

## **Myth Meets Reality: Canadian Presbyterians and the Great War**

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In his article “The Great War,” which appeared in the final volume of the *Cambridge History of Christianity*, Michael Snape summarizes the themes and historiography that have developed related to the Christian churches’ response to the First World War. He notes that “much harsh and self-righteous criticism” has been leveled at the “churches’ wartime attitudes and activities.”<sup>1</sup> To quote him further: “the historiography of Christianity during the war years has been heavily focused on the churches and their leadership and has been strongly influenced by the pacifism of the inter-war and Cold War eras.”<sup>2</sup> He goes on to recognize that while there is “plenty of scope for moralizing and recrimination,” these themes have confused our understanding of these years. Again, to quote Michael Snape: “what they have obscured is the fundamental fact that the churches interpreted the war and their role within it in the light of their nineteenth-century experiences and outlook, not in the more chastened spirit of later decades of the twentieth.”<sup>3</sup>

An important point has been made here. If there is one thing historians should be concerned about, it is the possibility that we might be unfairly reading back into the past values and expectations from a later time, in particular from our own times. We as historians struggle with our biases, those we are conscious of as well as those of which we may remain unaware. That attitudes to war changed in the twentieth century should not be a surprise. To state the obvious, the Great War did not succeed in ending all wars; instead, it laid the seeds for another, even greater

conflagration. The Second World War, in turn, was followed by a seemingly endless series of often-horrible conflicts. Given this, it is understandable why, in the midst of the nuclear arms race in the mid-1980s, one might look back critically at a previous generation of members of the Canadian churches who seemed to let their religious convictions be swept away by nationalistic rhetoric.<sup>4</sup> Michael Snape makes an important point. Our historical judgments are shaped by the times and events through which we live. Indeed, it is probably worth noting that while concerns about nuclear proliferation changed significantly with the collapse of the Soviet Union, other events, notably the terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001, continue to influence our understandings of the issues surrounding war and peace. These are contexts that shape our judgment of the past. The very real challenge is to try to see the past in its own terms and with its own values and understandings clearly in play. We should not underestimate how difficult this is. We also need to be willing to examine the extent to which these, and other, values have affected the manner in which we have researched and written about World War I and churches, including the Presbyterian Church in Canada.

The literature on Canadian Presbyterians and their response to World War I has developed slowly over the last decades. In studying the historiography of how Canadian Presbyterians responded to and were affected by the Great War, there are two distinct places where we might start. The first was Edward A. Christie's thesis, "The Presbyterian Church in Canada and its Official Attitude Toward Public Affairs and Social Problems 1875-1925."<sup>5</sup> The second was Michael Bliss's crucial article on Methodists and World War I.<sup>6</sup> Each of these starting places reminds us that the attitudes and actions of Canadian Presbyterians in World War I cannot be studied in isolation either from the denomination's broader attitudes and values or in isolation from other Christian denominations. Christie's thesis situates attitudes towards war within a larger study of the denomination's official positions on a variety of social issues, from temperance to industrial action. His sources were largely the decisions made by the denomination at the yearly General Assembly and the various denominational magazines. Christie's work has been crucial in demonstrating the fundamental fact that Presbyterians strongly supported the war from beginning to the end, including conscription. As Michelle Fowler has recently noted, Christie was deeply troubled by many of the opinions that Presbyterians expressed during the Great War.<sup>7</sup> In no small part due to his discomfort with some of the statements made in the *Record*, the *Presby-*

rian and Westminster, the *Presbyterian Witness* and by the General Assembly itself, Christie may have placed too much stress on some of the dissenting opinions or opinions that were more judicious and less hyper-patriotic. The discussion often seems to focus on one journal, the *Presbyterian*, which was “more cautious at the outset and talked much of peace and the means of preserving peace, for some months before succumbing to the pressure of an all-out war effort by English Canada.”<sup>8</sup> The *Presbyterian* was more cautious, but we should not confuse caution or careful language with a lack of active support for the war. Christie may also have over-emphasized statements discussing peace before and after the conflict. The General Assembly’s support for the League of Nations in 1920, and an editorial in the *Record* speaking about a warless world, led Christie to suggest that clearly “some real soul-searching has been going on, and at last has evolved an attitude toward war which appears to be more consistent with the Christian faith of a great Canadian church.”<sup>9</sup> This stress on those minority voices calling for an end to war has had an influence on the historiography of Presbyterians in World War I; however, it would be appropriate to ask whether we have over-emphasized these voices and, at times, misinterpreted their intent.

