

## **A United Church Presence in the Antigonish Movement: J.W.A. Nicholson and J.D.N. MacDonald**

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The Antigonish Movement, centred around the Extension Department of St. Francis Xavier University, represented a particular response to the poverty gripping much of the rural Maritimes even prior to the onset of the Depression. Moses Coady and Jimmy Tompkins, the two key leaders, were Roman Catholic priests; most of the next echelon of leaders and key workers in the Movement were also Roman Catholic. However, some clergy and lay members of other denominations either supported, or played an active role in, the Antigonish Movement, including two United Church ministers – J.W.A. Nicholson and J.D.N. MacDonald. This essay will briefly examine these two individuals, their motivations, the nature of their involvement, and the way in which they were perceived within the United Church, both during and subsequent to their direct involvement in the Antigonish Movement.

J.W.A. Nicholson (1874-1961) was a contemporary of Coady and Tompkins. Born in 1874 in Cape Breton, as a young man he attended Pine Hill Divinity Hall in Halifax, then a Presbyterian college serving the Maritimes. After completing his B.D., he did post-graduate study in Edinburgh, followed by a period of study at the University of Berlin. After an initial pastorate in the Saint John area, Nicholson served at Inverness in Cape Breton from 1905-1911. He then took a call to St. James Presbyterian Church in Dartmouth, where he stayed until 1927. Following a two year period of study at Columbia University in New York, Nicholson returned to Canada, where he served at North Bedeque, PEI, a rural,

multi-point pastoral charge until his retirement.

Nicholson was an ardent social activist, much influenced not only by liberal theology in general but also by social Christianity or the social gospel in particular. While, it is difficult to weigh the particular influence of various factors in his life, various influences both theoretical and experiential are evident: for instance, he studied with Adolf von Harnack in Germany; and the minister whose congregation Nicholson attended after his retirement judged that Nicholson's time in Inverness was likely a factor in his involvement in social action.<sup>1</sup> It was there that he gained first-hand experience with coal mining in Cape Breton and with the appalling conditions in which the miners and their families lived. During this time he developed a close relationship with the local Roman Catholic priest; this pattern of a close relationship with local Roman Catholic clergy remained a feature throughout his ministry. Nicholson also devoted the remainder of his life to involvement in various social causes designed to better the lives of common folk. While he manifested pacifist sympathies throughout his life, he became an ardent pacifist following World War I. He was the key leader of the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order in the Maritimes and was one of the contributors to the Fellowship's 1935 publication, *Towards the Christian Revolution*.

Nicholson's involvement with the Antigonish Movement took several forms. He was a good friend and correspondent of both Coady and Tompkins. The Movement clearly had his moral support, a support that grew stronger as the Movement gained authority. During his time at North Bedeque, he followed the Antigonish Movement practice of establishing study groups as a prelude to other initiatives. He also played a role in establishing credit unions, both in the general rural area where he served as well as elsewhere in Prince Edward Island. He was also active in the establishment of co-operatives on PEI. After his retirement from North Bedeque, he moved to Halifax, where he helped to organize study groups. After retiring to Halifax, he again played a key role in the still young credit union movement in Nova Scotia and also promoted co-operatives in the province. In 1938, when Moses Coady was putting together a ten person committee to do fund-raising in order to provide a financial base for the Extension Department at St. Francis Xavier, Coady approached Nicholson to serve on the committee. As Coady noted in his letter to Nicholson soliciting the latter's involvement: "The idea is to be able to say that this Movement is Maritime-wide, non-denominational, and non-political in character."<sup>2</sup> In his response, Nicholson noted his current involvement as

a rural representative on the Carnegie Library Commission and also his hope that some well-to-do Maritimers might be persuaded to support Coady's initiative, something Coady himself considered an unlikely prospect.<sup>3</sup> Nicholson continued to be a strong supporter of the work of the Extension Department. He was particularly appreciative of the decision of the Department to establish the *Bulletin*, a publication he regarded as well worth the annual subscription fee of one dollar.

