacrament’s dispensation. The festivals—which occurred elsewhere in British North America, and which typically took place once or twice per year—took place outdoors as churches were frequently unable to accommodate the large volumes of people that assembled, the largest of which numbered in the thousands. In addition to meeting the spiritual needs of the religiously neglected inhabitants of Cape Breton, the communion festivals also followed a strict pattern that adhered to the traditional ecclesiastical protocol that was practiced overseas. The entire process, Stanley has pointed out, typically began several days before the actual dispensation of the sacrament and consisted of a day of fasting, a series of sermons delivered in English as well as Gaelic, a day of intense scriptural explication and, prior to the actual dispensation of the sacrament itself, the distribution of communion tokens, which signified that a given recipient was indeed worthy of the “lord’s supper.” In adhering to such a protocol

the communion festivals nurtured a sense of communal inter-connectedness among Cape Breton’s Presbyterians by bringing them together in their new homeland while simultaneously providing them with ecclesiastical reminders of their overseas Presbyterian heritage.60

Strict observance of the traditional protocol was by no means confined to Cape Breton. On the contrary, metropolitan practices were assiduously adhered to by Presbyterians of Highland birth or descent participating in outdoor communion festivals throughout the British North American colonies. In mid-nineteenth century Orwell, Prince Edward Island, for example, large-scale festivals took pains to adhere to metropolitan traditions. This commitment to the preservation of authenticity in the New World was as pronounced among second- and third-generation Islanders as it had been among their immigrant forebears, a fact that attests to the abiding importance of Old World influences within the denominational community throughout the nineteenth century.61

By participating in such communion festivals nineteenth-century British North American Presbyterians integrated themselves into a transatlantic religious tradition. Scottish Presbyterians initially participated in outdoor ecclesiastical services during the seventeenth century in response to the efforts of the Stuart monarchs to thrust Episcopalian ecclesiastical practices upon them. Defiant adherents of Presbyterianism elected to take part in surreptitious outdoor services, unbeknownst to their Episcopalian oppressors. This tradition of outdoor Presbyterian services would reinvigorate Scottish Presbyterian communities in the years to come, as members of the denomination from various places would periodically gather for the purposes of outdoor worship. It also made its way across the Atlantic Ocean in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and flourished among Highland immigrants and their North American-born progeny in colonial America and the early republic. This transatlantic religious tradition eventually made an important contribution to the emergence in such American states as North Carolina and Kentucky of a vigorous Protestant culture, a phenomenon that attests to the

61 Harper, Adventurers & Exiles, 351.
interconnected Atlantic World that bound together western European and North American Protestants during the early modern era. The involvement of nineteenth-century British North American Presbyterians in such festivals therefore served to reinforce a sense of historical and cultural continuity with their denominational counterparts in differing chronological periods and spatial settings.  

To say that the mood that prevailed over nineteenth-century Presbyterian communion festivals was less than cheerful would be an understatement. Pared-down clothing was the norm among participants, as deviations from simple black attire were associated with unacceptably low levels of religious solemnity. The comportment of those in attendance was equally solemn, as evidenced by a contemporary observer’s description of the way in which participants in one Nova Scotia communion festival interacted with one another  

…but the greeting was sober; sisters even did not kiss; many met at first in silence, with teeth set and eyes fixed, and shook hands vigorously a long time with the motion of sawing wood.  

Participants in Presbyterian communion festivals frequently exhibited remarkable religious devotion. Consider the following account of the conduct of roughly one thousand Presbyterians who took part in one late nineteenth-century Cape Breton communion festival, which involved lengthy sermons that were delivered during a torrential downpour  

…but for five hours and twenty minutes that multitude sat upon the soaking sward as if glued to it. During the first two hours of that time, the rain came down incessantly. Comparatively few had umbrellas to raise and every male had his head uncovered…. They did not stir from that spot until nearly half past four.

---


o’clock…. Greedier hearers of Gospel truth, it has never been my privilege to witness.65

Presbyterian communion festivals were heavily influenced by an evangelical enthusiasm. Yet at the same time they differed substantively from the culture of radical revivalism that existed elsewhere in the Protestant world. In adhering to the traditional protocol, which as mentioned called for exhaustive scriptural explication, the Presbyterians diverged from such radical evangelical denominations as the early nineteenth-century Methodists and Baptists. The revivalistic gatherings of such denominations, which were reputedly characterized by emotionally unchecked displays of religious euphoria and a lack of careful scriptural analysis, were criticized by metropolitan and colonial Presbyterians as doctrinally dubious, and as unlikely to convert sinners to a life of Christian virtue.

An editorial published in the June 1861 edition of the Home & Foreign Record of the Presbyterian Church of the Lower Provinces of British North America is illustrative of the Presbyterians’ scepticism regarding the religious efficacy—or lack thereof—of radical evangelical revival meetings. Such gatherings, the author noted, exhibited a distressing tendency to emphasize mere “outbursts of feeling” over painstaking scriptural explication.66 While the editorial did not deny that preaching took place at such festivals, it was in the author’s view plainly subordinate in the minds of those in attendance to unbridled displays of religious exuberance. By emphasizing human spontaneity over a thorough examination of the revealed word of God—which in the author’s conception constituted the only viable means of “turning men from darkness to light”—the radical revival gatherings were in the last analysis incapable of eliciting among sinners a meaningful “change of heart.” The festivals’ inability to bring about reliable religious transformations was evident in the author’s view in the frequency with which supposed converts, shortly after their alleged spiritual metamorphoses, regressed into a familiar state of impiety. Presbyterian communion festivals, by adhering to the orthodox protocol,

66 Home and Foreign Record of the Presbyterian Church of the Lower Provinces of British North America, June 1861, 148.
were celebrated by members of the denomination for steering clear of the doctrinally dubious pitfalls of emotionally unchecked revivalism.\footnote{Ibid., 151.}

Communion festivals were viewed by devout nineteenth-century Presbyterians as representative of the reconciliation of the natural environment with its divine creator. An example of this belief can be seen in George Patterson’s account of the festivals that took place in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Pictou, Nova Scotia, which existed in this period as the Atlantic region’s “evangelical heartland.”\footnote{G.A. Rawlyk, The Canada Fire: Radical Evangelicalism in British North America, 1775-1812 (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994), 185-206.} Patterson, consistent with Stanley’s account, asserted that the actual dispensation of the “lord’s supper” was in fact merely the culmination of a more elaborate series of events that included numerous sermons, exhaustive scriptural explication, and the distribution of communion “tokens” to those who were deemed by clerical officials to be worthy recipients of the sacrament. The entire process, which included the dispensation of the sacrament itself, often lasted from Thursday afternoon until as late as eleven o’clock on Sunday night, with the Monday often being reserved for additional spiritual reflection as well as general expressions of “Thanksgiving.”\footnote{Patterson, Memoir of the Rev. James MacGregor…, 183-198.}

The entire spectacle in Patterson’s understanding was indicative of the Christianization of central Nova Scotia’s environment. That is, the natural world was thought to have undergone a process of redemption as a result of the piety that was displayed by the people involved in the proceedings. The environment itself had in Patterson’s conception been infused with a sense of religious awe. As the communicants made their way in an orderly manner to and from the table from which the sacrament was dispensed it was as though the natural world had become “hushed” in a state of worshipful silence and the “trees of the wood” were somehow “listening” to what was happening. The natural world was exulting in the moral transformation that had taken place in both the people and the land.\footnote{Ibid.}

Similarly, the Reverend Robert Burns, following a visit to Kincardine, Ontario in July of 1867, reported that during his visit he had taken part in a “delightful” communion season in which no fewer than 1,500 people had congregated in a grove adjacent to a
Presbyterian church in hopes of receiving the Lord’s Supper. Burns noted that the proceedings—which included sermons, scriptural explication, the distribution of communion tokens, and the dispensation of the sacrament itself—were carried out in “exact” accordance with the traditional protocol exhibited in such places as Invernessshire, Scotland, which attested to the perpetuation in the newly minted Canadian dominion of a longstanding Presbyterian tradition. Christian reverence and piety in Burns’ view pervaded the scene, encompassing not only the Presbyterian participants but the natural world as well. An unmistakable sense of solemnity and order prevailed in Burns’ view over both the crowd and the environment.71

The establishment of Presbyterian church courts also played an important part in the denomination’s campaign to assert moral sovereignty over northern North America. Such institutions aimed to promote heightened standards in popular virtue by chastising individual Presbyterians for a variety of perceived transgressions including illicit sexual activity and habitual drunkenness. They contributed to the consolidation of the denomination’s moral influence within a variety of embryonic villages and burgeoning towns.

Throughout the nineteenth century northern North America’s principal evangelical denominations—the Methodists, the Baptists, and the Presbyterians—systematically scrutinized their adherents’ behaviour in an effort to discourage vice and purge their churches of the unrepentant and seemingly incorrigible. For the Methodists, this process took place in local class meetings in which adherents would congregate in the home—or, for want of a sufficiently spacious home, the barn—of a congregation member. At such meetings members of a given congregation would discuss a wide range of spiritual and temporal issues, including supposed moral trespasses. In the case of the Baptists, conduct that was viewed as ethically dubious was publicly scrutinized by deacons and ministers at “covenant meetings” which took place every month, and which were typically attended by the entire congregation. For the Presbyterians, alleged offences were discussed and eventually dealt with at meetings of the kirk session. There, ministers and elected church elders would assess offences, interrogate alleged

perpetrators, and settle on punishments that ranged from admonishment to excommunication.72

Protestant church courts became increasingly prevalent during the mid-nineteenth century. As much of British North American society underwent a transition from subsistence agriculture to a comparatively prosperous marked-oriented economy, individuals who had traditionally been either deprived altogether of Christian ministrations or who had only been able to worship irregularly in private homes gained enhanced access to religious services. Central to this shift was the proliferation in expanding British North American towns and cities of church facilities, which in turn allowed for increased rates of Christian observance. The proliferation of churches, coupled with the emergence during the mid-nineteenth century of the fundamentally coherent Protestant culture to which I have referred, resulted in the intensification of evangelical Protestant efforts to regulate British North Americans’ behaviour.73

Early Canadian Presbyterians, in aiming to discourage such vices as extra-marital sex and public drunkenness, employed a systematic approach that was designed to thwart the chaos and sinfulness that supposedly pervaded northern North America’s wilderness. The activities of Presbyterian church courts, which sought to counter irreligion in backwoods villages as well as expanding towns, were integral to the denomination’s campaign to achieve dominion over northern North America, and to bring about the reconciliation of nature and divinity.

Nineteenth-century Presbyterian authorities divided individual communities into discrete districts so as to systematically cleanse northern North America of as much depravity as possible. The inhabitants of the various districts would then be subjected to the scrutiny of elected lay elders and in certain instances the congregation’s minister, who served as Moderator of the local kirk session. These influential figures assumed responsibility for evaluating the behaviour of the congregation members residing within a

73 Marks, “No Double-Standard?” 51.
given district. Accordingly, in the summer of 1849 the kirk session of Earltown, Nova Scotia declared that, henceforth, the community would be “divided into sections.” Individual church elders as well as the congregation’s minister would take on responsibility for assessing the conduct of the congregation members residing in one particular district and for reporting on “the state and progress of religion” within it at upcoming meetings of session. The imposition of such a disciplinary grid was identified by the Earltown session—not to mention many other Presbyterian congregations situated throughout British North America as well as elsewhere in the world—as a necessary step if they hoped to cleanse their communities of sinfulness and replace the moral wilderness with a righteous garden.

An example of the Earltown church court’s attempt to regulate morality within the various districts can be seen in their response in early 1850 to the case of Donald M., a blacksmith, and his wife, Jane M., who was accused by her husband of conceiving a child out of wedlock with Alexander M. (no relation), his journeyman assistant. After gathering information about the situation the court affirmed that “no undue motives” had prompted Donald M’s charge, adding that despite the fact that his wife was reluctant to provide “a frank confession” she nonetheless appeared to have been “in most blameworthy and suspicious circumstances” with her husband’s assistant. At a subsequent meeting of session, Jane M., who had been summoned to appear before the body, allegedly confessed her guilt, although she refused to elaborate on what in particular she had done wrong and took pains to deny that the child she was carrying had been conceived out of wedlock. Despite her best efforts to mitigate the situation, the session ultimately arrived at the “painful conclusion” that Mrs. M. was “guilty of the crime laid to her charge.” Her punishment? Excommunication “from the privileges of the Christian Church.”

The Presbyterian campaign to systematically assert moral authority over northern North America was evident in larger communities as well. Consider the disciplinary measures undertaken by Hamilton, Canada West’s Central Presbyterian Church in the mid-nineteenth century. Much like the congregation of Earltown, the community was

---

75 Ibid., 12 February 1850.
divided by the kirk session into clearly delineated districts, with each one being assigned
to either an individual church elder or the congregation’s minister. These figures, in turn,
were charged with the moral “inspection” of the congregation members residing within
their district’s boundaries.76 The session’s objective—congruent with other nineteenth-
century Presbyterian church courts—was to promote enhanced standards in popular
morality and to rid their communities of as much sinfulness as possible.

The case of Mrs. Robert S. is indicative of the Central Presbyterian Church’s
desire to expunge from their community such transgressions as chronic drunkenness. The
moderator of Hamilton’s Central Presbyterian Church, John H., stated in September of
1853 that both he and an elder, Mr. L., had recently visited the home of Mrs. Robert S., a
member of the congregation hitherto in good standing. However, Mrs. Robert S. was
allegedly found by her visitors to be “very much under the influence of intoxicating
drink.” The Moderator added that, on a subsequent occasion, he had dropped in on Mrs.
Robert S. in hopes of discussing the matter further, only to find that she was now in a
state of denial regarding the inebriated state that she was alleged to have been in during
his initial visit. Despite her insistence that she had not been inebriated, Mrs. Robert S.
was summoned to appear before the session later that month to “answer” to the charge of
drunkenness that had been made against her. She appeared before the session and denied
the charge once more. In an attempt to defend her character she provided the church court
with a letter signed by a friend, one Jane B., which stated that Mrs. Robert S. had recently
spent two days in her home while on a vacation and that, for the entirety of the visit, she
“did not taste any kind of drink.”77

Mr. L., the elder who had accompanied the moderator on his initial “visitation,”
proceeded to testify. He stated that upon their arrival Mrs. Robert S. had been found
“sitting on the step of her door.” She stumbled while attempting to rise, which in Mr. L.’s
estimation attested to the fact that she had indeed been under the influence of alcohol.
Ultimately, as a result of the evidence that had been marshaled against her, her
“disagreeable” response, and her insufficiently persuasive “evidence,” Mrs. Robert S.

---

76 PCCA Hamilton, Ontario; Central Presbyterian Church, Session Minutes, 1841-1990; 1973-8022, 13
September 1849.
77 Ibid., 14 September, 1853; 24 September 1853.
was suspended by the kirk session from church privileges. Then, in the fall of the following year, Mrs. Robert S. was called upon to appear before the session once again. This summons was prompted by a “charge of drunkenness” that had been leveled against her in this instance by the local police, and for which had been fined the sum of ten shillings. Her subsequent failure to appear before the session as requested resulted in her suspension from church privileges, a punishment that was to continue until she demonstrated a willingness to comply fully with the session’s decrees.

Some four years later Mrs. Robert S. was found yet again by the Moderator to be in “a state of intoxication.” Predictably, two church elders were dispatched to meet with her, and she was solicited to appear before the next meeting of session. Appearing in this case before the church’s disciplinary body, Mrs. Robert S. confessed her guilt, pledging to attempt to remain sober in the future, but allowing that she “could not promise” to permanently forswear the consumption of strong drink. Deeming this confession insufficient, the session concluded that, due to her frequent appearance before them for “the same fault” and her manifest inability to refrain from such morally dissolute behaviour, her name should be deleted from the Communion Roll, signifying excommunication.

Admittedly, Hamilton’s Central Presbyterian Church did not exist along the rough-hewn northern North American frontier. Yet the attempts of the congregation’s church court to systematically discourage acts of sinfulness fit neatly within a larger Presbyterian pattern of attempting to purge British North American communities of sinfulness through the projection across space of the denomination’s moral authority. Central to Presbyterian attempts to systematically promote more exacting standards in popular morality was the establishment within a variety of British North American communities—including Earltown, Nova Scotia and Hamilton, Canada West—of the denomination’s distinctive disciplinary institution.