Michael Bliss’s arguments have also been fundamental to the study of Canadian Presbyterian responses to the war.<sup>10</sup> Bliss’s approach reminds us that there was a common Protestant experience during the war, including vigorous support for the Imperial war effort, recruitment, support of conscription, and the role played by chaplains.<sup>11</sup> Another important article was David Marshall’s “Methodism Embattled: a Reconsideration of the Methodist Church and World War I,” which stresses that the experience of those at the front – including chaplains – was dramatically different from the experience of those who only knew the home front.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, both Bliss and Marshall are suggesting that the war was in some way a watershed. For Bliss the war helped to intensify the reforming zeal of Canadian Methodists, making them the most radical of North American religious denominations by the last year of the war. The church was willing to use the power of the state to build its vision of a Christian society; that vision was popular at the end of the war, but it faded in the 1920s.<sup>13</sup> For Marshall, the war, particularly for those who fought in the trenches, changed attitudes and values, particularly those values related to the building of a reformed society. These efforts were ultimately unsuccessful. Marshall suggested: “In its wake, the Great War contributed to the more secular atmosphere of the 1920s.”<sup>14</sup> For both, the

war transformed the churches and those who fought in it. It certainly changed the place of the Methodists in Canadian society.

This idea of World War I as a watershed that changed the Protestant churches can be seen in other writings. My own study of Thomas Eakin's preaching – influenced and informed by both Christie and Bliss – assumed that the war changed attitudes and tried to understand why that was the case.<sup>15</sup> I was particularly struck by how Thomas Eakin moved from seeing the war as a just war to comparing it to a holy war or crusade. With Michael Bliss, I saw this as a product of the propaganda used in World War I.<sup>16</sup> I noted the specific references to the Bryce Commission and other anti-German propaganda in Eakin's sermons. This view that Imperial propaganda played a key role among Canadian Presbyterians is one of the themes recently challenged by Michelle Fowler in her Master's thesis and subsequent articles.<sup>17</sup> Fowler makes a compelling case that the German military actions – some of which clearly were seen at the time, and should be so understood now, as atrocities – were well known from the early days of the war and provided ample cause for seeing the war as a just struggle from the very beginning.<sup>18</sup> In addition, the work that Gordon Heath has done on Canadian Protestant churches in the Boer War has demonstrated that the attitudes that historians once saw as developing during the Great War had already been expressed during that earlier conflict. These were attitudes being recycled, not created.<sup>19</sup> These are important correctives. At the same time, I still remain interested in what it was that drove one particular individual, Thomas Eakin, to use more extreme language as the war progressed. Others may have seen the war as a crusade from the beginning, but Eakin provides us with at least one example of someone who came to use harsher language to define the war only later in the conflict. One might theorize that it was the on-going and escalating cost of the war that led to this change, not any propaganda. At the same time, we should recognize that the dominant voices were interpreting this as a just war and even as a holy war from very early in the conflict, using phrases they had already used during the war in South Africa.

Our understanding of Canadian Presbyterians in World War I has improved over the decades as historians have looked at a variety of topics. Duff Crerar has studied the important role of chaplaincy and Bob Anger has applied his insights to Presbyterian chaplains.<sup>20</sup> Murray Angus has explored Presbyterians and Methodists in Nova Scotia in World War I, demonstrating the strong similarities between these traditions and their support of the war.<sup>21</sup> Individual Presbyterians have been the subject of

study,<sup>22</sup> notably C.W. Gordon (Ralph Connor), who, through his novels, speeches, and other writings, has provided a fascinating lens into a variety of areas.<sup>23</sup> Our understanding of Canadian Presbyterians in World War I has also benefited from studies of the history of propaganda and Jonathan Vance's work on memory and memorialization.<sup>24</sup> Studies of the role of women during the war, similar to one done dealing with the Methodist church,<sup>25</sup> and of memorials in Presbyterian churches would be enlightening. The war has continued to be seen in light of other topics affecting Canadian Presbyterians, including church union, colleges, and the social gospel. Most of these studies have been influenced in one way or another by the themes developed by Edward Christie and Michael Bliss. Indeed, it would be fair to say that some basic facts have been clearly established. These include the very strong and active support for the war that Presbyterian Church in Canada shared with the other major Canadian Protestant denominations. Such debate as there has been has concerned how we should understand and explain that support.

