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 undertaking, one that only a mature scholar, well immersed in the scope of archival

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 Brebeuf'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.[5] 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.[6] 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."[7] 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.[8]

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.[9] 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.[10] Grant argues that despite new methods for mission work in the twentieth century (e.g. through the use 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.[11] 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."[12] "Justice of native peoples," he concludes in *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."[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 *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.[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.[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."[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.[17] By the 1980s, when *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.[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."[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.[20] 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.[21] "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."[22]

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.[23] 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.[24] 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.[25] 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

1. John Webster Grant, *Moon of Wintertime: Missionaries and the Indians of Canada in Encounter since 1534* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984).

2. John Webster Grant, "Indian Missions as European Enclaves," *Studies in Religion* 7, no. 3 (Summer 1978): 263-75; John Webster Grant, "Rendezvous at Manitowaning: The Scramble for Indian Souls," *Bulletin of the Committee on Archives and History of the United Church of Canada* 28 (1979): 22-34; John Webster Grant, "Missionaries and Messiahs in the Northwest," *Studies in Religion* 9, no. 2 (Spring 1980): 125-36; Grant, *Moon of Wintertime*; and John Webster Grant, *A Profusion of Spires: Religion in Nineteenth-Century Ontario,* Ontario Historical Studies Series for the Government of Ontario (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988).

3. Grant, *Moon of Wintertime*, vii.

4. Douglas Leighton, Review of John Webster Grant's *Moon of Wintertime*, in *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 18 (November 1985): 460.

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

6. Grant, *Moon of Wintertime,* 21.

7. Grant, *Moon of Wintertime,* 175.

8. John Webster Grant, "The Hunters Hunted: Methodists of Three Countries in Pursuit of the Indians of Canada;" and John Webster Grant, "Presbyterian Women and the Indians" typescript, John Webster Grant Fonds, #F14, Box 7, File 27 and File 28, Victoria University Library Special Collections, Toronto, ON. The latter appeared in the *Bulletin of the Committee on Archives and History of the United Church of Canada* (n.d.).

9. Grant, *Moon of Wintertime,* 197, 182.

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).

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

12. Grant, *Moon of Wintertime,* 264-5

13. Grant, *A Profusion of Spires*, 221.

14. Although none of these works argues the extreme position and certainly acknowledge an active role for Native peoples during the process of missionization, they tend to regard a strict separation between belief systems and points of opposition rather than points of meeting: Robert Berkhofer, Jr., *Salvation and the Savage: An Analysis of Protestant Missions and American Indian Responses, 1787-1862* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1965); Elizabeth Graham, *Medicine Man to Missionary: Missionaries as Agents of Cultural Change Among the Indians of Southern Ontario, 1784-1867* (Toronto: Peter Martin Assoc., 1975); Cornelius Jaenen, *Friend and Foe: Aspects of French-American Cultural Contact in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), although rejecting the poles of civilization/savagery in favour of acculturation; Robin Fisher, *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774-1890* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1977); and Karen Anderson, *Chain Her By One Foot: The Subjugation of Women in Seventeenth Century New France* (London and New York: Routledge. 1995).

15. Terence Ranger criticizes the kind of circular logic that serves to distance parties rather than emphasize points of meeting in such definitions of indigenous societies (Ranger himself falling into the translatability school) in his "Christianity and Indigenous Peoples: A Personal Overview," *Journal of Religious History* 27, no. 3 (October 2003): 259-60; and Terence Ranger, "Christianity and the First Peoples: Some Second Thoughts," in Peggy Brock, ed. *Indigenous Peoples and Religious Change* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005), 21.