On a personal level, Coady and Nicholson had a close and strong friendship. They wrote with some regularity to one another, among other things recommending books each had personally found helpful. A 1951 letter from Nicholson to Coady offers insight into Nicholson's approach toward ecumenism and to his cooperative spirit with clergy of other denominations. He noted that he had "some good friends within my own church with whom I differ strongly on the proper Christian relations between our own and other churches, especially your own. I have always cultivated friendship and brotherly intimacy with these in my own long ministry, with most happy relations in nearly every case. It is one of the features of my ministry which gives me the richest satisfactions."<sup>4</sup>

How was Nicholson regarded in the United Church at the time? He was definitely viewed as a radical. By many, he was admired and respected, not least for his unswerving faith in the worth of every individual he met. He was also viewed by many as a "bit of a kook," and was feared by some for his ideas and his potential influence. His involvement in the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order and also in the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation made him *persona non grata* in some circles, especially among those who judged that clergy should have no part in worldly affairs in general and political affairs in particular. His close relationships with a number of Roman Catholic priests also netted him significant opposition from some United Church clergy. As well, in the post-World War II era, he became somewhat lionized by a number of younger clergy.<sup>5</sup> It may also say something of the way he was viewed, initially in the Presbyterian Church and later in the United Church, that though he had studied at two prestigious universities in Europe and had an earned M.A. in Theology at a time when such an accomplishment was relatively rare, he was never offered a teaching position at Pine Hill or any other Presbyterian or United Church theological institution. It is also noteworthy that when he returned from his studies at Columbia University in the late 1920s, urban congregations were not interested in his services, notwithstanding his reputation as a brilliant thinker, a good preacher, and

a caring pastor.

J.D.N. MacDonald grew up on a small farm in Cape Breton. His parents had moved from the American east coast shortly before his birth. Although not raised in a church-going family, he became involved in the church in his teens and, after a brief teaching career, studied for the ministry, being ordained in the United Church in 1926. His first pastoral charge was in the mining community of Dominion, Cape Breton. Following that, he served briefly in a rural area before developing, as a very young man, a heart condition that nearly killed him. He spent almost two years convalescing in a hospital in North Sydney run by the Sisters of Charity. While his hospital stay was not the beginning of his appreciation for Roman Catholic leadership in an age that was far from ecumenical, it certainly cemented his appreciation for the readiness of the Catholic Church to care for individuals who had few material advantages. Following that period of convalescence, in 1931 he went to serve a rural, primarily agricultural, pastoral charge near Baddeck, Nova Scotia. In 1932, Moses Coady came to Baddeck and addressed a meeting attended by MacDonald. Much impressed by Coady, MacDonald began to organize study groups in each of the four communities he served. Each study group began to collect money from its members,<sup>6</sup> and the resulting Thrift Club was the forerunner of a credit union in the area. The study groups and the Thrift Club also led to the development of a small cannery in the area. He also began to help the farmers in the area to market their produce in Sydney and the surrounding mining towns. The Thrift Club provided capital to bring in chicks and to increase the poultry flocks as well as to bring in good breeding stock in order to improve the quality of the animals raised by local farmers.

With the Movement growing in influence, Moses Coady approached MacDonald in 1936 to see if he would become a full-time field worker. MacDonald refused, commenting in his memoirs that it was the only time he had ever refused Moses Coady. For MacDonald, his own sense of his call to ministry meant that he needed to continue to work actively in parish ministry.<sup>7</sup> He did, however, agree to do part-time work as a field worker for the Extension Department, although confiding in his memoirs that while he did his best to accommodate Coady's requests, he also thought that Coady's demands on what constituted part-time work were strenuous. MacDonald also did extensive work with the credit union movement in Nova Scotia, especially after his move in the 1940s to serve a multi-point pastoral charge on the eastern side of Dartmouth, Nova Scotia.

In 1937 MacDonald received an invitation from students at Pine Hill Divinity Hall, the United Church theological college in Halifax, to come and talk with them about the Antigonish Movement. He rightly viewed this opportunity as one way to influence younger clergy who might be willing to offer leadership in the congregations they would serve. From that point onward, other United Church ministers became more actively involved in aspects of the Movement, though the overall number remained relatively small.