Michelle Fowler has strongly criticized the way historians have interpreted the Canadian Presbyterians' involvement in the war: "The argument presented by Bliss and echoed in many subsequent studies of Canadian attitudes towards conflict was influenced by postwar revisionism about the origins and significance of the war and reinforced by anti-war attitudes that developed during the 1960s."<sup>26</sup> Fowler notes that her study "attempts to avoid that use of temporal snobbery, that is the belief that our morality changes for the better simply by the passage of time"<sup>27</sup> as she examines the Presbyterian press in the Great War. As already noted, Fowler has made a compelling case for the early justification of the war as a result of the German brutality in the invasion of Belgium in the early days of the war. Equally significantly, she has demonstrated that the Presbyterian press was opposed to any thought of a negotiated settlement in the latter years of the war.<sup>28</sup> These are two key findings. At the same time, all historians write from their own temporal perspective. What is the perspective from which we are looking at the past? How have we been shaped by our own experiences? How have we been shaped by the literature that has developed about the past? The challenge of understanding the churches' strong support for the war has been made more difficult as a result of Thomas P. Socknat's study of pacifism in Canada.<sup>29</sup> Socknat was very clear in recognizing that the word "pacifism" has meant different things: "Since its initial appearance shortly before the Great War, 'pacifism' has often referred both to the belief that war is absolutely and

always wrong, and to the belief that war, though sometimes necessary, is always inhumane and irrational and should be prevented.” As he noted, the first understanding was limited to smaller traditions – “sectarians” – such as Quakers, those in the historic peace churches, and groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses. The second position, one which Socknat identifies with “liberal-progressive pacifists,” could be found more broadly. In his study, Socknat chose to use the term in “its broadest sense to reflect its common usage and meaning in Canada’s past,” while distinguishing between those always opposed to war and those who held “liberal-progressive” positions.<sup>30</sup> While it might be helpful to include the second category with those totally opposed to war within a discussion of the broader culture, in terms of the church (clearly one of the groups included in the study) this only creates confusion. Within the Christian tradition, the second position is simply one articulation of the just war position. I would strongly suggest that in using the term “pacifist” in discussing Canadian Presbyterians, we should restrict the term only to those who opposed war under all situations and note that no-one has yet identified a Presbyterian who held this position during the Great War. Although our knowledge of Canadian Presbyterians in World War I has dramatically improved, we still struggle with key questions, including how we can understand these events in their own times and not be overwhelmed by later developments or values. This is an important consideration. Yet, if we look closely, there may be clues we can find which can help us as we seek to understand and evaluate responses to the war.

On the eve of the Great War, a new building was constructed for Knox College, one of the theological colleges for Canadian Presbyterians. The college moved from its landlocked building on Spadina Circle to a very prominent location on the University of Toronto campus. It now fronted St. George Street on the west and King’s College Circle on the east. The basis of union that would take the Presbyterian Church in Canada into the United Church had already been passed; one can imagine that those who constructed this new building saw it becoming a major theological college for that new denomination. The building is quite dramatic. At the same time, the stonework is largely plain and undecorated. One of the few exceptions, and arguably the most notable, is the flag that was carved into the fireplace in the boardroom. This is a Covenanter flag, used by those who fought against royalist forces in the civil wars that affected Scotland, as well as England and Ireland, during the mid-seventeenth century. The flag states: “For Religion, Covenant, Crownes

and Kingdoms.” This suggests is that one of the features of Canadian Presbyterianism on the eve of the Great War was an identification with the covenanting tradition. This identification may have been more romantic than real, but Canadian Presbyterians saw themselves as part of a tradition brought over from Scotland that celebrated the fight for religious and personal freedom against monarchy. It was a tradition that commemorated those who rioted against the imposition of an alien prayer book in 1637, most famously at St. Giles in Edinburgh. The college even had a copy of the National Covenant signed in 1638. The College’s copy was donated in 1906 by one of its graduates, C.W. Gordon (Ralph Connor), and made the journey from Spadina Circle to the new building. There were thus a variety of symbols that reminded Canadian Presbyterians of a time when they defied the government based upon their religious principles. The covenanting tradition was part of Canadian Presbyterian culture when war broke out in 1914.