Language and imagery that invoked aspects of the natural world occupied a prominent position within the mental world of nineteenth-century Canadian

---

78 Ibid., 24 September, 1853; 5 October, 1853.
79 Ibid., 4 October, 1854; 2 November, 1854.
80 Ibid., 3 April, 1858; 9 April, 1858. Records indicate that Mrs. Robert S., following repeated appeals, was restored to church membership in the fall of 1864, only to be removed once again in the winter of 1866 as a result of her “habitual intemperance.” Ibid., 4 October, 1864; 2 February, 1866.
Presbyterianism. The undomesticated northern North American environment, which existed within the denominational imagination as both a physical and a moral entity, functioned as a propulsive metaphor for the Presbyterians’ desire to replace the purportedly anarchic wilderness with an orderly New Eden. This transformation was to be achieved by way of a two-pronged strategy. The first component centred on the efforts of Presbyterian missionaries and pioneer ministers dispatched to sparsely populated backwoods communities, where they would propagate the denomination’s doctrines among both Euro-Canadian settlers and certain Aboriginal groups. The promotion of Presbyterian tenets within such settings was linked within the denominational consciousness to an audible transition in which an irreligious din would be replaced by either pious stillness or vocal expressions of Presbyterian fervour, and to a pattern of material advancement characterized by economic and civic sophistication. The second component of the Presbyterians’ strategy involved the establishment of the denomination’s characteristic liturgies and institutions in fledgling villages and burgeoning towns, and was borne out in outdoor communion festivals and in the disciplinary activities of Presbyterian church courts. Adherents of the denomination believed that in employing this two-pronged strategy northern North America’s supposedly untamed waste places would be redeemed and the hitherto corrupt natural world would be reconciled with God.
And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God….  
—Revelation 21:10

The Christian… demands a history of the world, a universal history whose theme shall be the general development of God’s purposes for human life.  

A statue situated on the main floor of Knox College, Toronto, captures the agonizing final moments of Margaret Wilson’s life. It is illustrative of Presbyterianism’s longstanding preoccupation with the past. The statue was donated to Knox College, a Presbyterian theological school affiliated with the University of Toronto, in 1938 by Senator A.C. Hardy of Brockville, Ontario. Neoclassical in style, it depicts a slightly-larger-than-life-sized woman—Margaret Wilson—bound to a large, sturdy stake. A stoical veneer is etched on her face. Anguish smoulders beneath the surface. Wilson nobly gazes heavenward as she awaits inescapable death.

Both the statue and the historical episode that it depicts are the products of a powerful Presbyterian mythology that has been promoted by such figures as the eighteenth-century Scottish antiquary Robert Wodrow, whose influential writings emphasized the hardships reputedly endured by devout members of the denomination at the hands of Episcopalian oppressors. Wilson and another woman, Margaret McLachlan, were purportedly sentenced to death in the spring of 1685 for their refusal to repudiate their Presbyterian beliefs and acquiesce to the English crown’s ecclesiastical supremacy. Radical seventeenth-century Scottish Presbyterians, who rejected the Episcopalian system of church policy thrust upon them by the Stuart monarchs, elected to participate in illicit outdoors services, or “conventicles.” These gatherings allowed the denomination’s most ardent adherents to worship according to the dictates of their conscience, unmolested by hostile authorities. The Presbyterian mythology maintains that the two women, along with Wilson’s sister Agnes, were apprehended on their way home from one such service, which had been held surreptitiously in the countryside of southwestern Scotland. The women’s unwillingness to renounce their convictions ran contrary to the aims of the Stuart regime, which sought to cement its politico-religious authority over the
Scottish populace. Expressions of resistance to this objective, such as Presbyterian rebelliousness, were systematically suppressed.

The following paragraph contains the essence of the mythic narrative that culminates with Wilson’s death. Thirteen-year-old Agnes Wilson, the youngest of the three women, was set free following her parents’ payment of a hefty fine. The two older women were not so fortunate. For their insubordination, eighteen-year-old Margaret Wilson and sixty-three-year old Margaret McLachlan were sentenced to death by drowning. Accordingly, they were tied to stakes in an estuary near their home of Wigtown, Scotland, where a rising tide was to take their lives. As the waters rose, Wilson was offered a last opportunity to repudiate her beliefs. She had been forced moments before to witness the fatal submersion of McLachlan, whose stake had deliberately been planted amid deeper waters further away from shore. Wilson’s persecutors assumed that subjecting the younger—and thus, they reckoned, more pliable—woman to such a ghastly spectacle would likely elicit an eleventh-hour change of heart. They were wrong. Wilson rebuffed the offer, remaining steadfast in her beliefs until the awful end. She reputedly spent her final living minutes reciting from memory excerpts from the twenty-fifth Psalm and Book of Romans. And thus a martyr was born.¹

Wilson’s execution may never have taken place. Evidence derived from seventeenth-century records indicates that, instead of dying in such a horrific manner, Wilson likely repudiated her hard-line views and received a pardon. (McLachlan’s experience, for its part, is thought to have been virtually identical.) Yet the fact that the narrative of Wilson’s demise may well be apocryphal has not prevented it from being accepted by numerous Presbyterians in Scotland as well as elsewhere in the world as an accurate account of what transpired. Indeed, Wilson’s execution features prominently within accounts of the so-called “Killing Times” of the late seventeenth century, through which scores of fervent Scottish Presbyterians were actually put to death on account of their refusal to renounce their politico-religious convictions. Her tragic final moments in the estimation of sympathetic observers epitomize Presbyterian courage and conviction in an era of grinding oppression. “Her martyrdom,” reads the didactic message that

accompanies the statue, “symbolizes the sufferings of numerous covenanted men and women opposed to kingly domination.”

The term “covenanted” in this context is replete with meaning. It refers to the National Covenant of 1638, through which thousands of ordinary Scots publicly pledged their devotion to Presbyterianism and constitutional governance in response to the unpopular liturgical and political impositions of King Charles I and the Anglican Archbishop, William Laud. It refers, too, to the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643, which bound Scotland’s most ardent Presbyterians to the English Parliamentarians during their Civil War with the Royalists. The term also alludes to the covenantal bond that united God to his chosen people, the Israelites, as recounted in Genesis. The term “covenanted” therefore incorporates Wilson, one of the “Wigtown martyrs,” and her uncompromising compatriots into a grand historical lineage.²

The heroic rendering of Margaret Wilson in Knox College attests to the enduring potency of Presbyterianism’s past. For upwards of three centuries zealous members of the denomination have exalted the Covenanters as a symbol of Presbyterianism’s unwavering fidelity. Celebrations of the Covenanters’ religious fervour are by no means confined to the religious realm. On the contrary, their heroic reputation has to a great degree become intertwined with the Scottish national identity. The Covenanters’ legacy of suffering and sacrifice has been appropriated, modified, and yoked into the service of groups advocating everything from nineteenth-century Utopianism to contemporary constitutional devolutionism. For further evidence of the extent to which the Covenanting tradition has become enmeshed in the Scottish psyche one need look only to the kitschy Edinburgh pub located not far from one of the principal monuments dedicated to their memory. Painted crimson red, it bears the cringe-worthy name “The Last Drop.³

It is my contention that nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians fit neatly within this tradition of invoking and celebrating significant historical actors and events. A

---


compelling conception of the past in which groups such as the Covenanters occupied a prominent position permeated the early Canadian Presbyterian consciousness. This conception anchored the denomination in an elaborate historical narrative that was nothing short of majestic in scope. The Presbyterian interpretation of history began with the forging of the covenantal bond between God and Israel roughly two thousand years before Jesus’ birth and culminated triumphantly in the Christian millennium. Everything in-between represented the divinely orchestrated unfolding of God’s astonishingly intricate design for the world and its inhabitants.

Notwithstanding the Wigtown Martyrs’ heavily mythologized plight, the Presbyterians’ historical narrative was unmistakably patriarchal. Men, acting under providential auspices, were portrayed as the catalysts of historical change. Their female counterparts, by contrast, were typically cast as passive entities whose contributions to the unfolding of the providential design were at most complementary.

The Presbyterians’ historical narrative placed substantial emphasis throughout on such themes as sacrifice, perseverance, and violent conflict. Ardent adherents of the denomination located themselves within an epic tradition in which they were charged with responsibility for carrying on the divinely sanctioned work of such heroic figures as the ancient Israelites; early Protestant standard-bearers John Calvin and John Knox; and fiercely pious groups like the Scottish Covenanters and the English Puritans, with the latter group being portrayed by nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians as a “kindred” spiritual community with whom they shared a tenacious commitment to doctrinal orthodoxy and the principle of religious liberty. Canadian Presbyterian icons were integrated into this grand lineage as well, including the Huguenots of New France, who as Calvinists were dubbed by nineteenth-century observers Canada’s “first Presbyterians”; the Reverend James MacGregor, an indefatigable pioneer missionary in the Maritime colonies during late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; and the Reverend John Black, the denomination’s “apostle” at the Red River settlement beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. The heroic protagonists involved in the Presbyterians’ historical narrative were in numerous instances celebrated as champions of religious virtue and civil liberty, which were frequently portrayed as inter-related phenomena.
From the vantage point of the denomination’s elaborate historical mythology, nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians were not merely one of many Christian groups struggling to carve out a niche for themselves on the British Empire’s outskirts. Rather, they were part of a venerable tradition that was instrumental, through the initiatives and sacrifices of martyrs, missionaries, and evangelical voluntary societies, to the worldwide diffusion of piety and righteousness. By equipping the early Canadian Presbyterians with an enhanced sense of meaning and mystique, this grand historical narrative served to under-gird an ethos of communal purpose and inter-connectedness. It also reinforced a sense of emotional and cultural continuity with idealized Scottish and Ulsterite homelands that had been left behind by Presbyterian immigrants and their North American-born descendants.

So ingrained was the Presbyterians’ conception of history that it exerted influence even when the denomination’s subgroups quarreled with one another. Intra-denominational disputes regarding the degree to which the state should involve itself in the affairs of the church reveal how deeply rooted the denomination’s conception of history truly was. In such instances aggrieved Presbyterian factions frequently emphasized their denomination’s glorious common inheritance and divinely favoured status—albeit in differing ways—in an effort to substantiate their divergent politico-religious contentions. History was commandeered and conveniently interpreted by the various subgroups in an effort to corroborate their beliefs, resulting in the formulation of temporally expedient “usable pasts.” Thus, even when Presbyterianism’s constituent components found themselves bogged down in sectarian rancour, an elaborate historical mythology occupied an unmistakably important position within the wider denominational consciousness.

While the Presbyterian conception of the past consistently influenced the present, the present also exerted substantial influence upon the past. That is, while members of the denomination regularly cited historically significant events, groups, and individuals in an attempt to sharpen their arguments regarding an array of contemporary controversies, they also warped history so as to render their contentions optimally effective. The Presbyterian conception of the past, then, was neither static nor unambiguous, but rather fluid and vigorously contested.
The Presbyterians’ abiding emphasis on aspects of the past conditioned their understanding of time itself. History in their understanding was governed by God, and was geared inexorably toward the realization of the divinely authored plan. It followed in their view that the unfolding of time was neither amoral nor wholly inscrutable but rather purposeful and shot through with eschatological import. To be sure, God was capable of behaving in mysterious ways. Yet this capacity for divine inscrutability did not detract from the fact that all events were ultimately directed, under the auspices of an omniscient superintending providence, toward the proliferation of Protestant piety and, surely, Christ’s Second Coming. Influencing the Presbyterians’ historical account, then, was the progress-oriented thrust that characterized much of secular historiography throughout the English-speaking world during the nineteenth century and beyond.4

The Presbyterian conception of history stretched across the British North American provinces and persisted in various permutations throughout the nineteenth century. Propagated by way of denominational newspapers, sermons, public addresses, and Sabbath school lessons, it incorporated members of a geographically scattered, institutionally fragmented denomination into a fundamentally coherent conceptual community.

The Presbyterian tendency to draw on the past was without question an effective rhetorical strategy. Members of the denomination frequently invoked historically significant episodes, individuals, and groups during both inter- and intra-denominational conflicts as a means of infusing their arguments with enhanced legitimacy and forcefulness. Yet their conception of history was not simply the product of a disingenuous design that had been devised solely for the purposes of sectarian gain. The richly textured conception of the past that pervaded the nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterian imagination can more profitably be understood as the result of an intimate, if highly selective, familiarity with history and its supposed lessons.

This chapter will survey the principal features of the sprawling Presbyterian historical narrative, assess its contribution to the formulation of a coherent

---

denominational sentiment, and examine the way in which it shaped the denomination’s understanding of time. It aims to build on recent scholarship pertaining to the part played by historical reminiscences and acts of commemoration in shaping ethno-religious identities in Canada. The chapter ultimately contends that an elaborate conception of the past was integral to the early Canadian Presbyterian worldview. It provided members of an institutionally divided, spatially diffuse denomination with a deep imaginative reservoir of riveting events and heroic protagonists from which they were able to derive an intellectual synthesis of pride and purpose.

The ideas of three scholars—Northrop Frye, Hayden White, and Michael Kammen—shed valuable light on the early Canadian Presbyterian understanding of the past. Central to the denomination’s interpretation of history was a distinctive mythology. Frye has described myth as a “type of story” that is chiefly concerned with “containing the form of tradition.” He refers in this instance to the narrative structure by which individuals, events, and edifying morals are woven together into self-contained accounts. Myths in Frye’s understanding typically possess a perceptible beginning, a definitive end, and an intervening sequence of occurrences consisting of trying setbacks and invigorating advances. Representative of this undulating pattern is the Biblical narrative itself, which begins with the creation of the universe and wraps up with the world’s apocalyptic end. In-between one encounters a fluctuating succession of events that, in its fundamental features, mirrors the contours of a roller-coaster. That is, the Biblical narrative is characterized by an alternating series of distressing drops—the Fall, God’s destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the deluge wrought by widespread wickedness—and uplifting

---


rises—Israel’s miraculous deliverance from Egypt, Joshua’s martial successes, Daniel’s exhibitions of religious integrity in Babylon.

Myths, in privileging narrative structure over verifiable evidence, inevitably straddle the barrier separating fact from fiction. They are primarily concerned in Frye’s understanding not with actual historical actors and their experiences, but with the way in which their stories conveyed. He does not suggest that the content of myths is necessarily untrue. Rather, he views the content of mythic accounts as at most a secondary consideration. The principal function of mythology, Frye contends, is not to chronicle in meticulous and unerring detail what happened to a specific individual or group in a specific location over a specific period of time. It is, instead, to facilitate the propagation of compelling stories that adhere to a distinct narrative formula. Myth, then, is the literary mechanism through which grand tales are told.

Hayden White has illuminated several of the methodological strategies deployed by scholars in attempting to render the past intelligible. Authors of historical works are in White’s conception motivated by an ingrained yearning to imbue “real events” with an “integrity, fullness, and closure” that can only exist in the imaginative realm. Reality, he maintains, does not conform to the contours of carefully crafted “stories,” complete with clearly delineated beginnings, middles, and ends. On the contrary, reality presents itself to us as comparatively erratic and untidy. White attributes the appearance of narrative coherence in historical works to a pervasive, though often unwitting, authorial tendency to privilege or “rank” certain issues, individuals, and phenomena over others. This tendency, which is fuelled by the author’s often-subconscious aesthetic and/or moral preferences, strips complex issues and events of their ambiguity and invests them with a teleological thrust. This transformation, in turn, allows the author to project a misleading thematic consistency and linear sense of progress “backwards” onto the past, resulting in the emergence of an easily digestible story. White has described this phenomenon—through which the past is shorn of its complexity and rendered relatively unambiguous—

---

as a process of “emplotment” by which unique historical circumstances are moulded to fit the shape of a pre-existing narrative schema. A tendency toward emplotment is in White’s understanding inherent in the very marrow of western historiography.

