

A Discussion on Richard Allen's *The View from Murney Tower: Salem Bland, the Late Victorian Controversies, and the Search for a New Christianity*

JOHN H. YOUNG
Queen's Theological College

In my presentation, I want to begin with a few general comments about Richard Allen's *The View from Murney Tower*, move to highlight three particular strengths I believe the book to have, and conclude with two small criticisms. Before I do these things, since I share this panel with two eminent Canadian historians,¹ I want to note the perspective from which I approach this book. I teach at Queen's Theological College where my teaching falls into two areas: first, Practical Studies, where I teach courses in areas such as ministerial leadership; and, second, the History of Christianity, where I teach, among other things, a course in the History of The United Church of Canada. So, I have approached this book by Richard Allen from the perspective of the students I would teach in a History of the United Church course or a course in the broader area of Christianity in Canada. In other words, I have thought about this book in the context of teaching a class in which about three-quarters of the students are seeking ordination in the Christian tradition and where the other one-quarter are doing a Master of Theological Studies degree. So, I have come at the book as a historian, but as a historian teaching in that particular context.

The term "magisterial" has become much overused over the last generation, but I think the term does fit this book. To say that does not mean that the book has no flaws. But I have rarely read a book as extensively and thoroughly researched as this one; indeed, I cannot recall reading any book that evidenced such meticulous research. The work is

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obviously the product of a lifetime of study and interest, although Dr. Allen acknowledges the gaps in time when his political career necessitated setting this project aside.

The book is encyclopedic in its coverage of a vast number of subjects. One learns about the first half of the life of Salem Bland. But one learns, too, about topics as varied as the Jesuit Estates Act, the key writings of Henry Drummond, spiritualism in Canada, the Fabians, and on the list goes. The book is a highly engaging biography, but it also provides, usually in a relatively short form, a primer to a vast array of people, concepts, intellectual movements and developments, and historical events, primarily but not exclusively in Canada. Thus, with the exception of "The Prologue," where a reader would need some acquaintance with the writings of a number of Canadian historians in order to appreciate Dr. Allen's particular approach to certain aspects of Canadian historiography, persons with little knowledge of either Salem Bland or Canadian religious history could pick up this book and be able to immerse themselves in Bland's life. They can do so because Allen provides the necessary background to enable a reader to see Bland's thoughts about a subject in the context of the intellectual currents and historical events of the period from the 1850s through to 1903, a time of rapid change and much challenge. In so many ways, *The View from Murney Tower* is a monumental study.

I move now to what I regard as three particular strengths of this study. First, as Allen has pointed out, Bland's lifespan (he was born in 1859 and died in 1950) presents a rare opportunity to examine "three tumultuous periods of national development" in Canadian history through the life of a particular individual.² What Allen does, skilfully and engagingly in this volume that recounts the first half of Bland's life, is to enable a reader to view these political, social, economic/industrial, and religious developments during an era when these entities were much more closely related than contemporary Canadians would perceive them to be. It is a fascinating, appropriate, yet uncommon way to consider these events, a way made possible by Bland's lengthy life and by the rich store of reflections found in his sermons, his other written work, and his father's journals.

Second, Allan gives us a well-researched and clearly written account of the development of Canadian Protestant religious thought – Canadian thought in general, one could claim, but obviously Canadian religious thought in particular – during the latter part of the nineteenth century and

the earliest years of the twentieth. This era, as Allan points out, was one in which Canadians wrestled with the changes in their self-consciousness “resulting from the impacts of the theory of evolution, the higher criticism of the Bible, the rise of sociology, historicism, and new thought generally on a people whose mindset, personal values, and cultural norms were overwhelmingly based on the external authorities of an infallible Bible, the tradition-sanctioned propositions of classical and Reformation creeds, the incantations and exhortations of many pulpits, and the pronouncements of ecclesiastical hierarchy.”³ While some on this panel or in this room might well want to quarrel with some of Allen’s characterizations of that history, what I think undeniable is that Allan has presented a thorough and impressive account. Allen has documented his work so thoroughly that a reader can see how he reached those conclusions and is also to make an informed judgement concerning the strengths or the weaknesses of Allen’s assessment.

Finally, for the students I teach who are preparing for ordained ministry, primarily but not exclusively in The United Church of Canada, I judge that this book could be an inspiration in the best sense of the word. Allen portrays a thoughtful minister, Salem Bland, who wrestles with how his Christian faith, his inherited faith and the moral imperative that was part of it, needed to be re-thought and open to modification so that it could continue to speak to a Canadian society that was changing so rapidly and in so many ways. Bland came to recognize that, as Allen put it, “A revelatory process was at work in the present as in the past.”⁴ Bland did not abandon his Christian faith, but he sought always to see how it could best be presented and adapted to address his times. Allen portrays a Bland who saw reflection and wrestling, via a conversation between his inherited Christian tradition on the one hand and the culture in which he lived and sought to minister on the other, as a moral imperative if he was faithfully to serve in his age. The Salem Bland to whom Allen introduces us is a figure who found that necessary conversation, if sometimes painful and difficult, also energizing.