This tradition, as well as other values of the Canadian Presbyterian church in 1914, needs to be central to our discussion of the church’s approach to the Great War. What remains striking is how deeply and fully the church committed itself to the Empire’s cause. Perhaps even more striking is the language used and the fact that this support did not change as the casualties mounted. We see this when we look at the impact of the war on one of the central institutions of the Presbyterian Church in Canada – its theological colleges. The denominational colleges faced particular challenges during the Great War. One challenge was the few students who were available to teach. Enrollments dropped, which resulted in financial challenges. There were also fewer professors to teach the remaining students, as some of the faculty members were also serving overseas. A number of colleges had buildings appropriated by the government for use as convalescent hospitals or for other purposes related to the war effort. Still, the greatest effect was the loss of recent graduates or students studying for the ministry. The College Reports in 1918 give a sense of the impact of the war: Presbyterian College (Halifax) had forty-one students enlisted and four already killed; Presbyterian College (Montreal) had thirty-eight enlisted and eight dead; Queen’s (Kingston) had two students serving in Flanders; Knox (Toronto) had seventy enlisted and seven dead; Presbyterian College (Saskatoon) had four killed. Robertson College (Edmonton) had thirty-nine enlisted and five dead; Westminster Hall (Vancouver) had fifty three enlisted, two disabled, two prisoners of war, and eight killed; and Manitoba College (Winnipeg) reported that there

were only eleven students in classes as everyone who was fit was serving at the front.<sup>31</sup> It is worth noting that these numbers would not have included those killed in the last hundred days of fighting, which saw very heavy Canadian casualties.<sup>32</sup> Knox College saw another nine students die, for a total of sixteen killed in the war.<sup>33</sup> But numbers fail to capture the loss. Robertson College noted that three of their dead students “had rendered excellent services on Alberta mission fields and were young men of much promise.”<sup>34</sup> This same year (1918) the General Assembly established a committee to try to coordinate the work of the colleges during the crisis created by the war.<sup>35</sup> The impact on these institutions is clear. What is absent is any evidence that the theological colleges changed in their enthusiastic support for the war as a result of the casualties. Rather than being a watershed that changed values, the war seems to have served only to reinforce existing values. We need to test whether this continued to be the case throughout the 1920s and 1930s, but there is little evidence for a change during the war itself.

The study of individual Canadian Presbyterians may also help us to see to what extent the war changed them, as well as the way in which certain key features of Presbyterian culture, including the covenanting tradition, played out in reality. One figure we can study is the Rev. Charles W. Gordon, the most prominent Presbyterian chaplain who served during the Great War. Gordon was not only a Presbyterian minister, but also Canada’s best-known and best-selling novelist at the time, writing under the pen name Ralph Connor. When war erupted in August 1914, he was minister of St. Stephen’s in Winnipeg and, as he put it, “within six years of being sixty.”<sup>36</sup> Being fifty-four with the oldest of his children only fourteen, Gordon still felt the need to enlist and serve since he was the chaplain of the 79th Cameron Highlanders militia regiment which included many of the members and adherents of his congregation. Indeed, Gordon recounts that 350 members and adherents his congregation ended up serving overseas, including the commanding officer, who was also one of the elders at St. Stephen’s.<sup>37</sup> There are a variety of sources that relate to Gordon’s experiences during the war, including speeches in his private papers. As Ralph Connor he also wrote two novels during the war, *The Major* (1917) and *Sky Pilot in No Man’s Land* (1919). Another important source is his recollections of his life, *Postscript to Adventure: The Autobiography of Ralph Connor*, which he wrote in the latter years of his life. It was published posthumously in 1938.<sup>38</sup> Despite the subtitle, *Postscript to Adventure* is more like a collection of stories than an



autobiography in a conventional sense. Events, even in the war years, are not necessarily placed in chronological order. There are portions of Gordon's life which, for whatever reason, are not major foci of discussion, including his studies at Knox College, his family life, his time as Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, and the formation of the United Church of Canada in 1925. Gordon only recounts his marriage in the final chapter, although there are various references to his wife Helen prior to this. Apart from a few sources from the period, such as a letter to his wife in December 1916, his account of the Great War was written later and from a different perspective; however, this may actually add to its value as we see him constructing the story from this later perspective. The Great War clearly was important to Charles Gordon; about one third of *Postscript to Adventure* concerns his experiences as a chaplain in England and France and his speaking engagements during the final years of the war.

As a major Canadian novelist of the early twentieth century in terms of both popularity and sales, Charles W. Gordon has received attention from historians and literary critics.<sup>39</sup> Barry Mack wrote that in Connor's novels we see "sentimentalist evasion rather than a serious exploration of the issues of the day" and he noted that there is "no room for tragedy in Connor's world."<sup>40</sup> These observations are apposite to *Postscript to Adventure*, as Gordon speaks of his heritage, his country, and his experiences during the war itself. Gordon had a romantic view of history and speaks of himself as a Highlander, even though he was born in Canada and spent only his early years in Glengarry County, parts of which had been settled by Scottish Highlanders. We also see in his writing a romantic and very un-sophisticated knowledge of Scottish history. He is fascinated by it, even when he mixes together differing elements in his creation of a glorious Scottish (normally defined as Highland) past.<sup>41</sup> The fact that he donated a copy of the National Covenant to Knox College gives us an indication that he was aware, at least to some degree, of the covenanting tradition. At the same time, his writing shows an amazing ability to create his own romantic vision of reality.

