Commemorating the Contribution of
John Webster Grant to Canadian
Religious Historiography: Four Views

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John Webster Grant’s Contributions
to Aboriginal Historiography

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Unlike perhaps some of you in this room, I never knew John Webster
Grant; nor did have a good sense of the breadth of his work in terms of
scholarship or his life of service in the United Church before coming
across several of his works on field lists during my comprehensive exams
in the mid-1990s. Moon of Wintertime: Missionaries and the Indians of
Canada in Encounter since 1534 was the first John Webster Grant book
I read.1 I recall the impression it made on me quite vividly, having read it
so vigorously that the binding of the paperback edition I had borrowed
from my supervisor actually fell apart, much to my chagrin. Moon of
Wintertime appeared in 1984, the year he retired from being Professor of
Church History at Emmanuel College at Victoria University in the
University of Toronto, and while other scholarly publications followed, we
can locate his interpretations of Aboriginal peoples and Christianity in
encounter at the end of his very long career. It was an ambitious undertak-
ing, one that only a mature scholar, well immersed in the scope of archival

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sources and extremely knowledgeable on the range of literature on missionaries, churches, and Christianity in general, could even attempt. This paper situates Grant’s work as a contribution to Aboriginal historiography in Canada, and traces a few paths that other scholars after him have picked up on and further developed. My discussion will focus on Grant with respect to two topics – Native agency in mission work and residential schools. On the former approach, Grant’s work is a foundational study that echoed the broader trends in Canadian historical writing on First Nations. In terms of the latter topic of residential schools, Grant’s research was published prior to the widespread public awareness of their negative legacy, and his reflections on the position of the churches and Aboriginals in Canada seems overly optimistic given the revelations that would soon follow.

For those of you unfamiliar with Grant’s work on Aboriginal peoples and missionaries – *Moon of Wintertime*, a few additional articles on certain aspects of missions and prophet movements, and also his coverage of First Nations in his history of religion in nineteenth-century Ontario, *A Profusion of Spires*, which came out in 1988 and built further on the groundwork laid out in *Moon of Wintertime* – here is a summary of Grant’s interpretations.2 *Moon of Wintertime* is an overview of nearly 450 years of Christianizing Canada’s First Nations, including nearly every denomination, missionary agency, or individual missionaries he could think of, covering First Nations from coast to coast. He had originally intended the work as a textbook of sorts, based mostly on secondary sources, but soon discovered that he was required “to do much of the spadework” himself.3 As one reviewer remarked, “the breadth of the book is both its greatest strength and its greatest weakness.” He covers a lot, avoiding “the pitfalls of narrow specialization at the expense of scholarly depth” – a survey and overview rather than an analysis in case studies, in other words.4 He chose to exclude Métis and Inuit in his coverage, and most unfortunate, his book does not have a bibliography. However, we should not diminish the magnitude of his effort. While the literature existed in studies of individual missions, missionaries, religious orders, very few attempted such broad strokes as Grant. As a general history and reference book it is still remarkably useful, and it is worth saying there has been nothing comparable to *Moon of Wintertime* in the decades since, although there has been much scholarly interest in the topic of Native peoples and missions.

The central thesis of John Webster Grant’s *Moon of Wintertime* and,
more or less, the chapter on indigenous religions in *A Profusion of Spires*, is that Aboriginal peoples accepted Christianity at a time when their own “traditional” beliefs were being challenged and fading away in the face of the influence of Euro-Canadian culture. “‘Twas in the moon of winter time,/ when all the birds had fled / that mighty Gitchi Manitou/ sent angel choirs instead . . .” from J.E. Middleton’s translation of Brébeuf’s *A Huron Carol* encapsulates the notion held by other scholars of missions that there must be some level of cultural disruption or outright crisis before missions can be successful; new spiritual alternatives are only considered when the old ways are deemed to be no longer effective. On this point, I actually disagree with Grant – cultures can turn inwards at the sign of crisis, just as often as they can look outward for new powers – but I do appreciate that Grant is essentially pointing to colonialism (although he never uses that phrase) and the weight of its impact. Furthermore, his work is by no means uncritical and he does not shy away from phrases like “cultural genocide” in his assessment. The missionaries arrived into this environment of flux intending to consciously and deliberately transform Native cultures, and thereby threw Native religion into crisis – so taking advantage of the opportunities afforded by the colonialist impact but also part of the process of colonialism itself. Another key and admirable aspect of Grant’s interpretation is his insistence that First Nations were not helpless in this encounter, because that is precisely what is was – an encounter, maybe unexpected, but a meeting and exchange nonetheless between two parties (and frankly, missionaries often had a very uphill battle when they tried to merely impose their will on Native peoples).