MacDonald travelled through various parts of Cape Breton and Nova Scotia during the late 1930s and early 1940s. Occasionally it was at the request of a local United Church minister who wanted him to address a congregational meeting on organizing study groups as a first step toward other co-operative ventures. More often, it was at the request of Moses Coady or A.B. MacDonald, Coady's key assistant in the early days of the Extension Department. During his later years, J.D.N. MacDonald continued to organize study groups, but much of his energy went into developing credit unions in the province.

How were MacDonald and his work viewed within his own denomination? When I was a theological student at the Atlantic School of Theology in the mid-to-late 1970s, I interviewed MacDonald and asked him that question. He recounted that when he began, some of his colleagues thought he was a bit of a crack-pot, though most of them were "more puzzled by me than anything."<sup>8</sup> Some of his colleagues serving rural congregations, particularly in Cape Breton, might have shared some of his ideas but, he judged, they were fearful of becoming involved because of opposition that they would have faced within their congregations. It was often the case, particularly in the fishing communities of eastern Nova Scotia, that the local fish merchants and store owners were Protestant. Certainly one often risked opposition within one's congregations, and the opposition was likely to come from those with a capacity to be strong financial supporters. MacDonald also faced questions from some colleagues about his close association with a movement whose key leadership was Roman Catholic. In his memoirs, he noted that he did not meet as much opposition of that type as he would have expected, but it was still present.<sup>9</sup> One wonders, though, how much of it remained unstated.

During the 1950s and 1960s, his earlier work came to be more appreciated by others within the denomination. The relative success of co-operative stores and the credit union movement, and their value in rural

communities, led to greater appreciation of the work of those who had been the early leaders in the Movement. Both credit unions and co-operative movements had gained increased “respectability.” As these aspects of the Antigonish Movement became more normative, more open expressions of appreciation for those involved followed.

In 1958, St. Francis Xavier awarded MacDonald an honorary LL.D. for his work in the Antigonish Movement. That honorary degree – in a United Church Maritime culture that very much valued not only formal education but also such recognition by a university – heightened MacDonald’s profile within his own denomination. Subsequently, in the 1960s, he was elected President of the Maritime Conference, a position that, in those years, went only to “valued elders” in the region. United Church laity and ministers who, in the 1960s and 1970s, endeavoured to give leadership to rural life and rural congregations within the Maritime Conference, judged MacDonald to have been an important pioneer in trying to help rural communities develop local resources ways that benefitted the local community. It is perhaps even more telling that, in the challenging times rural communities currently face, there has been a renewed interest in the Antigonish Movement, as well as in the life and work of some of its key leaders.

### *Endnotes*

1. Rev. Dr. W. Charles Anderson, interview with John H. Young, February 1978, Halifax, quoted in John H. Young, “Maritime Churches and Social Action, 1928-1939” (M.Div. Thesis, Atlantic School of Theology, 1978), 127.
2. The Rev. Moses Coady to the Rev. J.W.A. Nicholson, 17 November 1938, The Rev. Moses M. Coady Papers, RG 30-2/1/3360, St. Francis Xavier University Archives (SFXUA), Antigonish, NS.
3. The Rev. J.W.A. Nicholson to the Rev. Moses Coady, 21 November 1938, The Rev. Moses M. Coady Papers, RG 30-2/1/3363, SFXUA.
4. The Rev. J.W.A. Nicholson to the Rev. Moses Coady, 1951 [day and month missing], The Rev. Moses M. Coady Papers, RG 30-2/1/3375, SFXUA.
5. As a theology student in the mid-to-late 1970s, I talked to some clergy who, though they were a full generation younger than him, had served at some time in the same general area as Nicholson; many of them hesitated for a little before they offered an evaluation of him, not because they did not admire him but because he was a difficult person to describe.

6. J.D. Nelson MacDonald, *Memoirs of an Unorthodox Clergyman* (Truro, NS: Cooperative Resources Ltd., 1986), 26-27.
7. MacDonald, *Memoirs*, 43.
8. J.D. Nelson MacDonald, interview with John H. Young, February 1978, Halifax, NS, quoted in Young, "Maritime Churches and Social Action," 116.
9. MacDonald, *Memoirs*, 46-47, 49-50.