Gordon's *Postscript to Adventure* gives invaluable insights into his values and his understanding of how his Christian faith should be lived. Manly courage in face of the enemy is portrayed throughout and it is important to him that he not only personally demonstrate this, but that it is also demonstrated by all Canadians, and in particular his regiment, the 43rd Cameron Highlanders.<sup>42</sup> This is a theme which occurs repeatedly in

his account of his experiences with the regiment while they were at the front in France. As was the case with so many soldiers in the Great War, the regiment was eventually involved in a frontal assault, in this case as part of the assault on the Regina trench during the Battle of the Somme. Gordon writes of not dreaming when he saw them march off so proudly from Winnipeg that “another day would come when I should see them march up to the dreadful Regina Trench on the Somme, some 580 strong, and see them march back a poor remnant of 68 dazed soldiers, but grim and unconquered, leaving their comrades in colored swaths before the uncut German wire.”<sup>43</sup> The “grim and unconquered” comment is crucial. Gordon recounts the tragedies of the front, but these are always glossed with stories of honour and courage. Men are injured but accept their fate: “I never once heard a wounded man curse his luck or curse the enemy. They took their wounds as part of their routine” and expressed no hatred to their enemy.<sup>44</sup> Courage was important, as was the respect shown to the Canadians, particularly by the British troops. He describes his battalion coming off the front line in the Ypres area “with our heads up conscious that we had not disgraced our name” and he notes that soldiers and officers they met from a British unit “didn’t say much, but made us feel that the Lion’s whelps had not altogether shamed their breed.”<sup>45</sup>

The emphasis on courage is clear throughout his account. Gordon notes that he rarely met anyone “whom I might call a coward” before beginning a long section on a replacement medical officer who crumbles under the experience of his first artillery barrage and is unable to help Gordon and others as they tend the wounded.<sup>46</sup> The medical officer’s character is revealed when he grumbles after Gordon offers spiritual comfort to one wounded soldier. Gordon snaps at him “Don’t be an ass!” and reminds him of the medical value of comforting the wounded. In the end, the medical officer takes shelter in the dugout and has to be removed from the line with the wounded. Gordon’s verdict is precise: “His trouble was that his supreme interest in life was himself.”<sup>47</sup> Gordon believed that courage was about self-giving whereas “Fear is the triumph of self-love.”<sup>48</sup> His appreciation for this medical officer does not improve when he meets him later behind the lines, “loud-mouthed, foul-mouthed, retailing a smutty story.” He silences him by slyly reminding the medical officer of his cowardice under fire. Gordon speaks of the many brave men he saw: “But that little filthy-mouthed M.O. was one of the few cowards I saw in the war.”<sup>49</sup> The link between this man’s lack of courage and his other less redeeming qualities – foul-mouthed, irreligious, loud – seems clear. For

Gordon, Christian living, in its morality and its willingness to sacrifice, made the bravest of soldiers. War stripped off the veneer to reveal what was truly underneath:

It is strange how war reveals traits of character, possibilities of endurance, courage, self-sacrifice, unsuspected in the majority of men. I never could have imagined the qualities of the human spirit that were revealed in the terrific experiences of war.<sup>50</sup>

War tested the values which the Christian church espoused, but it did not alter or transform them.

Scattered throughout these reminiscences are clues about how the war affected Gordon. On the one hand, he gives a picture of soldiering on in spite of tragedy. The first funeral he was required to conduct was for a young man from Winnipeg shot in a front trench by a sniper. The entire situation moved him deeply, and he found himself offended when the colonel seemed indifferent to it. Gordon describes himself silently sulking, until the officer sharply reminds him that they need to see to their duty and make sure that the men are well:

Suddenly it came to me how right he was. An officer's duty lies with the living. It was the lesson I needed and it did me good. Since then I have buried men in rows, but once my service was over I turned resolutely to my next duty, which was with the living. How right it is. After the volley over the grave the firing party marches off to a merry tune.<sup>51</sup>