For Michael Kammen, societies “arouse and arrange their historical memories to suit their psychic needs.” Historical recollections, he posits, are less an exact replica of the past—which, after all, is far too unwieldy to be accurately remembered, distilled, and recounted—than an imprecise account of what is thought to have occurred. Frequently formulated with contemporary convictions and anxieties in mind, collective memories can serve to perpetuate the values and institutions of the dominant “civic culture” or, alternatively, to propagate popular “folk” traditions, through which long-held beliefs and customs are transmitted from one generation to the next. Collective memories can be perpetuated formally, through monuments, museums, and celebratory scholarly works, or informally, through oral accounts. Yet while collective memories are capable of serving a variety of purposes and of assuming myriad forms, they nevertheless possess certain irreducible characteristics: they are highly selective in nature; they can be expediently marshaled and manipulated so as to advance certain agendas; and they play an important role in shaping conceptions of identity, in that they provide groups and individuals with a corpus of stories and symbols from which they derive a sense of meaning and, often, validation.

Applying the theories of Frye, White, and Kammen to the mental world of nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism is instructive. The Presbyterian conception of history accords with Frye’s definition of myth. It featured a beginning—the

---


establishment of the covenantal bond between God and Israel; an end—the realization of God’s millennial kingdom; and a lengthy “in-between” time characterized by a turbulent sequence of events in which righteous protagonists, including the early Canadian Presbyterians themselves, grappled with a series of diabolical adversaries. This dialectical struggle pitting heroes against villains was central to the Presbyterian rendering of history. It functioned as a narrative engine, propelling the denomination’s account along from one sequence of events to the next and infusing it throughout with a heightened sense of drama. The climactic triumph of virtue over sinfulness—which followed the apocalyptic clash between good and evil foreshadowed in scripture—would be all the more compelling in view of the numerous obstacles that had been toppled by righteous individuals and groups along the way. The Presbyterian conception of history can thus be seen as possessing a particular “shape” and “rhythm.” That is, it was characterized by an alternating series of dispiriting setbacks and uplifting successes that stretched in a virtually uninterrupted sequence from the beginning of their epic narrative all the way to the world’s apocalyptic end. What is more, the denomination’s historical narrative was punctuated at regular intervals by conflicts involving virtuous protagonists and their demonic tormentors. The Presbyterian rendering of the past was thus highly consonant with the mythic formula articulated by Frye.

The Presbyterian interpretation of the past also meshes with White’s observations regarding the historian’s tendency to artificially imbue the past with coherence. Their interpretation of history knitted together an array of seemingly disparate events that occurred in different parts of the world, at different times, and in different political, economic, and cultural contexts. The result was a coherent story that demonstrated beyond all doubt that the Presbyterians were indeed the heirs of a uniquely righteous heritage. Implicit within this grand narrative was a pronounced sense of historical succession and cosmic progress that linked the early Canadian Presbyterians to their heroic predecessors while simultaneously equipping them with a solemn responsibility for the advancement of God’s redemptive plan for the world and its inhabitants.

The Presbyterian understanding of history also bore a close resemblance to the account of historical memory put forth by Kammen. It was selective—members of the denomination sifted through virtually the entirety of the past and plucked out certain
actors and events, which were subsequently portrayed as representative of Presbyterianism’s illustrious inherited tradition. It was expedient—members of the denomination harnessed history and interpreted it in a selective manner that lent to the denomination an ennobling sense of grandeur. And it was central to the denominational self-conception—it allowed the Presbyterians to fashion a heroic identity for themselves that was linked to history’s irreversible onward march.

Devout nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians believed that a responsibility for the advancement of God’s providential plan had been handed down throughout the ages from one divinely favoured group to the next, and conceived of themselves as a link in this magnificent unbroken chain. Accompanying this exalted status was a duty, bestowed upon them by God himself, to promote piety and righteousness as widely and as vigorously as possible. To deviate from this duty, ardent adherents of the denomination were convinced, would be to invite punitive manifestations of divine displeasure.⁹

Tracing the progress of this elaborate historical lineage was central to the Presbyterians’ understanding of the past. Their historical narrative unfolded as follows: it began with the ancient Israelites; continued within the early Christian church; was threatened during the Medieval period by Roman Catholic “prelacy”; was re-invigorated during the Protestant Reformation; defended during the seventeenth century against Episcopalian oppressors; and persisted into the nineteenth century where fervent members of the denomination—including those situated in British North America—served as its defenders. The Presbyterians’ ability to substantiate this elaborate historical lineage hinged on their status as latter-day Israelites. Zealous adherents of the denomination took pains to portray themselves as a divinely favoured spiritual entity that was linked to God by way of a covenantal relationship. Without this special status the Presbyterians’ understanding of the past crumbled, amounting at best to an elaborate fiction and at worst to a pathetic delusion.

---

Nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians’ belief in their status as latter-day Israelites was evident in a series of Sabbath school lessons that were published in *The Monthly Record of the Church of Scotland in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick & Adjoining Provinces* during the winter of 1874. The lessons, which aimed to systematically inculcate Christian morality in young peoples’ minds, explicitly portrayed Presbyterianism as an object of divine favour. They began by stressing the privileged cosmic status occupied by the ancient Israelites, and then proceeded to portray nineteenth-century Presbyterians as the Israelites’ spiritual successors.

A lesson drawn from Exodus on Moses’ parting of the Red Sea is illustrative of the Presbyterians’ tendency to equate themselves with the ancient Israelites. It reputedly offered “wonderful proof” of God’s paternal care for the Israelites, “His ancient and chosen people.” With the seething waters before them and their vengeful Egyptian tormentors coming hot on their heels, the Israelite masses were afflicted by a crippling “fear.” Yet despite their anxieties regarding whether or not they would escape Egyptian captivity, Moses, whose faith in God was unwavering, enacted the Almighty’s will and parted the waters, allowing for the Israelites’ deliverance from tyranny.10 For the author of the lesson, the miraculous escape of God’s chosen people threw into relief the fact that the universe’s omnipotent creator, who is “the same yesterday, today, and forever,” never ceases to guide “His people” wherever in the world their lot may be cast. “Very often,” the author added, making explicit the connection between ancient Israel and nineteenth-century Presbyterianism, “we are like the Israelites.” When faced with challenging circumstances, nineteenth-century Presbyterians are prone to potentially paralyzing bouts of fear. But God’s chosen people—be they ancient Israelites or nineteenth-century Presbyterians—must always remain faithful, for the universe’s creator is eternally on their side.11

The Presbyterians traced their distinctive system of church polity—which consisted of a decentralized system of church government led by lay elders, or presbyters, and clergymen who were equal to one another in ecclesiastical status—to ancient Israel as well. Doing so served to invest the denomination’s traditions with enhanced

legitimacy, as it implied an ecclesiastical continuity with the governmental institutions employed by God’s chosen people. While the Israelites “were yet in bondage in Egypt, we find that they had their Elders… who were obeyed as heads of tribes, and rulers among the people.” These “Elders” were allegedly “men of gravity, experience, and wisdom” who served as the peoples’ divinely ordained “representatives.” No one who had “intelligently and impartially” read the Old Testament could deny that the governmental mechanisms employed by the Israelites, God’s “covenanted people,” contained the essence of what would come to be known as Presbyterianism.12

The Reverend Henry Esson articulated similar views regarding Presbyterianism’s ancient pedigree in an 1835 sermon that was delivered in Montreal’s St. Gabriel Street Church. The governmental structure of the “Hebrew Commonwealth,” he declared, was the “secret source” of Israel’s “national spirit.” This spirit was instrumental to Israel’s existence as a veritable beacon of religious virtue and righteousness amid an otherwise benighted “heathen world.” The significance of Presbyterian governmental traditions was in his conception virtually identical. They were “indelibly” etched on the Presbyterian heart, and were conducive to an “impressive fidelity” and religious “genius” that differentiated devout adherents of the denomination from those of all other religious traditions, whose tenets and traditions were inevitably rooted in error.13

Yet according to nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians the Jews of the Common Era who succeeded the ancient Israelites were unable to maintain God’s favour. The reason? The Jews’ refusal to accept Christ as their saviour. Zealous nineteenth-century Presbyterians maintained that, without Jesus’ miraculous birth and redemptive mission, the entirety of history would be purged of purpose, disintegrating into “a very Babel of confusion.” Adherents of the denomination therefore denounced Judaism without the Christian saviour as “an unmeaning superstition.” Jesus, who had been sent by God to suffer and die on humanity’s behalf, was the mainspring of all “wisdom” and

12 The Presbyterian; Missionary and Religious Record of the Presbyterian Church of Canada in Connection with the Church of Scotland, September 1850, 137.
13 Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives (PCCA), AR5 E7S4; A Sermon, Preached in the Presbyterian Church, St. Gabriel Street, Montreal, on the 30th of Nov. 1835 (St. Andrew’s Day). By the Rev Henry Esson, Senior Chaplain of the St. Andrew’s Society of Montreal, 47-8.
“sanctity.” Without him the “Jewish Church” amounted in the Presbyterians’ view to a misguided heathen institution.14

Peter Brown, George’s father and a devout Free Church Presbyterian, weighed in on the supposed rupture that occurred between God and the Jewish people in an undated journal entry. His remarks regarding the Jews’ fall from grace suggest that such sentiments circulated not only in the public sphere of sectarian publications and sermons, but in the private consciences of individual adherents of the denomination as well. Brown began his discussion by describing the ancient Israelites as “the chosen people of God,” adding that they had been exalted “above all nations” and endowed by the Almighty with “the true religion.” Yet in Brown’s conception the Jews lost their way. Despite God’s paternalistic care for them, the Jewish people became “corrupted and degenerated,” eventually “crucifying his son who came to save sinners.” God, in response, “left them to be subdued by the Romans.” The Almighty’s repudiation of the Jews “never would have happened,” Brown lamented, “if they had kept his will… in their hearts” and embraced his son.15

Yet Presbyterianism’s “grand features” and “leading principles” were not left to wither on the vine following the purported parting of the ways between God and the Jewish people. Rather, according to the Presbyterian historical narrative the denomination’s characteristic ecclesiastical institutions were preserved within the early Christian church. Ecclesiastical polity among Jesus’ first followers, consistent with Presbyterianism’s tenets, was purportedly characterized by “parity of ministers,” with “Christ alone” serving as the church’s head.16 Emphasizing the persistence of Presbyterian church polity within the early Christian church served to invest the denomination’s ecclesiastical traditions with heightened legitimacy and prestige. How could any other denomination compete with such an illustrious heritage?

Presbyterian institutions allegedly made their way under providential auspices to the British Isles. The Reverend R.F. Burns informed a Presbyterian audience in St.

15 Library and Archives Canada (henceforth LAC), George Brown Papers; microfilm reel C-1601; reel no. 4; Peter Brown’s Journal.
16 Home and Foreign Record of the Presbyterian Church of the Lower Provinces of British North America, January 1861, 1-3.
Catharine’s, Canada West in early 1867 that St. Patrick, “a Scotchman,” was responsible for introducing to Ireland in the fifth century Presbyterianism’s uniquely righteous ecclesiastical institutions. St. Patrick, Burns elaborated, established in that nation a decentralized system of church governance that was led by ministers and elected elders, a form of ecclesiastical polity that “was modeled like all other Apostolical Churches, after the Jewish Synagogue.” Such traditions constituted the essence of Presbyterian church governance, a continuity that would not have been lost on Burns’ congregation. He affirmed that, as a result of St. Patrick’s efforts, Ireland came to be known as the “Island of the Saints,” serving as “a centre of light” in an otherwise benighted world.\(^\text{17}\)

Burns added that the central characteristics of Presbyterianism made their way to Scotland during the sixth century as result of the efforts of St. Columba. Columba, “an Irishman,” essentially “paid back to Scotland the debt which his then favoured island”—Ireland—“owed to Patrick the Scotchman.” The result in Burns’ understanding was the establishment in Scotland of Presbyterian ecclesiastical traditions. He added that the Culdees, a Scottish monastic order, were responsible for nurturing these institutions—which in Burns’ view constituted the true “religion of Jesus”—during the eighth century, which allowed for their perpetuation. Scotland, as a result of the efforts of St. Columba and the Culdees, existed in Burns’ conception as a locus of de facto Presbyterian piety centuries before the Protestant Reformation.\(^\text{18}\)

The Presbyterian conception of the past was by no means comprised of an uninterrupted series of triumphs. Consistent with the mythic literary schema to which I have referred, their historical narrative was also littered with obstacles. Such entities were vital to the unfolding of the Presbyterians’ historical narrative. In persevering and eventually surmounting impediments like widespread sinfulness and religious persecution, the ancient Israelites and their successors were able to exhibit such virtues as piety and integrity while simultaneously advancing God’s providential plan for the world and its inhabitants. This unambiguous struggle between good and evil, which paved the way for the eventual establishment of God’s millennial kingdom, provided the Presbyterians’ epic historical account with its essential narrative thrust.

\(^{17}\) PCCA AR5 V3D6 Valedictory Discourse (In Substance) Delivered in the Canada Presbyterian Church, St. Catharine’s, 24 February 1867, by the Reverend R.F. Burns, 10.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 10.
During the medieval period a despotic Roman “prelacy” threatened the Presbyterian institutions that had been established in ancient Israel and perpetuated by the early Christian church, St. Patrick, St. Columba, and the Culdees. This allegedly “unscriptural” form of church polity was portrayed by nineteenth-century adherents of the denomination as replacing Presbyterian church governance with a unscriptural ecclesiastical hierarchy. Western Christendom, as a result, was plunged into a “dolorous… darkness” that would persist virtually unchallenged until the sixteenth century.\(^\text{19}\)

Yet Presbyterianism persisted. According to the denomination’s historical mythology, controversial Christian sects located on continental Europe preserved Presbyterian traditions during the medieval period. These included the Waldenses, who in the twelfth century incurred the wrath of the Roman Church through their flouting of orthodox liturgies and their attempts to translate the Bible into vernacular languages, and the Albigenses, whose radical asceticism and insistence on the absolute sinfulness of the material world prompted Pope Innocent III in the thirteenth century to launch a crusade against them. In view of their willingness to endure persecution in the name of religious virtue and liberty, both groups were portrayed by nineteenth-century Presbyterians as safeguarding the essence of the “true faith” during arguably the darkest days of Roman Catholic oppression.\(^\text{20}\)

Then, in the sixteenth century, divine providence brought forth a “noble army” of Reformers who took up the “torch of truth” that such groups as the Waldenses and Albigenses had sheltered and kept ablaze. Such iconic figures as Martin Luther and John Calvin were portrayed as passing the torch along “from land to land,” resulting in the spiritual redemption of substantial segments of western Christendom.\(^\text{21}\) They were also responsible in the estimation of nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians for propagating throughout much of western society religious and civil liberty. The Reformers’ advancement of these allegedly inter-related freedoms was portrayed as arguably their greatest contribution to world history. An article published in the February

\(^{19}\) Home and Foreign Record of the Presbyterian Church of the Lower Provinces, January 1861, 1-3.
\(^{20}\) The Presbyterian, December 1850, 185-6.
1864 edition of the *Monthly Record of the Church of Scotland in Nova Scotia and the Adjoining Provinces* observed that, as a result of the Reformation, “medieval darkness” was “swept away” and a ray of “sacred and civil” light was allowed to shine on both “Church and World.” All true Christians must acknowledge the Reformation’s significance, the article’s author declared, for it extended to the faithful believer “an open Bible,” a “reformed Church” and a “right to worship God according to his conscience, none making him afraid.” Such were the ennobling liberties for which the Reformers and their sympathizers throughout the Protestant world had been willing “to labour and die.”

The architects of the Protestant Reformation were also portrayed as adhering with virtual unanimity to Presbyterian traditions. The denomination’s distinctive system of church polity was allegedly embraced by such figures as Luther and Calvin as the soundest form of church polity. This was evident, zealous nineteenth-century Presbyterians maintained, in the reformers’ commitment to the “Apostolic” tradition in which prelacy was unknown and church elders, whose authority was “plainly warranted” in scripture, assumed positions of leadership within a decentralized system of church government. Within such a system, “individual congregations were not to be considered as independent communities, but as so many members of the body to which they belonged, and to be governed by representative assemblies for the benefit of the whole.” Thus, in addition to promoting both religious and civil liberty, the Reformation was celebrated by nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians for contributing to the perpetuation of denominational traditions that reputedly originated in ancient Israel.