*Moon of Wintertime* covers the missionary experience in beginning in New France, paying attention to the missions of the Récollets and the Jesuits among Native peoples of eastern Canada, and emphasizing that none operated separately from the influence of state and commercial interests of France. Among those groups targeted by the missionaries, “the presence of Europeans had long ceased to be a novelty when Christian missionaries made contact with them,” and trade, depletion of game, and disease aggravated the “severe psychic shock” that Grant believed allowed for Christianity’s reception. Grant next moves through the colonial into the national periods, the dominance of overseas of missionary societies, and the development of a “civilizing and Christianizing” mission that despite differences between denominations, bore striking similarities in its approach to Native people by the 1800s. “By the late nineteenth-century evangelism and pastoral oversight were supplemented and sometimes
overshadowed by a network of auxiliary institutions that ultimately included schools, hospitals, and various agencies for social welfare. This institutionalizing element received some earlier attention by Grant in shorter articles that examined the contributions made by a single denomination like the Methodists, or particular church organizations, such as the Women’s Foreign Missionary Society of the Presbyterian Church.

By the twentieth century, in Grant’s estimation, most missions entered a “holding pattern” stage and the roles Aboriginal Christians had taken in founding, fostering, directing, and supporting church institutions characteristic of earlier periods (especially the early nineteenth century) were long gone. One of the book’s weaknesses is perhaps, therefore, the short-shrift given to the twentieth century, and here Grant missed the opportunity to more deeply engage with themes such as gender, social Christian expressions, and ecumenicalism, although in this book he does give at least an outline of some of these topics. This reflects his obvious interest in the “heydays” of mission work – those periods of dynamic activity fostering Aboriginal commitments and striking leadership that Grant strongly located within a central Canadian context and as having occurred in the early nineteenth century. Grant argues that despite new methods for mission work in the twentieth century (e.g. through the use of radio or by employing airplane travel) and the involvement of new missionary groups (Pentecostals, Mennonites, Seventh Day Adventists, and Mormons), work with Native people declined until the post-World War II period ushered in new perspectives on Native rights (including an ecumenical movement more open to other spiritualities and the immediate need to address the very vocal Aboriginal criticism). By the 1960s, partnership, service, and integration rather than assimilation, marked the attempts to address what Grant still saw as the failing relationship with Native peoples.

The most provocative chapters, even from the standpoint of nearly a quarter century after he wrote Moon of Wintertime, are those that encapsulate Grant’s genuine reflections and critical rethinking about the place of missions and mission work for Canada’s First Nations. Optimistically Grant pronounces that Native rejection has not been directed to Christianity itself, but rather towards the threats it posed to Aboriginal culture. Grant’s final chapter boldly states: “Christianity is not a recent arrival but has been a factor in Indian life for almost four hundred years...Christianity has penetrated the Indian consciousness so deeply that in the long run it may prove as difficult to eradicate as the indigenous
traditions that have so often prematurely been pronounced moribund.\textsuperscript{12} “Justice of native peoples,” he concludes in \textit{A Profusion of Spires}, “demands acknowledgement not only to the long reign of spirits of the land but of the traumatic effects of their displacement by Christian missionaries who in their zeal were frequently insensitive to the cultural wounds they were inflicting. By the late twentieth century too, it has become evident that despite their eclipse the spirits have not been totally dislodged.”\textsuperscript{13} Perhaps then, the older belief systems were not in their wintertime when those “choirs of angels” arrived to do mission work.

Where do we place Grant’s interpretation of Native missions within the wider scholarship on Aboriginal history? For a long time, studies of missions among First Nations in North America were predicated on the assumption that Christianity and Aboriginal spiritualities were mutually exclusive, closed and self-contained religious expressions, almost always in opposition to one another. A classic work in this vein is Robert Berkhofer’s \textit{Salvation and the Savage} (1965) whereby Christianity is privileged as being superior, catching Native cultures at point of severe disruption or crisis, and its triumph over pre-existing Aboriginal belief systems regarded as inevitable.\textsuperscript{14} As the missionization of Native peoples was often accompanied by European and Western associations, and frequently direct imperialism and colonization, another perspective says that indigenous societies by definition are those that exclude Christianity.\textsuperscript{15} Indeed, Grant himself identified the “European associations of Christianity” as being both “the chief attraction” and “the most formidable obstacle to its acceptance. In many cases those who opted for it were, by the very act of conversion, consciously opting also for the adoption of a European mode of life.”\textsuperscript{16} Moreover, Grant meant European rather than Canadian lifestyles, as he argues in a 1978 article entitled, “Indian Missions as European Enclaves.” Until the mid-nineteenth century Aboriginal missions were almost exclusively directed from overseas and only slowly was Christian outreach to First Nations made more of an internal operation in Canada, though never entirely.\textsuperscript{17} By the 1980s, when \textit{Moon of Wintertime} was published and gaining speed over decades since, scholars had increasingly challenged this notion of mutually exclusive separation (i.e., dichotomies) by considering the dialogic nature of the Native-Christian encounter.\textsuperscript{18} This is not unique to examinations of the North American context and has elsewhere (e.g., for the African or South Pacific mission contexts) been touted as the “translatability school.”\textsuperscript{19} That is to say, a belief that Christianity can be translated, incorporated, and become an
integral part of an authentic indigenous identity, without wholly having to replace what came before.