Gordon also shares other experiences where the war had a deep emotional impact on him. After the attack on the Regina Trench that destroyed his unit, he fell into an exhausted sleep for ten hours.<sup>52</sup> After one particularly "ghastly carry" of a wounded soldier, he writes of waking up in the night "with the whistle of whiz-bangs grazing my backbone."<sup>53</sup> A train accident coming off the front left Gordon in London "feeling quite rotten, no appetite, sleepless, temperature, and all the rest," particularly as the city seemed unaware of the tragedy taking place at the front.<sup>54</sup> He also recounts being home later in Winnipeg, "startled broad awake from sleep by the sound of a shell, to realize first how safe I was, but with the next breath to listen through the dead stillness for the sounds of war."<sup>55</sup>

There are places in *Postscript to Adventure* where Gordon talks about the meaning of the war and issues of war and peace. The cause of

the war was clear – German militarism. He foreshadowed this early in his memoirs, as he described visiting Strasburg during a bicycle tour of Europe in about 1888: “Always we thanked God we were from a land where this silly militarism was unknown. Alas, we were to learn later by a terrible experience that it was not simply silly.”<sup>56</sup> Gordon also expressed more general and universal sentiments about the war, beyond blaming the conflict on German militarism. After recounting the death of his servant Edward, he writes: “Still I carry in my heart a dull pain and wonder at the folly and wickedness of men who for any cause whatsoever would make war again in the world.”<sup>57</sup> Visiting a graveyard, Gordon ponders the direction in which the world was heading before the war: “The conviction was forced upon me with appalling certainty that humanity had been moving in the wrong direction.”<sup>58</sup> This idea of the war requiring a return to God’s way is present. It is chaplains, Gordon writes, who are called upon to answer questions about the meaning of the war: “Every day, every hour of the night and day he was forced to justify his country and himself to his conscience. He found himself forced to accept the vicarious principle by which those guiltless of the crime of war must purge the world of this evil by their sufferings. But who were the wholly guiltless, who could say?”<sup>59</sup> While present, such expressions of universal human evil need to be placed into his broader musings on the causes and meaning of the war. During his speaking tours of the United States, Gordon spoke of the British Empire “fighting for world justice and world freedom.”<sup>60</sup> While generally sympathetic to the German people – noting of the enemy soldiers that, “the fellows responsible for this hell are not the fellows getting it” – he placed the ultimate responsibility for the war squarely on one side:

And that was the terrible pity of it. We all as a people must share our responsibility for our national attitudes. We have the governments we deserve; therefore, peoples must suffer for the sins of the governments they tolerate.<sup>61</sup>

German militarism was the cause of the war and those within Germany who did not rise up against their government were responsible for their own sufferings.

One of Gordon’s most important comments comes as he describes the speaking tour that he undertook in 1917 to help persuade Americans to push their government to enter the war on the side of the British Empire. He talks about preaching in many churches as part of this tour:

And why not? To me the cause of the Allies was then a sacred cause, in complete harmony as I felt with the tenets and principles of the religion I professed. It was the cause of human freedom and justice toward weak and defenseless people against the tyranny of grasping national ambition and military aggression.<sup>62</sup>

He writes that twenty years later, having studied “international affairs” since the end of the war, he had not come to a different conclusion. He continued to blame the war on “the blind, militaristic spirit of the Prussian Junta” who misled the German people and attempted “the conquest of the world.”<sup>63</sup>

What is noteworthy is that this feeling is expressed in the midst of an autobiography filled with appeals to national pride and pride in the British Empire. Could Charles Gordon even imagine that the British Empire, or Canada as part of it, might be on the side of wrong? Yet, the possibility that governments can be wrong is at the heart of the covenanting tradition. Indeed, it was a tradition that kept alive stories of the injustice and oppression of one's own government and celebrated those who opposed that government, sometimes by using military force. This covenanting critique of the state was a tradition which could have been used by Canadian Presbyterians before and during the Great War. Do we see these attitudes at all reflected in Gordon? The answer is no. Christianity and Empire are united in his vision. And these attitudes do not seem to change, or, at least, if they changed, they returned to their earlier form when he wrote his autobiography.<sup>64</sup> The Great War was a key moment in Gordon's life, not in terms of it changing his values, but rather in the way in which it affirmed his values and those of his faith.

Michael Snape is correct. We need to be careful not to read back later experiences into the response of the churches to the Great War, into their understanding of it theologically, or into their participation in it. His book, *God and the British Soldier*, has raised a series of additional questions that challenge us to consider how we understand the impact of the First World War on the Christian churches in Canada. Was it a watershed? What changed? These are questions we need to consider.<sup>65</sup> As well as surveying the literature and the historiographical developments, this article has raised the question of whether a tradition valued by Canadian Presbyterians – the covenanting tradition – is one which might be used in evaluating the strong support for Empire during World War I. This was a tradition that allowed for – and even gloried in – independent judgment by the church. Yet, when this myth met the reality of Empire and

the call to go to war, Canadian Presbyterians did not look to it. They seem to have made little distinction between Empire and God's Kingdom, between what was the will of King George and what was the will of King Jesus. In seeing this, we are not judging by the values of later times, but by the values of the times themselves.