Which brings us to the next chapter in the elaborate Presbyterian historical saga: the Scottish Reformation. Such “earnest, godly” figures as St. Columba and the Culdees had anticipated this event with their proto-Presbyterian institutions centuries before Luther enumerated his famous ninety-five theses. And while the principles and institutions that had been established by Columba and perpetuated by the Culdees were subsequently threatened by the “strong hand” of Papal tyranny, they were reputedly successful in stoking in Scotland a religious fire that “could never fully be

---

23 *The Presbyterian*, December 1850, 186.
It was to this conflagration that such Scottish Reformers as Patrick Hamilton, George Wishart, and John Knox would eventually contribute. The result of these individuals’ efforts in the estimation of devout Presbyterians from the sixteenth century onward was the establishment of a latter-day covenant between the Scottish nation and God.25

Nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians celebrated the “young and amiable” Patrick Hamilton for contributing to Scotland’s religious transformation. Hamilton, who was burnt at the stake in 1528 for publicly espousing religious convictions that ran contrary to the teachings of the Roman Church, is thought to have been Scottish Protestantism’s first martyr. A willingness to sacrifice his life rather than “worship the Virgin, or acknowledge the Pope as the Vicar of Christ,” garnered for Hamilton an esteemed place within the historical mythology of early Canadian Presbyterianism.26 He purportedly fit comfortably within a longstanding tradition of principled individuals and groups who were willing to suffer and in certain instances die in the name of religious virtue and freedom of conscience.

Nineteenth-century Presbyterians also exalted the “godly, eloquent, self-denying” George Wishart as a symbol of noble religious sacrifice during the era of the Scottish Reformation. Wishart, like Hamilton, was immolated in 1546 as a result of his rejection of Catholic tenets and traditions. Outraged Protestants responded to this event by murdering the Roman Catholic Cardinal, Andrew Beaton, who was thought to have authorized the execution. The Scottish Protestants’ reaction to Wishart’s death was in the estimation of nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians entirely understandable. “Goaded on to madness” by Popish oppression, Scotland’s fiercest Protestants naturally sought to exact revenge on the “notorious” Cardinal who was responsible for Hamilton’s death. Yet the Canadian Presbyterians’ interpretation of the Scottish Catholics’ reaction

26 Monthly Record of the Church of Scotland in Nova Scotia and the Adjoining Provinces, June 1864, 103.
to Beaton’s murder, which involved perpetuating the cycle of sectarian retribution and bloodshed, was markedly different. Whereas nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians’ portrayed the Scottish Protestants’ execution of Beaton as wholly understandable, the Roman Catholics’ seemingly similar response was denounced as an inhumane exhibition of “Revenge and redress.”

Nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians, in celebrating the Scottish Reformation, reserved their highest praise for John Knox. Where nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians credited William Wallace for resisting English tyranny in the fourteenth century, they lauded John Knox for struggling against the “more grinding oppression” of Roman Catholicism more than two centuries later. Knox, with “truth on his side,” combated what fervent nineteenth-century Presbyterians identified as Roman Catholic cruelty and superstition. Accordingly, Knox was likened by members of the denomination situated in northern North America to a host of heroic historical figures who had struggled against injustice and irreligion, including “the Israelites in Egypt… Daniel and his followers in Babylon… [and] Christ and his apostles in the Roman Empire.”

The importance of the Scottish Reformation and its heroic progenitors featured prominently within the early Canadian Presbyterian consciousness. A series of addresses designed “to call the attention of the people to the character and results” of that event were delivered throughout the British North American colonies in 1860 on the occasion of the Scottish Reformation’s tercentenary. Presbyterian authorities anticipated that this act of commemoration would “be one of deep solemnity,” and would encourage “a hearty gratitude” among adherents of the denomination for the “blessings” conferred upon them by the engineers of Scotland’s transition from “Popery” to Protestantism. Individual Presbyterian congregations and synods followed suit. For example, St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, Toronto, resolved in early 1860 to devote a service to the “commemoration of the Tercentenary of the Scottish Reformation,” while the Presbyterian Synod of New Brunswick in connection with the Church of Scotland took

---

27 Ibid.
28 Monthly Record of the Church of Scotland in Nova Scotia and the Adjoining Provinces, June 1864, 103.
29 Ibid., 104.
30 The Presbyterian, November, 1860, 160-1.
pains that same year to honour the Scottish Reformation, which was credited by the synod’s members for bringing about “the greatest blessings in our Father Land.”

The Reverend John Taylor “joyfully and devoutly” reflected on the significance of the Scottish Reformation during an 1860 public address delivered in Hamilton, Canada West. The Reformation in Taylor’s view was responsible for the “growth and maturity” of Scottish Protestantism despite acts of “wholesale slaughter” carried out by “cruel” Roman Catholics. An essay published the following month by the Reverend Andrew Ferrier of Caledonia, Canada West argued that the Scottish Reformation amounted to “a breaking of the yoke of popery in Scotland,” by which the nation’s populace had hitherto been “enslaved.” The Reformation in Ferrier’s conception wrested ecclesiastical and civil authority from a corrupt prelacy and precipitated a process of spiritual reinvigoration that was allegedly responsible for Scotland’s attainment of an enviable combination of national piety and prosperity. Yet another article published in 1860 commemorated the “sufferings and the triumphs” of such “heaven-prompted heroes” as Hamilton, Wishart, and Knox, individuals who purportedly attained for Scotland the indispensable aspects of Protestant worship—namely, “an open Bible and a preached gospel.” Their efforts were thought to have “exalted Scotland as a nation,” a gift for which her “sons”—including those situated in British North America—“can never be sufficiently thankful.”

Momentous though it may have been, the Presbyterian historical narrative did not conclude with the Scottish Reformation. The sacrifices made in the mid- and late seventeenth century by the Scottish Covenanters also featured prominently within the denomination’s account of the past. These early modern Presbyterians were celebrated by their nineteenth-century denominational counterparts for refusing to repudiate their religious convictions, and for resisting ecclesiastical and political domination. The “civil and religious liberties” of Scottish Presbyterians were purportedly threatened in this era not by Roman Catholics, but by the equally oppressive Stuart monarchs and their Episcopalian collaborators. According to the denomination’s historical mythology,

---

31 PCCA 1989-8027 Toronto St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church (King and Simcoe Streets); Session Minutes, 1842-93, 6 December, 1860; UCA 79.0353/TR Synod of New Brunswick in Connection with the Church of Scotland. Transcript of Minutes, 1859-1868. 12 July 1860.
33 Ibid., July 1860, 197-201.
34 Ibid., 201.
35 Ibid., December 1861, 358.
seventeenth-century Presbyterians had Episcopacy—essentially hierarchical church government headed by bishops—as well as unchecked monarchical authority foisted upon them, and were temporarily prohibited from publicly professing their religious convictions. The Stuarts were bent on “reigning as absolute monarchs,” and were determined “to put down by the strong arm of civil authority, all who expressed the slightest dissatisfaction with their tyrannical proceedings.”

Yet while the seventeenth-century Presbyterians’ lives “hung in constant doubt” as a result of Stuart tyranny they reputedly held fast to their convictions, secure in the knowledge that divine providence was on their side. This firmness of opinion was attributable, in the estimation of one mid-nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterian observer, to the fact that God “is ever with his Church in affliction.” God, in other words, could be expected to shelter his chosen people, as he sheltered the Israelites following their providentially sanctioned flight from Egyptian captivity in “the deserts” of oppression.

The English Puritans, who emerged as uncompromising proponents of Calvinistic orthodoxy in the late fifteenth century, were integrated into the Presbyterians’ elaborate historical narrative as well. The Puritans—whose reputation for religious fanaticism and intolerance toward alternative viewpoints was studiously ignored—were portrayed as cut from the same cloth as the Scottish Covenanters. Like his Covenanting counterpart, the archetypal Puritan was “Calvinistic in his creed, and regarded himself as the special object of the solicitude of the Almighty.” What is more, both groups reputedly looked forward not to earthly riches or acclaim, but rather to a “heavenly kingdom” situated beyond the grave.

The British “nation,” which officially embraced Protestantism and constitutional governance following the Glorious Revolution of 1688, was purportedly indebted to the Puritans for their “deep hatred” of religious and political injustice. According to the nineteenth-century Presbyterians’ historical narrative, the Puritans’ aversion to ecclesiastical and civil tyranny was evident during the English Civil War. This event

---

36 Canadian Presbyterian Magazine, March 1854, unpaginated. See also Canadian Presbyterian Magazine, January 1854, unpaginated.
37 Ibid.
38 Canadian Presbyterian Magazine, March 1854, unpaginated.
pitted the Puritans against their Royalist adversaries, who allegedly aimed to stifle expressions of religious and political dissent. The Puritans’ contribution to religious and political liberty in the seventeenth century was by no means confined to England. Their principled insistence that “GOD ALONE IS LORD OF THE CONSCIENCE” purportedly reverberated throughout much of the western world, penetrating “the prison houses of tyranny—waking up the nations—overturning thrones and dynasties.” Indeed, the Puritans’ insistence on freedom of religion and conscience was portrayed by nineteenth-century Presbyterians as largely responsible for obliterating the foundations of spiritual and temporal injustice.39 Presbyterians and Puritans were thus portrayed as “kindred” spiritual groupings to whom much of western society was indebted for their resistance to tyrannical authority in church and state.40

The Puritans, ardent nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians maintained, made an especially important contribution to the development of Britain’s constitution. This elaborate bundle of laws, conventions, and institutions was viewed by nineteenth-century members of the denomination as largely responsible for Britain’s unmatched combination of prosperity, might, and “moral grandeur.” 41

The early Canadian Presbyterian emphasis on the greatness of the British constitution is immensely revealing and merits further investigation. Whereas nineteenth-century adherents of the denomination portrayed the seventeenth-century Stuart monarchs as agents of oppression, the Glorious Revolution—which witnessed a Protestant King, William of Orange, assuming the English Crown, and which resulted in a permanent diminution in arbitrary monarchical power—reputedly ushered in a new era of religious and political freedom. This transition occasioned a dramatic shift in Presbyterian attitudes toward what had been known since the Union of 1707 as the British Crown. No longer a perceived source of arbitrary ecclesiastical and civil coercion, it came to be seen by members of the denomination as a veritable beacon of enlightenment and justice.42 The Puritans, as the English equivalent of the Scottish Covenanters, were celebrated for their indispensable contribution to the rise within the

39 Home and Foreign Record of the Presbyterian Church of the Lower Provinces, January 1861, 1-3.
40 Colonial Patriot, 2 October 1828, 244.
41 Canadian Presbyterian Magazine, March 1854.
British Isles of religious and political liberty. They too were integrated into the early Canadian Presbyterians’ historical mythology.

“Canadian” Presbyterians were integrated into the denomination’s account of the past as well. Particular attention was paid by nineteenth-century observers to the following figures: the Huguenots of New France; Nova Scotia’s pioneering Presbyterian missionaries; and early Presbyterian standard-bearers in western Canada. Incorporating such peoples into the denomination’s historical narrative was advantageous, as it tacitly affirmed that nineteenth-century members of the denomination were indeed the heirs of a glorious trans-oceanic heritage that linked a succession of divinely favoured peoples together in an unbroken chain that extended magnificently throughout the ages.

George Patterson, a nineteenth-century Presbyterian minister and historian of colonial Nova Scotia, emphasized what he identified as northern North America’s extensive Presbyterian past. North America’s Huguenots, he explained, adhered to a Calvinistic confession of faith that explicitly acknowledged the bible as the only reliable source of religious truth, while at the same time acknowledging the veracity of the doctrine of ministerial parity. This combination of Calvinistic theology and decentralized church polity rendered New France’s Huguenots positively Presbyterian regarding both “doctrine, [and] worship.”

Patterson elaborated on the New World’s rich Presbyterian heritage. The Huguenot Admiral Gaspard de Coligny, he explained, had in the mid-sixteenth century devised a colonization scheme for France’s Protestants, who had been unjustly “persecuted” in their homeland as a result of their Calvinistic convictions. Patterson praised de Coligny’s settlement scheme, which sought to provide a New World refuge for an oppressed religious minority, as “one of the most beautiful conceptions of modern times.” Yet de Coligny’s design was stifled by the hostility of France’s “Catholic party,” which purportedly thwarted his efforts to bring his plan to fruition. In the early seventeenth century another attempt was made to provide sanctuary in the New World to persecuted Huguenots by Pierre du Gua de Monts, a French fur trader. De Monts, Patterson argued, strove to obtain for the Huguenots a refuge in northeastern North

---

43 Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management (NSARM), MG1, George Patterson Fonds; vols. 742-44; MG 9 nos. 5, 31; vol. 742, “Pioneers of Presbyterianism in the Maritime Provinces of Canada.”
America from the “ecclesiastical domination” to which they had been subjected in France. De Mont’s plans, however, were scuttled in 1627 with the establishment in that year of the Company of One Hundred Associates, whose mandate explicitly called for the promotion within New France of Roman Catholicism.44

Yet the demise of Huguenotism in New France was by no means the end of the Presbyterian story in northern North America. Patterson’s assessment of the failure of religious tolerance in northern North America’s French-speaking settlements was followed by a discourse on the subsequent growth of Presbyterianism within the region’s primarily English-speaking territories. He observed that, in 1621, Scotland’s William Alexander obtained through King James I a land grant in northeastern Nova Scotia, “which he proposed to colonize on an extensive scale.” According to Patterson, Alexander pledged to settle the “eastern part of New England” with “his own countrymen.” Populating the region with “a body of people of the mettle [of the] Scottish Covenanters,” Patterson explained, would result in the formation of a “firm barrier of Scottish Presbyterianism” that would counter the expansion of Roman Catholicism in the valley of the St. Lawrence River.45

The battle lines were drawn. Patterson proceeded to portray the eighteenth-century Anglo-French struggle for imperial control of the North American continent as an epic confrontation between the “representatives” of Protestantism situated in Nova Scotia and New England and those of “Popery” located in New France. The Protestants were allegedly spurred on in their rivalry with their Catholics adversaries as much by a unqualified “hatred of what they deemed Popish idolatry,” as they were by a desire to

---


45 NSARM MG1 George Patterson Fonds; vol. 742, “Pioneers of Presbyterianism in the Maritime Provinces of Canada.” Unpaginated.
preserve their ecclesiastical and civil freedoms and advance the geo-strategic interests of their metropolitan homelands. Accordingly, a “spirit of religious enthusiasm” fuelled the Protestants’ prosecution of this conflict, which culminated in the British Conquest of New France.\(^{46}\)

Nineteenth-century Presbyterians summoned up history in an attempt to substantiate the notion that they too constituted a link in the magnificent chain that tied together God’s chosen peoples throughout the ages. In doing so they drew on the well-worn themes of sacrifice, perseverance, and violent conflict. One adherent of the denomination noted in 1848 that he looked upon the “martyr graves” of the Scottish Covenanters with “filial piety.”\(^{47}\) These uncompromising Presbyterians were portrayed as forgoing virtually all comforts and enduring severe persecution in the mid- and late seventeenth century as a result of their refusal to repudiate their convictions and submit to Episcopalian tyranny. The observer boasted “lineage” with this group who had been “baptised with the blood of martyrs,” adding that the Covenanters’ capacity for religious integrity and zeal had made its way under providential auspices “[to] this extremity of the globe.” “I do not repudiate that inheritance,” the observer asserted; “I run not after modern inventions with no combats, no glories, no past and no future.”\(^{48}\) Such remarks attest to the belief that nineteenth-century Presbyterians were the Covenanters’ spiritual successors, and were thus endowed with a responsibility for the preservation and promotion of religious truth and civil liberty.