Grant’s work falls somewhere between these two poles. In what he calls the “pioneer stages” of missions to First Nations, there were points of meeting and even Native direction, but as he explains, by the late nineteenth century, a fairly fixed “classical pattern” of mission procedures (and assumptions about indigenous peoples) came to dominate. Amidst this missionary paternalism and regulation, and aided by Canadian Indian policy (treaties, reserves, Indian Act) that similarly constrained and confined Aboriginal peoples, Native Christians had little input beyond the most local of contexts. The mutual exchange aspect of the encounter, according to Grant, was gone by the early twentieth century, and Grant considers this characteristic of mission work as the one most responsible for Aboriginal alienation from the churches, criticism, and a good deal of Native anger that permeated their response in the later half of the twentieth century. “Indians,” he writes, “have experienced the church as an institution constantly denigrating their culture and seeking to displace its values. It is not surprising, therefore, that recent expressions of Indian discontent have borne with special severity upon the churches.”

However, Grant’s emphasis on Native agency brings him in line with wider developments occurring in Native historiography in general in the 1970s and 80s. Take fur trade historiography: Research in the 1970s and 80s on the native role in the fur trade altered the image of Aboriginal people from one in which they were presented as passive and historically unimportant participants in processes they could neither understand nor control, to an image of Natives as willing, shrewd, sophisticated, and historically decisive partners in commercial and social relationships over which they exerted considerable influence. Studies of mission history came to similar conclusions. Scholars such as Cornelius Jaenen, James Axtell, and Bruce Trigger were leaders in the development of ethnohistory and frequently applied it to their study of missionization of Native peoples. Ethnohistory is an approach to the study of Natives and newcomers in contact that considers textual, oral, and material sources in its analysis. James Axtell’s “Some Thoughts on the Ethnohistory of Missions” (1982) called for an assessment of Native responses to Christian missions in as much detail as historians had hitherto invested in the examination of missionary goals and criteria. Above all, the ethnohistory of missions should reveal that Christianity was an important part of that post-contact Native past, whether through resistance against, conversion
to, or the various reactions that fell between. Axtell writes:

It would be easy – and foolish – to lament this particular revitalizing break with their pre-Columbian past as a tragic loss of innocence for the Indians. It was indeed a loss for them, but not necessarily a tragic one. Only if we continue to see the pre-contact Indian as the only real Indian, as the “noble savage” in other words, can we mourn his [or her] loss of innocence. Only if we persist in equating courage with mortal resistance to the forces of change can we condemn the praying Indians as cultural cop-outs or moral cowards.26

Moon of Wintertime came to a similar conclusion; Christianity is part of Aboriginal history and culture. Grant’s work is an otherwise traditional, descriptive, documentary-based history, and therefore more reliant on Euro-Canadian evidence over Aboriginal sources, privileging male Euro-Canadian perspectives on religion.27 That said, Grant also recognized that the next logic step was to consider “what conversion meant to the Indians who embraced Christianity.”28 “A realistic evaluation of Indian Christianity,” he writes in his conclusion, “must take into account not only what the Indian made of Christianity but of what it did for them.”29 And indeed, I think other scholars have taken him up on this.

Endnotes


5. Grant, *Moon of Wintertime*, 263.


10. This was particularly true of Upper Canada/Canada West/Ontario in the nineteenth century, where he claimed “Even in the process by which the bulk of the native inhabitants of the province came to accept Christianity the most dramatic events occurred early in the century, with the result that there is little of comparative interest to record about its later stages” (Grant, *A Profusion of Spires*, 221).


17. Grant, “Indian Missions as European Enclaves,” 270.


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20. Grant, Moon of Wintertime, 170. Grant also paradoxically concludes: “Despite the existence of many common elements of program the Christian mission to the Indians was far from monolithic. Each agency had an ethos that was not quite identical with that of any other. Each individual brought a set of convictions, talents, and sometimes idiosyncrasies that make generalization difficult and dangerous” (226).


22. Grant, Moon of Wintertime, 258.


26. Axtell, “Ethnohistory of Missions,” 37. The issue of representation (self-representation, mis-representation), particularly concerning Native spiritualities, is a hotly debated, highly politicized one among academics and Native writers and activists (see the Special Issue of the *American Indian Quarterly* devoted to this and related themes, which includes Lee Irwin, ed., “The Hear the Eagles Cry: Contemporary Themes in Native American Spirituality,” *American Indian Quarterly* 20, nos. 3-4 [Summer & Fall 1996]; see also Arif Dirlik, “The Past as Legacy and Project: Post-Colonial Criticism in the Perspective of Indigenous Historicism,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 20, no. 2 [1996]: 1-31).