### ***Endnotes***

1. Michael Snape, "The Great War," in *World Christianities c.1914-c.2000*, ed. Hugh McLeod (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 131-32.
2. Snape, "Great War," 131.
3. Snape, "Great War," 132.
4. My work on Thomas Eakin, noted later, was written during the 1980s and there is no question that this context affected some of the themes that I explored. See Stuart Macdonald, "From Just War to Crusade: The War-Time Sermons of the Rev. Thomas Eakin" (M.Div. thesis, Knox College, 1985). Other works from this period include William J. Klempa, "War and Peace in Puritan Thought," and Brian J. Fraser, "Peacemaking among Presbyterians in Canada: 1900-1945," in *Peace, War and God's Justice*, ed. Thomas D. Parker and Brian J. Fraser (Toronto: United Church Publishing, 1989).
5. Edward A. Christie, "The Presbyterian Church in Canada and Its Official Attitude Towards Public Affairs and Social Problems 1875-1925" (M.A. thesis, University of Toronto, 1955).
6. J. M. Bliss, "The Methodist Church and World War I," *Canadian Historical Review* 49, no. 3 (1968).
7. Michelle Fowler, "Keeping the Faith: The Presbyterian Press in Peace and War 1913-1919" (M.A. thesis, Wilfred Laurier, 2005); Michelle Fowler, "Keeping the Faith: The Presbyterian Press and the Great War," *Canadian Society of Presbyterian History Papers* (2005); and Michelle Fowler, "'Death Is Not the Worst Thing': The Presbyterian Press in Canada, 1913-1919," *War and Society* 25, no. 2 (2006).
8. Christie, "Presbyterian Church in Canada and Its Official Attitudes," 122.
9. Christie, "Presbyterian Church in Canada and Its Official Attitudes," 140.
10. Presbyterians and Methodists were, of course, in the process of uniting in one denomination, with those opposed to this decision committed to continuing as the Presbyterian Church in Canada.

11. Bliss, "The Methodist Church and World War I." One notable difference would be the reality that there were a small number of well-known pacifists in the Methodist tradition and none among Canadian Presbyterians.
12. David Marshall, "Methodism Embattled: A Reconsideration of the Methodist Church and World War I," *Canadian Historical Review* 66, no. 1 (1985): 49.
13. Bliss, "The Methodist Church and World War I," 213, 231-3.
14. Marshall, "Methodism Embattled," 60-64.
15. Macdonald, "From Just War to Crusade"; and Stuart Macdonald, "The War-Time Sermons of the Rev. Thomas Eakin," *Canadian Society of Presbyterian History Papers* (1985).
16. Bliss, "The Methodist Church and World War I," 215.
17. Fowler, "Keeping the Faith: The Presbyterian Press in Peace and War 1913-1919"; and Fowler, "'Death Is Not the Worst Thing'," 213.
18. Fowler, "Keeping the Faith: The Presbyterian Press in Peace and War 1913-1919," 27-9, 36-37.
19. Gordon L. Heath, *A War with a Silver Lining: Canadian Protestant Churches and the South African War, 1899-1902* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), 50, 126.
20. Duff Crerar, *Padres in No Man's Land: Canadian Chaplains and the Great War* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995); and Bob Anger, "Presbyterian Chaplaincy During the First World War," *Canadian Society of Presbyterian History Papers* (2002).
21. Murray Edmund Angus, "Living in the 'World of the Tiger': The Methodist and Presbyterian Churches in Nova Scotia and the Great War, 1914-1918" (M.A. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1993).
22. Bev Dietrich, "Colonel John McCrae: From Guelph, Ontario to Flanders Fields," *Canadian Military History* 5, no. 2 (1996); Michelle Fowler, "Faith, Hope and Love: The Wartime Motivations of Lance Corporal Frederick Spratlin, Mm and Bar, 3rd Battalion, CEF," *Canadian Military History* 15, no. 1 (2006).
23. C. W. Gordon has been a major focus of research. Works that have looked at him, including his attitudes to war would include: Daniel Coleman, *White Civility: The Literary Project of English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006); D. Barry Mack, "Ralph Connor and the Progressive Vision" (M.A. thesis, Carleton University, 1986); D. Barry Mack, "Modernity without Tears: The Mythic World of Ralph Connor," in *The Burning Bush*

*and a Few Acres of Snow: The Presbyterian Contribution to Canadian Life and Culture*, ed. William J. Klempa (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1994); and Brian J. Fraser, *The Social Uplifters: Presbyterian Progressives and the Social Gospel in Canada, 1875-1915* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1988).