Recollections of idealized Scottish and Ulsterite homelands contributed to a sense of communal identity for Presbyterian individuals and families that had undergone potentially jarring processes of transatlantic migration. Such recollections frequently downplayed references to the difficult economic circumstances that frequently precipitated the Presbyterians’ emigration in the first place, emphasizing instead nostalgic recollections of homelands that had been left behind. Consider the mid-nineteenth-century remarks of the Reverend John Sprott of Musquodoboit River, Nova Scotia. Sprott informed a metropolitan audience in the mid-1850s of his undiminished fondness for Scotland, the country from which he had emigrated several decades before. “I cannot

\(^{46}\) Ibid.

\(^{47}\) The Presbyterian, June 1848, 87.

\(^{48}\) Ibid.
forget the ivy-mantled towers where my forefathers dwelt,” he declared. “I have slept for nearly forty year in Nova Scotia; but my dreams are all in Scotland.” Such observations, in addition to strengthening notions of communal identity among Presbyterian immigrants and their descendants residing in northern North America, reinforced a sense of emotional and cultural continuity with homelands that lay on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

Individual northern North American Presbyterians were integrated into the elaborate lineage that lay at the heart of the denomination’s historical mythology as well. Such figures as the Reverend John Brown, a missionary involved in the 1817 founding of the Antiburgher Presbytery of Pictou, Nova Scotia, and the Reverend Hugh Graham, an itinerant minister who served in such locations as Cornwallis and Stewiacke, Nova Scotia beginning in the late eighteenth century, were allegedly deserving of “honourable mention” within the “annals” of that colony’s history. Through the efforts of these Presbyterian standard-bearers, the Christian “seed” had been allowed to flower in the hitherto “barren” colonial backwoods. The “sturdy Presbyterianism” of Scotland and Ulster, for which “covenanting forefathers had shed their blood,” was thus planted anew in the British North American “wilderness.”

The Reverend James MacGregor was woven into the Presbyterians’ historical narrative as well. MacGregor served as a tireless pioneer missionary and agent of the British and Foreign Bible Society in the Maritime region between his arrival in Nova Scotia in 1786 and his death in the mid-nineteenth century. So revered was MacGregor within the denominational community that his apotheosis as a Presbyterian hero began while he was still alive. Residents of the Maritime colonies’ backwoods communities had reputedly languished in a state of religious “destitution” prior to MacGregor’s late eighteenth-century arrival. MacGregor, who allegedly left behind all comforts in his “native land,” routinely wound a path through the trackless “wilderness” in search of his religiously neglected Presbyterian “brethren,” imparting to them at every opportunity “Heaven’s best boon to man.” Despite a reluctance to bestow such high praise upon “living characters,” the Colonial Patriot of Pictou, Nova Scotia made an exception for

49 Missionary Record of the United Presbyterian Church, July 1855, 126.
50 Patterson, Memoir of the Reverend James MacGregor…, 67-8.
51 Colonial Patriot, 4 April 1827, 133.
MacGregor, who “seems already to belong to history.” His name, the *Patriot* reported, was “so linked to everything good… [and] so venerated by thousands of people on both sides of the Atlantic” that one was hard-pressed to view him as anything other than a denominational hero of the first rank.52

Western Canadian Presbyterians were by no means excluded from the historical mythology that lay at the heart of the denominational identity in nineteenth-century northern North America. John Black, Presbyterian “apostle” at the Red River settlement beginning in the mid-1840s, was portrayed within the denomination’s narrative as an immensely important historical figure. His missionary exertions in the nineteenth-century Canadian west were equated with the sacrifices made approximately two centuries before by such entities as the Scottish Covenanters and the English Puritans. For Presbyterian historian George Bryce, the sacrifices made in the seventeenth century in the name of religious virtue and freedom by “Hamilton and his Covenanters” in Scotland and by Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans in England elicited tremendous pride in Presbyterian minds.53 Yet for all of their praiseworthy efforts, Bryce portrayed nineteenth-century Christian heroes—including missionaries like Black—as arguably exhibiting a “greater heroism” than their early modern predecessors. This “new” era of religious valour was evident in Bryce’s view in the “army of Christian adventurers” that had been dispatched as missionaries throughout the world, who were reputedly waging “a new war” against “sin and idolatry” in the name of “King Jesus.” Their adversaries were reputedly more fearsome and debased than even “the bloody Claverhouse,” Episcopalian tormentor of seventeenth-century Presbyterians during the notorious “Killing Times.” Bryce portrayed John Black as serving in the vanguard of this new evangelical “army,” and as laying the “foundation of a spiritual empire of the future.”54

Black was by no means the only figure lauded by Bryce for his efforts to promote Presbyterian piety west of the Great Lakes. During the late nineteenth century Presbyterian missionaries were portrayed as fanning out across the west in search of religiously neglected Scottish settlers. For Bryce, these missionaries possessed the

---

53 George Bryce, *John Black: The Apostle of the Red River; or, How the Blue Banner was Unfurled on Manitoba Prairies* (Toronto, 1898), v.
“Scottish blood” and “fervid spirit” of such “national religious heroes” as Hamilton, Wishart, and Knox. Joining Black in this noblest of tasks was James Nisbet, who served as the first Presbyterian missionary to the Cree of what would eventually be known as the province of Saskatchewan, and the Reverend James Robertson, who oversaw Presbyterianism’s dramatic expansion in the “great north-west” beginning in the late nineteenth century. So similar were these early western Canadian Presbyterian heroes to their iconic Old World forbears that the churchyard at Kildonan, Manitoba where many of them were eventually buried came to be seen as hallowed ground. Indeed, in Bryce’s view it constituted “a Presbyterian Westminster abbey” for western Canada.55

The richly textured conception of the past that permeated early Canadian Presbyterianism served a variety of purposes. By emphasizing the ancient pedigree of the denomination’s system of church polity, Presbyterianism took on enhanced legitimacy as a form of ecclesiastical governance. By associating themselves with such heroic figures as the ancient Israelites, the Scottish Reformers, the Scottish Covenanters, the English Puritans, and such early “Canadian” icons as James MacGregor and John Black, nineteenth-century Presbyterians located themselves within an epic historical tradition that invested the denomination with considerable prestige as well as an ennobling sense of righteousness. The Presbyterian conception of history also contributed to a sense of communal identity among Presbyterian immigrants. Idealized recollections of the past contributed to a sense of emotional and cultural continuity among Scottish and Ulsterite immigrants and their North American-born offspring with overseas homelands that had been left behind.

Yet history was also deployed by the Presbyterians for sectarian purposes. Norman Knowles has argued that historical reminiscences and acts of commemoration are neither “a fixed set of immutable ideas and actions” nor merely “tools of hegemony” manufactured by “political and social elites” in a deliberate attempt to strengthen their grasp on the levers of political and economic power. Rather, they represent the product of a “complex process” that is shaped to a great degree by the intermingling of romanticized recollections of the past and the anxieties and circumstances of the present.56 In keeping

with Knowles’ assertions nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians frequently wielded a selective interpretation of the past as a rhetorical and symbolic weapon in an effort to advance their interests regarding contemporary controversies. Temporally expedient usable pasts were utilized by Presbyterians as a means of rendering more forceful their arguments concerning such nineteenth-century issues such as public funding for Nova Scotia’s Pictou Academy and the Upper Canadian debate over responsible government.

Yet this is not to suggest that the Presbyterian interpretation of history was based entirely on cynical self-interest. To attribute the denomination’s abiding fascination with the past solely to calculated insincerity is to ignore how ingrained and widespread their epic conception of history really was. Still, it is important to acknowledge that sectarian considerations and contemporary concerns played a role in determining Presbyterian attitudes toward historically significant episodes, groups, and individuals. Recognizing this fact allows us to attain an enhanced understanding of the intricate synthesis of historical idealization and contemporary necessity that informed the denomination’s elaborate mythology.

For the Presbyterians, a skewed conception of the past consistently influenced present circumstances. Acclaimed events and individuals were invoked in an effort to strengthen the denomination’s arguments regarding contemporary conflicts. Yet at the same time the past was also influenced substantively by the present. That is, history was selectively interpreted and in certain instances distorted by Presbyterians as a means of investing their arguments regarding contentious issues with enhanced validity and dynamism. The denomination’s understanding of the past, then, was neither unchanging nor uncontested. It can more profitably be viewed as malleable and subject to frequent reinvention.

Consider the arguments put forth by the Reverend Thomas McCulloch regarding Pictou Academy, a Presbyterian educational institution that struggled to obtain reliable funding from the Nova Scotia legislature in the early nineteenth century. McCulloch, in an appeal addressed to potential metropolitan benefactors, emphasized the cultural continuities that bound together Nova Scotia’s Presbyterians and their Scottish counterparts. The principal objective underlying the academy’s formation, he explained, was a desire to perpetuate the noble “principles” that Scotland’s heroes had “transmitted
to their offspring” by way of “the testimony of their blood.”\textsuperscript{57} The perpetuation of these principles through Pictou Academy purportedly represented the “only means” by which inhabitants of Nova Scotia could recreate “the land of their fathers” in northeastern North America. McCulloch concluded by stressing the fundamental ties that bound together Presbyterians on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean:

[we] in Nova Scotia are neither foreigners nor foes. Your country is ours and your kindred are ours. We have the same home and our hearts turn with yours to the same mansions of the dead endeared to us and hallowed by the dust of our fathers. Let not our offspring be as foreigners and aliens[;] let them inherit with their brethren.\textsuperscript{58}

History was also invoked and selectively interpreted by Presbyterians in relation to the Upper Canadian debate over responsible government. The \textit{Banner}, a reform-oriented Upper Canadian Presbyterian publication owned and operated by Peter and George Brown, invoked the past in 1843 in making the case for constitutional liberalization. It was “inexpressibly ridiculous” in the Browns’ view that “all power” whether religious or secular should be concentrated in the hands of an oligarchic elite. The precedent established by the Glorious Revolution made plain what should be done with “rulers” who became “a terror to the good and a protection to the evil.” The populace, spurred on in their reform-oriented activities by a wholly natural “self-preservation” instinct, were allowed—no, obliged—to demand constitutional change. The people’s right to agitate for a system of responsible government in which the colonial governor would abide by the will of the majority grouping within the legislative assembly was allegedly enshrined in nothing less than “the sacred ark” of the British Constitution, which in the Browns’ conception had been bought with the blood of such heroic figures as the Scottish Covenanters and the English Puritans. Without exception, the \textit{Banner}’s staunchly Presbyterian editors declared, legitimate political authority “is derived under God from the people,” and was to be exercised in every instance with their best interests in mind. Anything less furnished valid grounds for sweeping change.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{57} NSARM MG1 Thomas McCulloch Papers, vol. 554, 37; Address to United Presbyterian Synod, Scotland on behalf of Pictou Academy. “Remarks Upon the Religion and Education of Nova Scotia from the time of its occupation by the British till the present.” Unpaginated.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{The Banner}, 1 September 1843. Page numbers obscured.
Two months later, the *Banner* published a provocative poem that had originally appeared in an Irish publication of the same name. It vividly recalled the heroic struggles of both the Israelites and the Scottish Covenanters against the tyranny of the ancient Egyptians and the seventeenth-century English Episcopalians, respectively. The poem’s appearance in a publication that devoted so much attention and energy to the purported righteousness of political reform suggests that nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterian liberals like Peter and George Brown potentially viewed themselves as the successors to their hallowed forebears. The poem ran as follows:

Soldiers of Christ! well done!  
Bear forth the ark of God;  
Your march lies through the wilderness,  
The path your Fathers trod:  
God’s pillar will direct your Way—  
A fire by night—a cloud by day.  
The proud Egyptian host,  
The mighty of the land,  
Have tampered with a nation’s faith,  
And ruled with iron hand;  
But God now smites the naves for you!  
And woe to them who dare pursue!  
Go forth as went your sires,  
In covenaning days;  
The bonny blue-bell welcomes you—  
The heather hills and braes  
Are fragrant with the flow’rs that bloom  
O’er many a martyr’s hallowed tomb.  
What though the martyr’s blood  
has stained its heavenly hue—  
Oh! ne’er forget that it was given  
A sacred pledge to you:  
And may it still to Scotland be  
The flag of Scotland’s liberty!60

The Presbyterian tendency to draw on the past for sectarian purposes was also evident during the numerous internecine disagreements that beset the denomination prior to the establishment of the dominion-wide Presbyterian Church in Canada in 1875. The debate concerning the degree to which the state should involve itself in the sacred domain

---

of the church was easily the most divisive issue, resulting in the fracturing of the denomination into an array of autonomous subgroups. This atmosphere of politico-religious fragmentation was especially pronounced in Upper Canada, where that thorniest of issues, the Clergy Reserves endowment, elicited substantial controversy prior to the introduction of legislation calling for the endowment’s secularization in 1854. By the mid-nineteenth century Upper Canadian Presbyterians typically fell into one of three categories when it came to the church-state relationship: Church of Scotland establishmentarians, Secessionist voluntarists, and members of the Free Church, who insisted on the responsibility of the state to provide the church with permanent funding while simultaneously refraining from involving itself in any other aspect of its affairs. While all three politico-religious ideologies traced their origins back to Scotland, circumstances that were peculiar to British North America—especially the Clergy Reserves controversy—aggravated politico-religious divisions in the New World.\textsuperscript{61}

All three constituencies invoked history in an effort to substantiate their divergent contentions. A Canadian Church of Scotland publication celebrated the Scottish Reformers, who allegedly strove to free themselves from the “corruption and tyranny of Rome” with a vehemence that was unmatched by any other group.\textsuperscript{62} This was followed by an equally hard-fought campaign on the part of Scotland’s Presbyterians against the political and liturgical impositions of the seventeenth-century Episcopalians, which threatened to subject Scottish Protestants to a “coarse… vassalage.” Fortunately, however, the “scriptural intelligence” of the Presbyterian populace attained for Scotland a secure “civil establishment” that had been “plenteously watered with the blood of her martyrs.” A permanently endowed state church was thus the result of the dearly bought victories of the Scottish reformers and Covenanters. For adherents of the Church of Scotland, theirs was a legacy not to be forsaken.\textsuperscript{63}

Secessionist Presbyterians espoused a rather different conception of the denomination’s politico-religious past. The Glorious Revolution, which allegedly allowed Scotland’s Presbyterians to worship freely following the “Killing Times,” was in this

\textsuperscript{62} \textit{The Presbyterian}, March 1848, 41.
\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Ibid.} See also \textit{Ibid.}, June 1848, 87.
subgroup’s understanding nothing less than “a signal interposition of Divine Providence” that liberated Presbyterians from the religious and civil tyranny to which they had been subjected by their Episcopalian persecutors.64

The Secessionists, in making such a statement, were by no means unique. Virtually all British North American Presbyterian subgroups celebrated the Glorious Revolution as a critical moment in the divinely ordained onward march of spiritual and political liberty. Yet upon further investigation it emerges that the Secessionists’ interpretation of the Glorious Revolution’s significance in fact differed markedly from that of their co-religionists in the Church of Scotland. Presbyterianism, the Secessionists declared, was corrupted almost immediately after William and Mary’s ascension to the throne. The cause? Intrusive secular interference in the church’s purportedly inviolate sphere of activity. The Secessionists identified the intensification of lay patronage following the Glorious Revolution as an especially egregious offence, one that simultaneously compromised the church’s teachings and engendered temporal persecution. Wherever such instances of secular interference in the church’s sacrosanct sphere of activity were exhibited, “the Church became more and more doctrinally corrupt, and the standard of everlasting truth was weakened and ready to be overthrown.”65 History also attested to the fact that, wherever lay patronage obtained for itself “a legal settlement,” it invariably morphed into an “enemy of civil and religious liberty,” serving as the “primary cause of all religious persecutions,—the great obstacle in the way of national improvements and the progress of the gospel… [and] the legalised stronghold of superstition, tyranny, and oppression.”66

Adherents of the Free Church, for their part, summoned up the past in an attempt to legitimate their distinctive position vis-à-vis the church-state question. Following the “Great Disruption” that led to the Free Church’s formation, the Reverend William Rintoul embarked on a speaking tour of eastern Upper Canada in an attempt to elicit support for his faction’s cause. In meeting with the inhabitants of such towns as King, West Gwillimbury, and Oro, Canada West, he made plain his conviction that the Free Church’s departure from the Scottish establishment was entirely valid. The Free Church,

---

64 Canadian Presbyterian Magazine, October 1851. Unpaginated.
65 Ibid., December 1851. Unpaginated.
66 Ibid., April 1852. Unpaginated.
Rintoul asserted, was right to break ranks with the Church of Scotland, which in his opinion had “cut herself off from the fellowship of all other Churches.” For Rintoul, “the spirit of the Church of Knox” had departed from the establishment and migrated over to the “Free Protesting Church,” where, as a result of that faction’s commitment to stable state support as well as complete religious autonomy, it “thrives mightily.”