I said that I thought one of the book’s great strengths was that it could be an inspiration for some of the students whom I teach. Maybe a better way of expressing that thought is to say that the Salem Bland who comes to us in such a clear and delightful way through these pages could be an inspiring model for contemporary ministers. The students whom I teach, if they are going to be effective in ministry, need to learn how to have that conversation between the tradition and the particular context in

which they find themselves, to have that conversation as Bland did. His deeply honest wrestling, his valuing of his Methodist tradition even as he recognized that living out that tradition on the cusp of the twentieth century would sometimes mean something different from what it had meant for his ministerial father, let alone for John Wesley – that approach, so marvellously presented here, can help significantly to fund the ministerial imagination of the students I teach.

It is not that the students I teach should reach the same particular conclusions or take the same positions Salem Bland did, for the contemporary situation is a markedly different world from the Canada of Salem Bland's first forty-four years. But it is Allen's presentation of, and reflection upon, a figure who wrestled imaginatively with how Scripture and his faith tradition could speak to its age, with all its particular social, economic, intellectual, and religious currents, that provides an accessible model, a model that could encourage contemporary students to do the same thing in their own time.

Having spoken about some key strengths of the book, I want to note two points of criticism. First, and this point is relatively minor, Allen makes reference to the co-called "Wesleyan Quadrilateral." Allen's presentation of this "Quadrilateral" stated that "John Wesley had set the Bible, as the inspired and infallible authority for the Christian life, side by side with religious experience, reason, and the traditional teaching of the church."⁵ For John Wesley, these four authorities for theology and for the Christian life were not equal authorities. Scripture was the primary authority, with the other three authorities clearly subsidiary to it. Allen quite rightly notes that the phrase, the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," comes from the American scholar, Albert Outler, who first used this term in the 1960s.⁶ Outler believed he detected these four authorities for Christian theology and for the Christian life in Wesley's thought, though Wesley certainly never spoke himself in such a way. However, Outler was, rightly, very clear that these four authorities were not equal ones and that, for Wesley, Scripture was the primary authority. As scholars and others began to use Outler's phrase to suggest that Wesley had seen Scripture, religious experience, reason, and tradition as "equal authorities," Outler became increasingly troubled. Indeed, near the end of his career, Outler expressed with increasing vociferousness his great regret that he had ever invented the phrase, the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," given the way some historians and some church leaders had come to understand the term. I make this point because Allen, and I may be misreading him, appears to suggest that

for Wesley these four authorities were equal.

Second, in his prologue, Allen speaks dismissively of various groups, including “latter-day Niebuhrian ‘realists’”⁷ among others, who developed caricatures of the liberal theology that arose in North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Without question, some neo-orthodox thinkers did develop caricatures of liberal theology. But I think that Allen’s statement here casts the net of aspersion too widely. For example, it is true that in *The Kingdom of God in America*, H. Richard Niebuhr made a damning indictment of what he judged to be result of the central tenets of liberal theology: “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgement through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”⁸ But on the subsequent page, Niebuhr spoke very positively of both Walter Rauschenbusch and Washington Gladden, two of the great figures in liberal theology in the era, as persons who did not hold the particular view he had so sharply criticized. Niebuhr heaped particular praise on Rauschenbusch, of whose thought he noted: “the revolutionary element remained pronounced; the reign of Christ required conversion and the coming kingdom was a crisis, judgement as well as promise.”⁹ That positive assessment of arguably the most significant liberal theologian of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries suggests, at least to me, that Allen made too wide a generalization in his comments about “latter-day Niebuhrian ‘realists’” developing “caricatures of liberal theology.”

Those critiques aside, Allen, through his book, invites us to “sail the ocean” of further exploration and consideration of this period of Canadian religious and intellectual history, and not to draw ourselves off “into a small pond, a safe harbour of prematurely defined dogmatic defences.”¹⁰ It is an invitation well worth taking up.

Endnotes

1. The other members of the panel discussion included A.B. McKillop (Carleton University) and Ian McKay (Queen’s University). Their reviews are not included here.
2. Richard Allen, *The View from Murney Tower: Salem Bland, the Late Victorian Controversies, and the Search for a New Christianity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), xviii.
3. Allen, *The View from Murney Tower*, xviii.

4. Allen, *The View from Murney Tower*, 88.
5. Allen, *The View from Murney Tower*, 132-33.
6. Allen, *The View from Murney Tower*, 425.
7. Allen, *The View from Murney Tower*, xxii.
8. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1937), 193.
9. Allen, *The View from Murney Tower*, 194.
10. Allen, *The View from Murney Tower*, 6.