24. Jeffrey A. Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship During Canada's Great War* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1996); Jonathan F. Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning and the First World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997); and Jonathan F. Vance, "Sacrifice in Stained Glass: Memorial Windows of the Great War," *Canadian Military History* 5, no. 2 (1996).
25. Penny Bedal and Ross Bartlett, "The Women Do Not Speak: The Methodist Ladies' Aid Societies and World War I," *Canadian Methodist Historical Society Papers* 10 (1993-94).
26. Fowler, "'Death Is Not the Worst Thing'," 23. The same quotation appears in her thesis "Keeping the Faith: The Presbyterian Press in Peace and War 1913-1919," 1.
27. Fowler, "'Death is not the Words Thing'," 24.
28. Fowler, "'Death is not the Worst Thing'," 31-34.
29. Thomas P. Socknat, *Witness against War: Pacifism in Canada, 1900-1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).
30. Socknat, *Witness against War*, 7-8.
31. *Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada* (hereafter *A&P*) 1918. College Reports in the Appendices, 148-85.
32. Desmond Morton and J.L. Granatstein, *Marching to Armageddon: Canadians and the Great War 1914-1919* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1989), 153.
33. There are sixteen names listed on the memorial plaque in the Knox College chapel.
34. *A&P* 1918, 183. Presbyterian College noted the death of James Donald "one of the cleverest students in our College," 177-78.
35. *A&P* 1918, 83.
36. Gordon, *Postscript to Adventure*, 204.
37. Gordon, *Postscript to Adventure*, 213.
38. Gordon, *Postscript to Adventure*, vii, viii, xi.



39. Coleman, *White Civility*; and Mack, "Modernity without Tears."
40. Mack, "Modernity without Tears," 149, 154.
41. Evidence for this can be found in *Postscript to Adventure*, where Gordon describes his visit to Edinburgh, 76-81.
42. The Cameron Highlanders were the 79th at home, but they went overseas as the 43<sup>rd</sup> Cameron Highlanders. See Gordon, *Postscript to Adventure*, 213.
43. Gordon, *Postscript to Adventure*, 214.
44. Gordon, *Postscript to Adventure*, 229.
45. Gordon, *Postscript to Adventure*, 259-60. Gordon also speaks of holding the line with very few men, a feat that impressed a British officer: "Our Canadian chests stuck out just a little. We remembered Mons and were not unduly uplifted" (267-68).
46. Gordon, *Postscript to Adventure*, 233-34.
47. Gordon, *Postscript to Adventure*, 235.
48. Gordon, *Postscript to Adventure*, 236.
49. Gordon, *Postscript to Adventure*, 236.
50. Gordon, *Postscript to Adventure*, 237.
51. Gordon, *Postscript to Adventure*, 233.
52. Gordon, *Postscript to Adventure*, 266.
53. Gordon, *Postscript to Adventure*, 256.
54. Gordon, *Postscript to Adventure*, 276.
55. Gordon, *Postscript to Adventure*, 294.
56. Gordon, *Postscript to Adventure*, 103. The year is not given in the text, but Gordon and his friends went to Edinburgh in the fall of 1887 and this adventure seems to have been the next spring.
57. Gordon, *Postscript to Adventure*, 246.
58. Gordon, *Postscript to Adventure*, 261.
59. Gordon, *Postscript to Adventure*, 262.
60. Gordon, *Postscript to Adventure*, 305.

61. Gordon, *Postscript to Adventure*, 253.
62. Gordon, *Postscript to Adventure*, 313.
63. Gordon, *Postscript to Adventure*, 313.
64. Barry Mack suggests that Gordon “came to feel very ambivalent about his role in the war,” but he later downplayed this in his autobiography.” Mack, “Ralph Connor and the Progressive Vision,” 63. This is an important insight based on reading Gordon’s private papers. The question then becomes, why did Gordon choose to alter this view in his autobiography? A related question would be how we understand these differences between language used during the war and language used after the war. Does this represent a change of attitude or merely a change of rhetoric?
65. Michael Snape raises additional questions related to the way in which our understanding of secularization has led us to interpret the role of the churches in both World Wars. Michael Snape, *God and the British Soldier: Religion and the British Army in the First and Second World Wars* (London: Routledge, 2005), 3-4.