The various factions that comprised nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism differed from one another in profound ways. A tendency toward sectarian fragmentation plagued the denomination for several decades prior to the formation, in 1875, of the dominion-wide Presbyterian Church in Canada. When it came to the church-state relationship Presbyterians advocated everything from permanent public support for religion to the complete and utter separation of sacred and secular spheres. Yet for all of their undeniable politico-religious differences the various Presbyterian subgroups also occupied important common ground. The major subgroups involved in the Upper Canadian church-state struggle—adherents of the Church of Scotland, the Secessionists, and the Free Church—drew on history—or, more precisely, a selective interpretation of history—so as to invest their arguments with enhanced validity and rhetorical forcefulness. While they admittedly interpreted the past in divergent ways, all three groups held up the heroic feats and sacrifices of their forebears in attempting to legitimate their contentions vis-à-vis the church-state debate. A deeply ingrained preoccupation with the past can thus be seen as suffusing the denominational consciousness.

The intricate conception of history that permeated nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism shaped the denomination’s understanding of time itself. William Gallois has advocated perceiving time not as “a singular, natural and uncontested entity” but rather as a plural phenomenon that is “constructed in varied manners in different cultures.” Implicit within this assertion is the notion that time is capable of assuming a multiplicity of forms, and of being experienced in a multiplicity of ways. That is, time consists of numerous components including the sprawling past, the evanescent present, and the mystery-enshrouded future, each of which is understood and experienced

---

67 Ecclesiastical & Missionary Record, June 1845, 81.
68 Ibid.
differently. Perceptions of time can also vary depending on the chronological and cultural context, as evidenced by the disparities that distinguish modern western, pre-modern, and a variety of disparate non-western temporal cultures from one another. Yet notions of progress, individualism, and linearity are so entrenched in the modern western understanding of time that they frequently obscure the existence of alternate temporal conceptions that place greater emphasis on, for instance, that which is cyclical, eternal, or temporally transcendent. So embedded in the western cultural consciousness is the progressive, individualistic, linear understanding of time that its normality is frequently taken as a matter of course—so much so that the notion of differing conceptual models regarding the passage of time and the way in which individuals and communities experience it strikes many of us as unfathomable, if not absurd.

Accompanying the modern western understanding of time is the orthodox Christian belief in the world’s inevitable apocalyptic end. The apocalypse serves as the culminating event in the biblical narrative, and is of virtually immeasurable importance to what Gallois has termed Christianity’s conceptual orientation toward “time as judgment.” This cataclysmic event will purportedly involve a decisive clash between good and evil, a divinely administered judgment through which salvation will be extended to the righteous and eternal damnation meted out to the wicked, and the establishment of a magnificent millennial kingdom in which suffering and injustice will be entirely eradicated. Anxiety and excitement regarding these events—which are inextricably linked to Christ’s triumphant return—is integral to the conventional Christian temporal culture. Indeed, the millennium exists within the orthodox Christian consciousness as the eschatological terminus towards which universal history has ever been progressing.

Nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterian attitudes toward time’s passage mesh with the western and Christian temporal models to which I have referred. Time in the Presbyterians’ understanding was relentlessly teleological. To be sure, it could seem inscrutable—few doubted that God was capable of behaving in mysterious ways. Yet this did not detract from time’s essential character. History in the Presbyterians’ view amounted to a grand chronicle of God’s purposive involvement in the world, the

---

70 Gallois, *Time, Religion, and History*, 130.
inevitable result of which would be the Christian millennium and Jesus’ return. Notwithstanding their epic historical conception’s rollercoaster-esque contours, ardent nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians harboured little doubt that both history and time were progressive entities that would culminate in the establishment of a Heavenly Kingdom. Thus, the Presbyterians’ understanding of the past exhibited important commonalities with the “whiggish” historical outlook that informed much of nineteenth-century secular historiography throughout the English-speaking world. Such a perspective, in John Burrow’s words, conceived of the past as a “success story” consisting of a succession of social, political, and economic advances that propelled western society onward.71

Presbyterians, as the supposed heirs of a uniquely righteous tradition, had been endowed with a solemn responsibility for the advancement of the providential plan. This belief had significant implications for the denomination’s understanding of time. As a result of their abiding emphasis on the unfurling of the divinely authored design, the Presbyterian temporal conception was characterized throughout by a preoccupation with progressive succession—the notion that one divinely favoured group bequeathed responsibility for the advancement of God’s grand plan to the next—and with the existence of a final terminus towards which world history was inexorably making its way—the Christian millennium. While they could not predict precisely when it would occur, zealous adherents of the denomination were convinced that righteousness would one day prevail decisively over iniquity, which in turn would allow for the creation of a heavenly kingdom. So pronounced was the Presbyterians’ belief in the inevitability of the millennium that their rendering of history was characterized in numerous instances by a palpable sense of anticipation.

Nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterian attitudes toward the world’s end frequently meshed with the essential characteristics of “post-millennialism,” a theological doctrine which posits that Christ’s return will occur after a thousand-year period in which peace, happiness, enlightenment, and prosperity prevail on earth. Such a conception differs dramatically from the tenets of “pre-millennialism,” an alternative interpretation

---

regarding the end of the world, which holds that Christ’s return and the apocalypse will take place before the joyous thousand-year age.\textsuperscript{72}

These differing eschatological perspectives have had important implications for their adherents’ perceptions of earthly developments. Post-millennialism—which exerted influence within several nineteenth-century Christian groups, including Presbyterianism—implicitly conceives of earthly and providential progress as complementary phenomena. Moral, economic, and technological advancement will in the post-millennialists’ understanding hasten Christ’s return, and will be preceded by a thousand-year epoch in which violence, injustice, ignorance, and poverty will be utterly unknown. By contrast, pre-millennialism—which found expression in the influential early nineteenth-century prophecies of the radical American evangelical William Miller, and which persists in the form of such contemporary Protestant groups as Seventh-Day Adventism—perceives earthly phenomena as entirely unrelated to the unfolding of the providential plan. From the pre-millennialists’ perspective developments occurring within the irredeemably sinful temporal realm should in no way be construed as linked to Christ’s return, which according to their interpretation of scripture must transpire before the millennium can happen.\textsuperscript{73}

Though nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians did not use either term—post- and pre-millennialism are primarily used by contemporary commentators in an attempt to distinguish between competing eschatological interpretations—their views regarding the cosmic significance of earthly developments nevertheless accord with the essential characteristics of a post-millennial perspective. A heady conceptual synthesis regarding


the supposedly complementary nature of earthly and cosmic progress played a crucial role in determining the contours of the denominational worldview.

What accounts for the recognizably post-millennial outlook that circulated within much of nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism? Within which cultural and historical circumstances did it emerge and evolve? And why in the event was it such an influential intellectual impulse among members of the denominational community? Millennial ideas have circulated within the Judeo-Christian consciousness since at least the eighth century B.C., when the prophet Isaiah anticipated the world’s end. Yet the notion that worldly circumstances were somehow related to the onward march of God’s providential plan surfaced relatively recently. For centuries Christians believed that they would likely be subjected to varying degrees of hardship and persecution during their time on earth. Augustine of Hippo, a fourth-century theologian whose ideas were immensely influential during the Middle Ages and Renaissance, was largely responsible for propagating such an interpretation. Christians, as a result of Original Sin and the corresponding corruption of the earthly realm, would in Augustine’s view “never be free” from the countless “ills which abound in human society amid the distresses of our mortal condition.” Such pervasive sinfulness in Augustine’s understanding contrasted with the bliss of heaven, the eventual destination to which the saints—the privileged few who would be permitted to enjoy eternity alongside God—would ascend at the end of their often-arduous stint on earth. Earthly developments—including phenomena that were reputedly geared towards society’s material advancement—appeared from the Augustinian perspective to be unrelated to the providential design’s metaphysical progression.

Yet beginning in the early modern era attitudes toward the relationship between worldly circumstances and the aims and activities of the universe’s creator began to change. Precipitating this shift were significant temporal developments occurring within segments of western society—notably the Enlightenment, popular reactions against unchecked monarchical authority, and patterns of economic and technological sophistication. As a result of such progressive developments it was increasingly felt

within western Christendom that, rather than being dissonant phenomena, earthly events and the unfurling of the providential plan were in actuality inter-related. Devout Christians in ever-expanding numbers inferred that God, in addition to redeeming the souls of individual sinners, was steadily redeeming the world as well. Earthly and cosmic progress came to be viewed as symbiotic phenomena whose irreversible onward march would culminate in the earthly establishment of a glorious millennial kingdom in which the lion would lay down with the lamb.

Such views regarding the purportedly inter-related nature of worldly and cosmic progress were prevalent within numerous Protestant denominations situated throughout the English-speaking world, which were invigorated in numerous instances by the transnational evangelical revivals of the mid- and late eighteenth centuries. Such groups frequently defined themselves in contradistinction to the supposed backwardness of Roman Catholicism, with the Pope increasingly being denounced as the antichrist. Thus, for substantial segments of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century evangelical Protestantism, patterns of temporal and spiritual improvement were by no means unrelated. Zealous Protestants, on the contrary, interpreted purportedly progressive earthly developments—including such seemingly profane achievements as technological innovations regarding railways and the telegraph—as accelerating the millennium’s arrival.

Yet despite the emergence during the early modern era of a belief in the inter-related nature of earthly and cosmic progress, evangelical Protestants continued to believe that both the apocalypse and the Great Day of Reckoning would follow the thousand-year millennial epoch. As a result of the final judgment, the logic ran, the righteous would be permitted to enjoy the eternal splendours of heaven while the reprobate would be sentenced to the ceaseless torments of hell. Such convictions infused devout Protestants’ earthly activities with greatly enhanced import. Given the supposedly symbiotic character of worldly and cosmic phenomena, evangelicals were obligated to abide at all times by the strictest moral standards and to propagate the Gospels in as vigorous a manner as possible. The prospect of either everlasting life in heaven or an excruciating eternity in hell spurred them on in their efforts to Christianize the world. Such views accord with the fundamental features of post-millennialism, an outlook that
reverberated throughout nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism and influenced the denomination’s understanding of both history and time.\textsuperscript{75}

For the Reverend Henry Esson, “no subject” was more awe-inspiring than the passage of time. The “changes and revolutions” wrought among “individuals… nations and empires” attested to the fact that world history was actuated by an omniscient superintending providence. History in Esson’s understanding was “an exposition” of the wondrous events that had been brought forth “by the hand of time.”\textsuperscript{76} While he conceded that the purpose underlying certain historical phenomena could indeed seem inscrutable, Esson was confident that the universe’s sovereign ruler ultimately determined all events.

The Reverend Simon McGregor, in an 1864 sermon delivered in Pictou, Nova Scotia, expanded on the teleological conception of time that galvanized much of nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism. He began by emphasizing the cosmic historical significance of Jesus’ birth. “To that marvelous event,” McGregor asserted, “the previous history of the world had ever been shaping itself in its downward course.”\textsuperscript{77} This was the central event towards which history’s currents had ever been “converging.” Without the birth of God’s Son, who was sent by his heavenly father to endure humiliation and an excruciating death on humanity’s behalf, history was reduced to a purposeless “mass of disorder” and “an awful enigma.”\textsuperscript{78} Fortunately, however, such was not the case. History in McGregor’s conception was determined by God, and was progressing relentlessly toward the earthly achievement of the Heavenly Kingdom. Fired by such a conviction, he exclaimed that salvation’s “glad tidings” were being propagated with increasing intensity “from sea to sea” and “shore to shore”; idols were being smashed, he added, and hypocrites were being exposed the world over. In time, McGregor thundered, “righteousness” will assuredly envelop the world “like a great

\textsuperscript{75} Largely in response to such phenomena as biblical “higher criticism” and the practical orientation of the Social Gospel movement, a Presbyterian minority gravitated in the later nineteenth century toward what could fairly be described as pre-millennial fundamentalism. Moir, Enduring Witness, 175-176; Westfall, Two Worlds, 167-168. Yet post-millennialism persisted as an influential impulse within the Presbyterian mainstream during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, playing an important role in the safeguarding of evangelical convictions in an era of challenges to doctrinal orthodoxy. Gauvreau, Evangelical Century, 184-185.
\textsuperscript{76} PCCA, AR5 M6S4, Henry Esson, A Sermon, Preached in Montreal, on Sunday the 28th of Dec, 1834 by the Rev. Henry Esson, 5-6.
\textsuperscript{77} Monthly Record of the Church of Scotland in Nova Scotia and the Adjoining Provinces, November 1864, 201-2
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 202.
river,” prevailing decisively over wickedness and laying the groundwork for Jesus’
glorious thousand-year reign. McGregor concluded his address by declaring that God,
“the Governor of the universe,” will inevitably “restore order in his family,” assume
command of the world’s seemingly “tangled reins,” and steer humanity on toward a
matchless millennial “happiness.”

Contemporary events were central to Presbyterian discourses on the relentlessly
purposeful nature of history and time, an emphasis that accords with the post-millennial
outlook. Zealous members of the denomination interpreted the weakening of autocratic
regimes and the expansion of evangelical Protestantism into hitherto “pagan” or Roman
Catholic territories as evidence of the advancement of the providential design. While
such events were occasionally associated with periods of “turmoil,” they ultimately
foreshadowed the arrival of “a happy Millennial Age to be enjoyed by the Church on
earth, when the name of Jesus shall be universally known and his power
acknowledged.”

Mid-nineteenth century examples of such portentous events included the rise of
“millions of Italians to the dignity of free men” as a result of widespread anti-clerical
agitation in that country and the global proliferation of evangelical missionary societies.
The righteousness of these developments were contrasted by one observer with the
“unequivocal infidelity” perpetrated by the authors of Essays and Reviews, which called
into question the historical accuracy of the biblical narrative, and by the continued
existence of “drunkenness,” “squalor,” and “dense ignorance” throughout much of British
North American society. For fervent Presbyterians, “light and darkness, truth and error,
virtue and vice” were increasingly coming into contact—indeed, the struggle pitting one
against the other was intensifying with “every succeeding day.” Members of the
denomination interpreted the intensification of such conflicts as evidence of the Christian
millennium’s imminence. Though they could not predict precisely when it would arrive,
zealous nineteenth-century Presbyterians were confident that the “day of the lord” was
drawing near. Presbyterians, as “the people of God,” were therefore urged to “do and
dare and suffer” for God in anticipation of the apocalyptic clash between good and evil,

79 Ibid., 204-5.
80 Home and Foreign Record of the Presbyterian Church of the Lower Provinces of British North America,
March 1861, 57-9.
when the world’s omnipotent creator, flanked on either side by “mighty angels,” would exact revenge “on those that know not God and obey not the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The inevitability of the apocalypse purportedly had implications for all Presbyterians. Members of the denomination were informed that they could not “support [God’s] cause too liberally or labour too diligently” for its realization. “Ministers, elders, [and] communicants,” were obliged through their “baptismal covenant” to do whatever they could in God’s service, for “[he] records in heaven every word you speak, every line you write, every mile you travel, every act you perform for the advancement of His cause on earth, and He will remember them all on the last great day!” In view of the fact that the entirety of one’s life—including “every secret thing”—would be scrutinized on the fateful Day of Reckoning, it was imperative that Presbyterians “walk circumspectly” when it came to both public and private morality, serving wherever possible as devout Christian standard-bearers. For, “on the last day,” all will assemble on either the right or left hand of the divine “Judge,” who will then dispense sentences of either “acquittal” and “condemnation” to the entirety of humanity. To balk at one’s Christian duty was to betray God and consign oneself to an endless perdition.