16. Grant, *Moon of Wintertime*, 244.

17. Grant, "Indian Missions as European Enclaves," 270.

18. For example, James Axtell, *The Invasion Within: The Context of Cultures in Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Grant, *The Moon of Wintertime*; Jean-Guy Goulet, "Religious Dualism Among Athapaskan Catholics," *Canadian Journal of Anthropology* 3, no.1 (Fall 1982): 1-18; Donald B. Smith, *Sacred Feathers: the Reverend Peter Jones (Kahkewaquonaby) & the Mississauga Indians* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987); Clarence Bolt, *Thomas Crosby and the Tsimshian: Small Shoes for Feet Too Large* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1992); Kerry Abel, *Drum Songs: Glimpses of Dene History* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993); Martha McCarthy, *From the Great River to the Ends of the Earth: Oblate Missions to the Dene, 1847-1921* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press and Western Canadian Publishers, 1995); James Treat, ed., *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996); Raymond Huel, *Proclaiming the Gospel to the Indians and the Metis* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1996); Brett Christophers, *Positioning the Missionary: John Booth Good and the Confluence of Cultures in Nineteenth Century British Columbia* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1998); Sergei Kan, *Memory Eternal: Tlingit Culture and Russian Orthodox Christianity through Two Centuries* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1999); Lee Irwin, ed., *Native American Spirituality: A Critical Reader* (Lincoln, NE: Nebraska University Press, 2000); Susan Neylan, *The Heavens are Changing: Nineteenth-Century Protestant Missions and Tsimshian Christianity* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003); and Clara Sue Kidwell, Homer Noley, and George E. Tinker, *A Native American Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005).

19. Ranger, "Christianity and Indigenous Peoples," 259; See also Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa Vol. I* and *The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier Vol II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991 &

1997); and Robert W. Hefner, ed., *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on the Great Transformation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

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).

21. Grant, *Moon of Wintertime,* 264-6.

22. Grant, *Moon of Wintertime,* 258.

23. Kerry Abel identified Ray along with the likes of Robin Fisher and Sylvia Van Kirk as authors of path-breaking books of the first wave of Native historiography in Canada. Kerry Abel, "Tangled, Lost, and Bitter? Current Directions in the Writing of Native History in Canada," *Acadiensis* 26 (Autumn 1996): 92. But the scholarly list of such "path-breakers" goes much further: Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Role as Hunters, Trappers and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson Bay 1660-1870* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1974); John S. Milloy, *The Plains Cree: Trade, Diplomacy and War 1790 to 1870* (Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press 1988), which was derived from a MA thesis completed at Carleton University in 1972; John E. Foster, "The Country-Born in the Red River Settlement: 1820-1850" (Ph.D. diss., University of Alberta, 1973); Sylvia Van Kirk, *'Many Tender Ties': Women in Fur-Trade Society in Western Canada, 1670-1870* (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer 1980) based on her PhD dissertation completed at the University of London in 1975; and Jennifer S.H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia 1980), likewise derived from her PhD dissertation completed at the University of Chicago in 1976.

24. Berkhofer, *Salvation and the Savage*; Cornelius J. Jaenen, *Friend and Foe: Aspects of French-Amerindian Cultural Contact in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976); James P. Ronda, "'We Are Well As We Are': An Indian Critique of Seventeenth Century Christian Missions," *William and Mary Quarterly,* 3d ser., 34 (Jan 1977): 66-82; James Axtell, *The Invasion Within*; and Bruce G. Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers: Canada's "Heroic Age" Reconsidered* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985).

25. James Axtell, "Some Thoughts on the Ethnohistory of Missions," *Ethno History* 29, no. 1 (1982): 35-41. He later expanded upon similar themes throughout Axtell, *The Invasion Within.*

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).

27. Interest in gender and the experience of both missionary and missionized has received recent attention from Eleanor Leacock, "Montagnais Women and the Jesuit Program for Colonization," in *Women and Colonization: Anthropological Perspectives,* ed. Mona Etienne and Eleanor Leacock (Brooklyn, NY: J. F. Bergin Publishers and Praeger Publishing, 1980), 25-42; Karen Anderson, "Commodity Exchange and Subordination: Montagnais-Naskapi and Huron Women, 1600-1650," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2, no. 1 (Autumn 1985): 48-62; Anderson, *Chain Her by One Foot*; and Natalie Zemon Davis, "Iroquois Women, European Women," in *Women, "Race" and Writing in the Early Modern Period,* ed. Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), 243-58; Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race, and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); and Myra Rutherdale, *Women and the White Man's God: Gender and Race in the Canadian Mission Field* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2002).

28. Grant, *Moon of Wintertime,* 249.

29. Grant, *Moon of Wintertime,* 251.