Baleful warnings notwithstanding, there was little doubt among fervent nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians that the millennial Kingdom would ultimately be realized. Contemporary circumstances allegedly offered ample evidence of this fact. For example, in the mid-nineteenth century the authority of the Pope and his “Bible-hating satellites” the Italian “Grand-Dukes” had been greatly diminished, while in such exotic locales as India, China, and parts of Africa the Gospels were gaining ever-more momentum, and were being diffused in accordance with the providential plan over ever-more territory. Such developments were interpreted as foreshadowing the Messiah’s return—“Christ’s Kingdom has advanced and shall advance till He reign king of kings and lord of lords.” Yet adherents of the denomination did not interpret the inevitability of the millennium as grounds for spiritual complacency. Quite the opposite—devout

---

81 Ibid., 58-9.
82 Home and Foreign Record of the Presbyterian Church of the Lower Provinces, May 1861, 113-115.
Presbyterians were reminded of their obligation to assist Christ’s “cause” wherever and whenever possible. For, God will look fondly upon such efforts, and remember them when the elect arrive at the end of their earthly sojourn and ascend heavenwards to “meet him in the air. Happy day when all the earth shall be the Lord’s!”

An 1875 meeting of Presbyterian groups from Canada, Britain, the United States, and Australia that took place in London, England was interpreted as further evidence of the progress of the “Redeemer’s Kingdom.” The meeting was designed to bring together members of the global denominational community in order to discuss means by which the various Presbyterian churches could accelerate the progress of the divinely authored plan and topple Satan’s earthly “strong-holds.” The gathering of the various Presbyterian contingents was allegedly orchestrated by none other than God himself, who was purportedly hastening the arrival of the day when all ardent believers would be drawn together “in the unity of the Spirit and in the bonds of heavenly peace.” The meeting of these Presbyterian representatives was thus subsumed within “a wider, deeper, more magnificent movement” that would culminate in nothing less than the establishment of an earthly New Jerusalem.

An elaborate conception of history pervaded the early Canadian Presbyterian consciousness. This narrative galvanized members of an institutionally fragmented, geographically diffuse denomination and persisted in various permutations throughout the nineteenth century. The Presbyterians situated themselves within a sprawling sequence of events in which they were the heirs of a singularly righteous heritage that had been passed down throughout the ages from one covenanted group to the next. The Presbyterian conception of history possessed a distinctive “shape” and “rhythm”—that is, their account of the past consisted of a fluctuating series of distressing drops and exhilarating advances, and was punctuated in numerous instances by dramatic conflicts involving heroic protagonists and their diabolical adversaries.

The Presbyterians’ elaborate understanding of history served a multitude of purposes. It lent to the denomination enhanced legitimacy and prestige, and under-girded a widespread sense of communal inter-connectedness. Aspects of the Presbyterians’ epic

---

84 Ibid., 198-200.
85 Home and Foreign Record of the Presbyterian Church of the Lower Provinces, June 1875. 143
historical narrative were also invoked by members of the denominational community as a means of advancing sectarian interests during both inter- and intra-denominational conflicts regarding such issues as the acutely divisive church-state relationship.

The Presbyterian rendering of the past had important implications for present circumstances—members of the denomination frequently appropriated vaunted individuals and events from bygone eras in an attempt to advance their interests regarding contemporary conflicts. Paradoxically, though, the present also exerted substantial influence upon the past, as reflected in the various Presbyterian subgroups’ penchant for modifying and in certain instances distorting history so as to render their contentions optimally effective. Their conception of history, then, was neither immutable nor uncontested, but rather fluid and subject to dramatically divergent interpretations.

Yet it would be a mistake to conclude that the elaborate historical mythology that permeated the denominational imagination was the product of an insincere scheme cynically deployed for nothing more than sectarian gain. On the contrary, it was shaped by an intimate, albeit highly selective, familiarity with the past and its supposed lessons.

The Presbyterian interpretation of history informed their understanding of time itself, which devout members of the denomination viewed as deeply meaningful and unmistakably teleological. All events, they believed, were governed by God, and were geared in all instances toward the advancement of the providential design. Neither devoid of meaning nor entirely imponderable, time was in their understanding replete with cosmic significance. The purpose-driven course of world history allegedly attested this fact. A belief in the purposive nature of both history and time served to infuse contemporary developments occurring in northern North America as well as elsewhere in the world with enhanced import. History would inevitably come to end, devout members of the denomination were convinced, with a climactic clash in which the righteous and wicked would do battle one last time. They were equally certain that the righteous would triumph in this climactic conflict, resulting in the establishment on earth of a Heavenly Kingdom in which poverty, violence, and injustice would cease to exist. Thus, their epic historical narrative, characterized as it was by an alternating series of uplifting “highs” and depressing “lows,” concluded with an unambiguously happy ending.
The Presbyterian conception of the past invigorated members of a spatially diffuse, institutionally fragmented denomination and equipped them with a compelling conceptual synthesis of pride, duty, and destiny. Its significance in relation to the formulation of the denominational identity can scarcely be overstated.
Conclusion: Boundless Dominion

He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth.

—Psalms 72:8

...we have but to go forward, to open up for our children and the world what God has given into our possession, bind it together, consolidate it, and lay the foundations of an enduring future.

—George Monro Grant, *Ocean to Ocean* (1879)

Robert McDowall, an early Upper Canadian Presbyterian missionary who propagated the denomination’s tenets and traditions throughout the colony for several decades beginning in the late eighteenth century, sat down to dinner one Sunday evening in a settler’s rough-hewn cabin. McDowall, who was a ferocious Sabbatarian, abruptly stood up mid-meal, picked up a plate of biscuits that lay on the table, walked over to the door, opened it, and unceremoniously tossed the biscuits outside. They tasted too fresh to have been baked on Saturday.¹

McDowall’s behaviour in this instance meshes with Presbyterianism’s reputation for austerity. In addition to expressing itself in strict Sabbatarianism, the Presbyterians’ capacity for austerity was also evident in the frequency with which members of the denomination became embroiled in sectarian quarrels. While early Canadian Presbyterians—much like their metropolitan counterparts—often clashed with members of other denominations over such issues as the ever-vexatious church-state relationship they frequently found fault with one another as well, a pattern that resulted in the fracturing of the denomination into a multitude of autonomous subgroups. Presbyterianism’s reputation for austerity is thus by no means historically inaccurate.

Yet there was more to early Canadian Presbyterianism than unbending Sabbatarianism and sectarian fragmentation, influential though such tendencies were within the denominational community. Nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism was in numerous instances invigorated by a grand worldview, the fundamental

characteristics of which stand in stark contrast to the denomination’s dour reputation. This worldview drew together members of an institutionally incoherent, geographically dispersed denomination and imbued them with an exhilarating conceptual combination of distinctiveness, duty, and destiny. The central component of the Presbyterians’ worldview was a desire to facilitate God’s achievement of dominion—spiritual sovereignty—over northern North America, and to promote an uncompromising Protestant piety as extensively and as energetically as possible throughout the wider world. The realization of these inter-related objectives hinged on the propagation at home and abroad of the denomination’s characteristic theological doctrines and liturgical practices.

Presbyterians, in striving to Christianize nineteenth-century northern North America, envisioned the establishment of a godly society in which an uncompromising Protestant morality would permeate everyday life, inform the decisions of public officials, enhance the authority of governmental institutions, and promote heightened standards in popular virtue. This goal was closely linked to a desire on the part of the denomination’s membership to propagate Protestant beliefs and practices in such exotic locales as Africa and Asia, where millions of people were allegedly mired in ignorance and superstition. Devout adherents of the denomination were convinced that, in aggressively combating sinfulness in nineteenth-century Canada as well as elsewhere in the world, virtue would prevail definitively over sinfulness and the groundwork would be laid for the Christian millennium, a glorious thousand-year epoch in which violence, poverty, and injustice would be utterly eradicated.

A belief in God’s absolute providential sovereignty over the universe and its inhabitants played an important part in determining the contours of the early Canadian Presbyterian worldview. Adherents of the denomination were by no means unique among Christian groups—not to mention non-Christian groups—in focusing on the providential theme. Yet their abiding emphasis on the Almighty’s unchecked universal authority differed substantively from the providential conception that existed within other denominations. This included the numerically substantial and culturally influential Methodists, whose Arminian theological outlook reputedly held that spontaneous human
exertions could potentially play a role in the reconciliation of repentant individuals and God.

The Presbyterians’ emphasis on the providential motif dovetailed with their fondness for the principles, institutions, and mystique of the British Empire, which was identified by members of the denomination as a divinely sanctioned vehicle for the worldwide propagation of Protestantism and the matchless virtues and institutions of western civilization. A multitude of events occurring both at home and abroad—the War of 1812, the Napoleonic Wars, the Rebellions of 1837-8, the European Revolutions of 1848, the Indian “Mutiny” of 1857, and the Canadian Presbyterian union of 1875—were interpreted by members of the denomination as evidence of God’s foreordained design for the world and its inhabitants. In each instance God was portrayed as sheltering the Empire and its inhabitants, who had purportedly been charged with a solemn responsibility for the onward march of piety and righteousness. The Presbyterians, who conceived of themselves as an elect spiritual nation comparable to ancient Israel, believed that they had a special role to play in bringing this providential plan to fruition.

A synthesis of providentialism and British imperial enthusiasm also informed Presbyterian attitudes toward Roman Catholicism and the practice of slavery in the southern United States. Roman Catholicism, which members of the denomination routinely dismissed as backward and benighted, was viewed as antithetical to the dynamic, enlightened Protestantism that prevailed throughout much of the British World. Accordingly, Protestant missionary activity in such primarily Catholic settings as Lower Canada was widely perceived as a providential instrument through which Catholic peoples would be liberated from the spiritual subordination to which they had traditionally been subjected by a despotic priestly caste.

Slavery, for its part, was portrayed as an accursed institution, one that blatantly contradicted the high-minded ideals upon which the American republic reputedly rested. Ardent early Canadian Presbyterians viewed post-revolutionary British North America, where legislation calling for the gradual elimination of slavery had been introduced in the late eighteenth century, as a refuge from the dehumanizing drudgery that many American blacks had been forced to endure in the southern United States. Accordingly, adherents of the denomination supported the creation in British North America of a refuge for
American blacks that had succeeded in escaping the fetters of slavery in the American republic. The United States Civil War, which tore at the fabric of American society during the 1860s, was perceived as a divinely administered punishment meted by the universe’s providential ruler on account of slavery, the republic’s unconscionable national sin. A scathing anti-Catholic prejudice and an equally strident objection to the practice of slavery in the American republic ultimately brought into focus the centrality of providentialism and British imperial enthusiasm within the Presbyterians’ mental world. It also equipped fervent members of the denomination with an exhilarating sense of divinely sanctioned duty that transcended the territorial boundaries of the individual British North American colonies and the early Canadian dominion.

Divergent attitudes concerning church-state relations contributed to the formulation of the early Canadian Presbyterian worldview as well. By the mid-nineteenth century, adherents of the denomination typically fell into one of three discrete categories when it came to this immensely contentious affiliation. Adherents of the Church of Scotland, who conceived of themselves as members of a prestigious religious establishment whose legal equality with the Church of England was enshrined in the 1707 Treaty of Union, advocated extensive church-state ties. Members of the Secessionist tradition, whose arguments were in numerous instances informed by the politico-religious philosophy of voluntarism, frequently insisted on the absolute and unequivocal separation of sacred and secular spheres. And supporters of the Free Church, which emerged in consequence of the metropolitan “Great Disruption” of 1843, advocated a politico-religious configuration in which the state is legally required to provide the church with unwavering financial support, but is strictly prohibited from intervening in any other aspect of the church’s affairs. Presbyterians from all three categories based their politico-religious contentions on differing interpretations of the British political tradition, a fact that attests to the elasticity and abiding importance of the multi-faceted British imperial phenomenon within the denominational consciousness. And the various subgroups’ divergent politico-religious arguments also corresponded to differing secular political ideologies that ran the gamut from arch toryism to unabashed liberalism, which throws into relief nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism’s tremendous eclecticism.
Yet for all of their undeniable diversity when it came to the church-state relationship, members of the denomination also shared an important commonality when it came to the interplay between religion and politics. In virtually all instances Presbyterianism’s constituent parts aimed to harness the authority of the state in an effort to transform northern North America into an unambiguously “Christian Nation.” That is, zealous adherents of the denomination—regardless of the Presbyterian subgroup to which they belonged—sought to create an expansive godly polity in which Christian ethics would constitute the foundation of public life, and in which acts of Sabbath desecration and immoderate alcohol consumption would be sharply curtailed.

The Presbyterians’ grand worldview was mapped out by members of the denomination onto their conception of the natural world. Their yearning to infuse nineteenth-century Canadian society with Protestant virtue, in other words, was paralleled by a desire to render submissive what members of the denomination identified as the anarchic northern North America environment. Zealous members of the denomination employed a two-pronged strategy in their campaign to subdue the wilderness, which was perceived within the denominational consciousness as both a physical and a moral entity. The first component of the Presbyterians’ two-part strategy to assert moral sovereignty over northern North America involved the propagation of the denomination’s characteristic theological tenets in religiously neglected settlements among both Euro-Canadian settlers and certain Aboriginals groups, whose culture zealous Presbyterians endeavoured to transform. This objective would be achieved, ardent nineteenth-century Presbyterians reckoned, through the efforts of missionaries and pioneering ministers who had been dispatched to geographically peripheral northern North American communities. Members of the denomination also felt that the promotion of the denomination’s theological doctrines would result in an audible transition, through which irreverent sounds of merrymaking would be replaced by either pious stillness or vocal articulations of Christian zeal, as well as in patterns of material sophistication, in which largely undomesticated backwoods regions would be replaced by bustling townships complete with churches, roads, and schools.

The second component of the Presbyterians’ campaign to render submissive the untamed natural environment centred on the establishment within rough-hewn northern
North American settings of the denomination’s characteristic liturgical traditions. These included elaborate communion festivals, through which the “lord’s supper” would be administered to large crowds outdoors beneath what was commonly described as the “canopy of heaven,” and Presbyterian church courts, through which penalties ranging from admonishment to excommunication would be dispensed to supposed transgressors for such ethical offences as illicit sexual activity and habitual drunkenness. Devout Presbyterians, in pursuing their two-pronged strategy, aimed to Christianize the untamed wilderness, which in turn would bring about the reconciliation of the natural world and its omnipotent creator.

An epic conception of history was also integral to the early Canadian Presbyterian worldview. The denomination’s conception of the past began approximately two thousand years before Jesus’ birth and culminated gloriously in the Christian millennium. Everything that occurred in-between these momentous events represented the divinely engineered unfurling of God’s foreordained design for the world and its inhabitants. The Presbyterians’ grand historical narrative opened with the forging of the covenantal bond between God and the Israelites, and included such iconic individuals and groups as John Calvin, John Knox, the Scottish Covenanters, and the English Puritans. The denomination’s sprawling conception of the past included northern North American groups and individuals as well, including the Huguenots of New France and such early Presbyterian standard-bearers as James MacGregor, who propagated the denomination’s tenets and traditions in the Maritime region between the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, and John Black, who served as a Presbyterian standard-bearer at the Red River settlement during the mid-nineteenth century.

Presbyterians, as a people highly favoured of God, had an immensely important part to play within this grand historical narrative. They viewed themselves as the heirs of a uniquely righteous tradition that had been handed down throughout the ages from one divinely favoured entity to the next, and were thus responsible for nothing less than the progressive onward march of such phenomena as religious and civil liberty. The Presbyterians’ sprawling account of the past was by no means devoid of adversity. Quite the opposite—the heroic protagonists who were charged with responsibility for the advancement of the providential plan were in numerous instances challenged by a variety
of diabolical adversaries, not the least of which were alleged Roman Catholic and Episcopalian tormentors. The ultimate triumph of good over evil—which followed the apocalyptic conflict between the two that had been foreshadowed in scripture—would be all the more gratifying in view of the numerous enemies that had been vanquished by divinely favoured groups and individuals along the way.

So ingrained was the Presbyterians’ epic conception of the past that it featured prominently within the denominational consciousness even when the various subgroups quarreled with one another. For example, when Presbyterianism’s constituent components found themselves mired in bouts of sectarian rancour over such issues as the church-state relationship, members of the various subgroups almost invariably invoked aspects of the past—albeit in differing ways—in an attempt to legitimate their divergent politico-religious contentions. The Presbyterian conception of the past, then, was neither unchanging nor unambiguous, but rather fluid and hotly contested.

The elaborate historical account that circulated within the denominational consciousness had important implications for the denomination’s understanding of time itself. Given the Presbyterians’ abiding emphasis on the unfurling of the providential design for the world and its inhabitants, ardent adherents of the denomination came to perceive time as neither amoral nor entirely inscrutable. Rather, they perceived time’s passage as a deeply purposeful phenomenon that was shot through with eschatological import. Ardent members of the denomination understood time to be a relentlessly teleological entity that would inevitably culminate in the earthly realization of a magnificent millennial Kingdom in which poverty, sinfulness, and ignorance would be utterly unknown.

Ideas matter. Early Canadian Presbyterian attitudes and assumptions regarding such phenomena as providentialism, church-state relations, the undomesticated northern North American environment, and history exerted meaningful influence within the denomination’s mental world throughout the nineteenth century. Presbyterian views regarding these themes—which were primarily propagated through such media as sectarian newspapers, pamphlets, and sermons—were by no means confined to the writings and public musings of an unrepresentative few. On the contrary, they were discussed with remarkable frequency by a wide variety of individuals, both clerical and
lay, over a lengthy period of time. Influential ideas suffused the denomination’s collective consciousness, and went a considerable distance in determining the behaviour of its membership.

Moreover, the media through which these themes were discussed cumulatively constituted a vibrant discursive community, or “public sphere.” Through such media a diverse aggregation of clerical and lay Presbyterians were drawn together in a variety of discussion-oriented communities in which words and ideas circulated freely and competed with one another for conceptual supremacy within the denominational psyche. Such communities ultimately functioned as a deliberative forum through which an array of beliefs and anxieties were discussed, debated, and deliberately transmitted to a broader Presbyterian public.

There was also a substantive correlation between the rhetoric expressed through Presbyterian sermons, pamphlets, and newspapers and the actions undertaken by rank-and-file members of the denomination. For instance, the ideas put forth by prominent clerical and lay Presbyterians regarding such concerns as anti-Catholicism and the abhorrent nature of the practice of slavery were paralleled by the actual initiatives regarding these issues that were launched by “ordinary” members of the denomination. For evidence one need look only to the Presbyterians’ support for Protestant missionary activities occurring among the overwhelmingly Roman Catholic inhabitants of Lower Canada, and to their fundraising efforts on behalf of the Buxton mission, which aimed to provide a haven in mid-nineteenth-century Canada West for individuals who had succeeded in fleeing legalized bondage in the American republic.

To contend that there was a meaningful correlation between elite rhetoric and rank-and-file action is not to imply that expressions of resistance or outright insubordination on the part of ordinary Presbyterians were unheard of. Nor is it to imply that rank-and-file members of the denomination simply acquiesced to the injunctions of elites, as though they were passive instruments that carried out the bidding of Presbyterianism’s disproportionately influential clerical and lay upper echelons. Rather, to emphasize the correlation between rhetoric and action is intended to demonstrate that compelling ideas regarding such phenomena as the alleged iniquity of Catholicism and the inhumane institution of slavery in the southern United States circulated widely within
the Presbyterian imagination, and influenced the denomination’s behaviour in significant ways throughout the nineteenth century.

Investigating the ideas that existed within early Canadian Presbyterianism also allows us to understand better the highly influential Christian culture to which the denomination belonged. Nineteenth-century Canada’s Christian culture informed the attitudes of millions of people toward such fundamental religious considerations as sinfulness and salvation. Yet Christianity’s significance in northern North America during this period transcended the expressly religious realm. Nineteenth-century Canada’s Christian culture, in determining popular attitudes toward morality, tacitly informed popular views regarding such enormously important—and comparatively secular—phenomena as work, commerce, leisure, materialism, gender relations, and sexuality. Examining the attitudes and assumptions that existed within nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism, one of northern North America’s largest and most influential religious groups, sheds light on the important Christian culture of which the denomination formed part.

Delving into early Canadian Presbyterianism’s mental world also permits one to attain a strengthened grasp of nineteenth-century Canada’s highly influential Protestant culture, which bound together members of differing denominational traditions and crystallized during the mid-nineteenth century. To a great degree members of this culture—which included numerous Presbyterians—conceived of themselves as the righteous antithesis of a debauched Roman Catholic “other,” and rallied in myriad instances around such ethical concerns as objections to the pervasiveness within northern North American society of immoderate alcohol consumption and Sabbath desecration, the institution of slavery in the American republic, and the rise within western Christendom of allegedly despotic ultramontane Roman Catholicism. Drawing on a conceptual synthesis of evangelicalism and proto-middle-class social values, members of this Protestant culture became passionately involved in a litany of moral reform crusades in hopes of purging northern North America of sinfulness.

The impact on nineteenth-century Canadian society of this Protestant culture, which influenced popular moral outlooks and eventually engendered the formulation of coercive laws that aimed to promote exacting standards in societal virtue, can scarcely be
overstated. Exploring the intellectual and cultural history of nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism—which played an active role in the multi-denominational Protestant community that coalesced in the mid-nineteenth century—serves to illuminate several of the fundamental assumptions and objectives on which this culture was based.

Through the prism of nineteenth-century Presbyterianism one ultimately catches a glimpse of religion’s utter centrality in Canadian society before processes of secularization—through which orthodox Christianity’s conceptual foundations were called into question—began to gather momentum. Callum Brown, in grappling with the phenomenon of British secularization, has observed that, “the mere presence of Christian churches or of Christian people in Britain does not make, and never has made, Britain Christian.” Rather, what made that nation Christian in Brown’s estimation was the fact that aspects of Christian morality suffused everyday life and exerted significant influence on conceptions of individual and collective identity prior to the phenomenon of secularization—which in his view occurred abruptly during the 1960s—displaced conventional religiosity from its traditional place at the heart of British culture.²

Brown’s arguments regarding Christianity’s centrality in Britain prior to secularization’s advent have stimulating implications for the study of religion in nineteenth-century Canada. Northern North America was not fundamentally Christian throughout this century simply because it contained numerous churches and a great many churchgoing individuals. Rather, it was fundamentally Christian because aspects of that religion penetrated millions of peoples’ lives, determined popular notions of virtue and depravity, and played an indispensable role in structuring notions of selfhood and community.

An investigation of Presbyterianism’s intellectual and cultural substance brings into focus the critical importance of religion within nineteenth-century northern North American society, in that it illustrates the pronounced extent to which ardent adherents of this large and influential group looked to religious phenomena in an effort to make sense of the world and their place within it. Historians of nineteenth-century Canada would do well to devote further attention to the vital part by religious considerations and

controversies in shaping northern North Americans’ conceptions of identity—individual, communal, regional, national, and imperial—prior to secularization’s onset. To downplay religion’s significance within nineteenth-century Canadian society is to obscure one of the most irreducibly important aspects of this country’s intellectual and cultural past.

Hugh MacLennan, in his novel Each Man’s Son, engages with Presbyterianism’s reputation for austerity. Dr. Dougald MacKenzie, a mid-twentieth-century Cape Breton physician, attempts to comfort his guilt-ridden friend and colleague, Dr. Daniel Ainslie, who serves as the novel’s protagonist. MacKenzie, in attempting to discern the root cause of Ainslie’s unhappiness, identifies his friend’s upbringing as the child of a Presbyterian minister—through which a stern Calvinistic morality was rigorously inculcated in his mind beginning at an early age—as largely responsible for his psychological suffering in adulthood. Ainslie, despite gravitating as an adult to agnosticism, is in MacKenzie’s view tormented by his Presbyterian heritage. “Dan,” MacKenzie asserts, “you haven’t forgotten a single word you’ve ever heard from the pulpit or from your own Presbyterian father. You may think you’ve rejected religion with your mind, but your personality has no more rejected it than dyed cloth rejects its original colour.” Ainslie, who finds himself unable to refute his colleague’s assessment, speculates as to why he has been condemned to “forever feel guilty before he could reason away any cause for guilt?” MacKenzie had informed him that, “although he might be an intellectual agnostic, he was an emotional child in thrall to his barbarous Presbyterian past.” As Ainslie struggles to digest his colleague’s remarks, he notices himself feeling “guilty again.” But why, he wonders, was this the case? “Was there no end to the circle of Original Sin? Could a man never grow up and be free?”  

Hugh MacLennan, who was himself the son of a Presbyterian minister, presumably knew of what he wrote when it came to the denomination’s cultural legacy. Yet it would be a mistake to conclude from his remarks that there was—and is—nothing more to Presbyterianism than Calvinism’s guilt-inducing psychological residue. Adherents of the denomination situated in nineteenth-century northern North America were in numerous instances galvanized by an elaborate worldview, the essential features

---

3 Hugh MacLennan, Each Man’s Son (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1962 [1951]), 67.
4 Elspeth Cameron, Hugh MacLennan: A Writer’s Life (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 7-12.
of which differ dramatically from the caricature of the impossibly austere Presbyterian. Though a dour conceptual orientation inarguably exerted influence within the denominational consciousness, nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterians were also drawn together by an ambitious and wide-ranging desire to bring about God’s achievement of dominion, or spiritual sovereignty, over northern North America. The realization of this objective, devout members of the denomination were convinced, would involve the creation of a godly society in which an uncompromising Protestant piety would permeate individual homes and consciences and constitute the ethical bedrock of public life. Closely associated with this impulse was a yearning to propagate Protestant tenets and traditions throughout the wider world, which in turn would hasten the arrival of the Christian millennium itself.

So, yes, austerity was an important aspect of early Canadian Presbyterianism. But it was by no means the only factor contributing to the formulation of the denominational self-conception.
1. Primary Sources

A. Unpublished Primary Sources

Archives of Ontario

    William Cochrane Papers

Dalhousie University Archives

    Thomas McCulloch Fonds

Library and Archives Canada

    George Brown Papers

    Isaac Buchanan Papers

    William Morris Papers

Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management

    George Patterson Fonds

    Thomas McCulloch Papers

Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives

    Boston Presbyterian Church, Session Minutes (Esquesing, Ontario)

    Central Presbyterian Church, Session Minutes (Hamilton, Ontario)

    Coté Street Church, Session Minutes (Montreal, Quebec)

    First Annual Report of the Ladies’ Auxiliary Association in Connection with the French Mission Work of the Church of Scotland

    Knox Presbyterian Church, Session Minutes (Earltown, Nova Scotia)

    Knox Presbyterian Church, Session Minutes (Milton, Ontario)

    Mary Lizette Jenkins Papers

    MacNab Street Presbyterian Church, Session Records (Hamilton, Ontario)
Merrick Street Church, Session Records (Hamilton, Ontario)

Michael Willis Papers

Presbyterian Church of Canada in Connection with the Church of Scotland Papers

Robert McDowall Fonds

St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, Session Records (Markham, Ontario)

St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, Session Records (Scarborough, Ontario)

St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, Session Records (Toronto, Ontario)

William Gregg Papers

William Proudfoot Papers

Queen’s University Archives

Presbyterian Church of Canada in Connection with the Church of Scotland Fonds

St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church (Upper Canada) Fonds

William Bell Diaries

United Church of Canada Archives

Canada Presbyterian Church/Presbyterian Church in Canada: Foreign Mission Committee, John Black Letters

James Croil Papers

Mark Young Stark Fonds

Presbyterian Church of the Maritime Provinces in Connection with the Church of Scotland. Presbytery of Prince Edward Island. Minutes, 1854-1875

Synod of New Brunswick in Connection with the Church of Scotland. Transcript of Minutes, 1859-1868

United Synod of Upper Canada Fonds

William Smart Papers
B. Published Primary Sources


——. *A Thoroughly British Legislature Wanted, or, in other words, Legislation Combining Patriotism & Popularity….* Greenock: Published at the Advertiser Office, 1850.


——. *Valedictory Discourse (In Substance) Delivered in the Canada Presbyterian Church, St. Catharine’s, 24 February 1867, by the Reverend R.F. Burns. St. Catherine’s, ON [?] : Office of the Post, 1867.*

Burns, Robert. *Substance of Speeches and Address at the Presbyterial Visitation at Knox’s Church, Toronto….* Toronto: Maclean, Thomas and Co., 1856.

——. *Report Presented to the Colonial Committee of the Free Church of Scotland, on Canada and Nova Scotia. By the Rev. Dr. Robert Burns, Paisley, one of the deputies of the Free Church to America*. Paisley: Printed by Alex. Gardner, For the Colonial Committee, 1844.

Caven, William. *A Vindication of Doctrinal Standards….* Toronto: James Campbell and Son, 1875.


Easton, Robert. *Reasons for Joy and Praise: A Sermon Preached April 6, 1815: Being the Day of General Thanksgiving for Peace with the United States and in the Presbyterian Church, St. Peter’s Street, Montreal*. Montreal, 1815.


——. *A Sermon, Preached in the Presbyterian Church, St. Gabriel Street, Montreal, on the 30th of Nov, 1835 (St. Andrew’s Day). By the Rev Henry Esson, Senior Chaplain of the St. Andrew’s Society of Montreal*. Montreal: Printed by James and Thomas A. Stark, 1835.


King, Andrew. *Narrative of Events Issuing in the Institution of the Free Church of Scotland in Separation from the State....* Halifax: James Barnes, 1861.


Mathieson, Alexander. *A Sermon, Preached in St. Andrew’s Church, Montreal, on the Thirtieth Day of November, 1836, (St. Andrew’s Day) by the Reverend Alexander Mathieson, A.M. (Minister of that Church, and one of the Chaplains of St. Andrew’s Society, Montreal).* Montreal, 1837.


McGill, Robert. *Discourses Preached on Various Occasions, in the course of Ministerial


Willis, Michael. The Gospel of Grace Vindicated; Being Sermons Preached on Several Sabbath Evenings in 1869…. Toronto: A. Lovell, 1870.


C. Newspapers

The Banner

Canadian Presbyterian Magazine

Canadian United Presbyterian Magazine

Colonial Patriot

Ecclesiastical & Missionary Record of the Free Church of Scotland

Ecclesiastical & Missionary Record of the Presbyterian Church of Canada

Evangelical & Missionary Record

The Globe

Home & Foreign Missionary Record of the Church of Scotland
Home & Foreign Missionary Record of the Free Church of Scotland

Home & Foreign Missionary Record of the Presbyterian Church of the Lower Provinces of British North America

Home & Foreign Record of the Presbyterian Church of the Lower Provinces of British North America

Missionary Record of the United Presbyterian Church

Monthly Record of the Church of Scotland in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick & Adjoining Provinces

Montreal Gazette

The Presbyterian; Missionary and Religious Record of the Presbyterian Church of Canada in Connection with the Church of Scotland

Presbyterian Witness and Evangelical Advocate

2. Secondary Sources


——. The View from Murney Tower: Salem Bland, the Late Victorian Controversies, and the Search for a New Christianity; Book One: A Canadian Odyssey. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008.


Bowsfield, Hartwell. “John Black.” In *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. XI.


——. “Providence, Predestination and Progress; or, did the Enlightenment Fail?” *Albion* 35, no. 4 (Winter 2004).

Clark, S.D. *Church and Sect in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1948.


Crerar, Duff. “‘Crackling Sounds from the Burning Bush’: The Evangelical Impulse in Canadian Presbyterianism before 1875.” In *Aspects of the Canadian Evangelical


——. The Evangelical Century: College and Creed in English Canada from the Great


Grant, John Webster. “Canadian Confederation and the Protestant Churches.” Church History 38, no. 3 (September 1969).


Moir, John S., ed. Called to Witness: Profiles of Canadian Presbyterians; A Supplement


Noel, Jan. Canada Dry: Temperance Crusades Before Confederation. Toronto:


Read, Colin. The Rebellion of 1837 in Upper Canada. Ottawa: Canadian Historical


Swyripa, Frances. “‘The Monarchy, the Mounties, and Ye Olde English Fayre’: Identity


Wilson, David A. *The Irish in Canada*. Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1989.


3. Unpublished Theses & Dissertations


