

The Contribution of John Webster Grant to Protestant Religious Historiography

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As I have thought about the contribution of John Webster Grant specific to Protestant religious historiography, three themes come to mind. First, John Webster Grant laid foundations for our work as historians of Canadian Christianity. B.G. (Before Grant), historians emphasized that much of what Canadians did religiously was derivative. Protestantism was little more than a faith transplanted to Canada.¹ A.G. (After Grant), historians have highlighted Canadian themes such as the experience of church union, social Christianity, and the role of the churches in shaping a national identity, and a periodization specific to Canada.

In his 1968 Presidential Address to the Canadian Society of Church History, a paper entitled “The Reaction of WASP Churches to Non-Wasp Immigrants,” Grant highlighted three themes. First, the response of Canadians to immigration helped crystallize vague suggestions of church union into a definite proposal for action. Second, Canadian Protestants were more radical than their American or European counterparts in shaping the church’s social involvement during the Depression. Third, Canadianization was central to the work of Canadian Protestants. Now commonplace, these ideas were sufficiently controversial at the time that several academic journals rejected the paper which is known only through the pages of the annual *Canadian Society of Church History Papers*.²

Surveying our annual publication and several years of *Studies in Religion-Sciences Religieuses*, I am struck by the paucity of references to Grant. I have concluded that this is because many of the talks, articles, books, and anthologies he edited are used primarily as textbooks or as a springboard from which we undertake specialized and interdisciplinary work. That his work is a benchmark is given, and, outside Canada, historians regard Grant’s *The Church in the Canadian Era* and *A Profusion of Spires: Religion in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* as “basic.”³

This leads to my second point. While Grant did ground-breaking work, his perspective reflected something of a “Protestant consensus.” Grant did not ignore Baptists, Lutherans, Orthodox, or members of other denominations. He broadened the field by including women, Native and Black Canadians. But he did concentrate on the Anglican, Catholic,

Methodist, and Presbyterian traditions as especially worthy of serious historical study, including how they actually have come to practice their faith and how their institutions have come to be.

In his twelfth lecture in the course “Religion in Canada,” offered at Emmanuel College in the fall of 1990 six years after his retirement, Grant spoke of a “confusion of religious tongues.” He opined, “My impression is that conservative evangelicalism may have peaked.” While this remained a “live option for many Christians,” Grant identified conservative Christians as those who watch the television evangelists and saw Canadians generally as highly secular. He seems not to have anticipated a broad spiritual awakening that may have already begun to emerge.⁴

In surveying the papers published by the Canadian Society of Church History, I found several colleagues, including some present here, who gently, but rightly chided Grant for his emphasis on the “mainstream.” For example, Darren Dochuk faulted Grant for his treatment of premillennialists as religious fanatics; and Bruce L. Guenther corrected Grant for identifying the majority of William Aberhart’s supporters as alienated evangelicals.⁵

My third point highlights Grant’s commitment to the mission of the church, a theme highlighted in the Grant festschrift to which many CSCH members contributed.⁶ In his 1949 Oxford D.Phil dissertation, later published as *Free Churchmanship in England 1870-1940*, Grant identifies the “free churches” (Baptists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians) as an “expression of Calvin’s side of the Reformation.”⁷ During the years studied, the nonconformist conscience was a power in the land, fuelling the social gospel movement and triumph of political democracy.⁸ During the 1957-8 academic year, Grant was Visiting Professor at the United Theological College of South India in Bangalore, India. That visit led to the publication a year later of *God’s People in India*, a book that explored the difficulty of transplanting Christianity from one environment to another in a way that releases creative power.⁹

A prolific scholar, Grant was finishing yet another book at the time of his death. With the collaboration of friends and colleagues, he completed *Divided Heritage: The Presbyterian Contribution to the United Church of Canada*, published posthumously by Laverdure and Associates. Throughout the manuscript, we see Grant as maker and not simply interpreter of Protestant history.

Among autobiographical reminiscences, Grant describes growing up in Pictou, Nova Scotia, where he and his mother moved after his father

died of tuberculosis when John was two years old. Grant mentions family members who were missionaries. He honours them as representing the cutting edge of Christianity. Among these were the Grants of Trinidad, whose frequent furloughs made them and the island an integral part of his growing up. Among those who promoted Canadian Presbyterian missions were the members of the Women's Missionary Society. Grant observed, "I have no doubt that its active members were better informed about what was going on in various parts of the world than most members of Parliament."¹⁰

Grant's comment strikes me to be as true today as it was then. Moreover, I can attest personally to the importance of this outreach, for I have taught at St. Andrew's Presbyterian College in Trinidad, where the names of the Reverend and Mrs. Kenneth J. Grant are well remembered as founders of the congregation in San Fernando.¹¹

For six months in 1949, Grant supplied the pulpit of the church in which he had grown up. Grant recalled, "Inevitably the town had changed. Most conspicuously many of the leisure activities now took place in a community centre that absorbed much of the time and energy that once had been devoted to the churches. One immediate result in this God-fearing town was that young people especially were busier than ever as they tried to do justice to both claimants on their time."¹²

From this or similar observations about other appointments, Grant described Presbyterian folkways with grace, insight, and feistiness. Recalling an assignment to the Evangelism and Social Service Committee of the Maritime Conference of the United Church not long after his ordination, Grant revised his views about resistance to church union. In an early publication, *The Canadian Experience of Church Union*, Grant stressed the greater awareness of ethnic origins and less coherent and disciplined organization of Canadian Presbyterians than either Methodists or Congregationalists as the root of opposition of many to church union.¹³ At the end of his life Grant argued that, while many factors were involved, much of the resistance and the strength of the feelings it aroused were due not to specific features of the plan but to the distrust of unionists' motives and therefore nervousness about what the United Church would be like: "They [the opponents] could foresee a body careless about doctrine while insistent on conformity to a moral code, and they didn't like what they saw . . . a church not unlike the Methodism of the time."¹⁴

I predict that through this final book, Grant will inspire a fresh body of research, writing, and debate. This would be a fitting tribute to his

legacy. All of us who have studied Canadian Protestantism specifically, and religion in Canada generally, remain in his debt.

Poaching on John H. Young's tribute to John Webster Grant as a church leader, I observe that Grant was not an arcane historian. His empathy and appreciation of cultural diversity are apparent in his work as a member of United Church of Canada committees that dealt with issues such as evangelism, social service, and worship. In his 1990 report for the Working Group on the Changing Church, Grant offered trenchant warnings against "thoughtless change" and the need for ecumenical cooperation on such issues as the falling off of resources and the residential school scandals.¹⁵

Grant was a key member of the committee that planned *The Hymn Book* of the Anglican Church of Canada and the United Church of Canada. Published in 1971, it includes his setting to music of Psalm 122 and translation from Latin to English of four hymns that appear in recent hymnals.¹⁶ Phyllis Airhart, Grant's successor at Emmanuel College, once heard him muse that this contribution might prove to be his most enduring legacy. If you take time to read them you can understand why. He had a gift for using words well, whether writing elegant academic prose, preparing coherent committee reports, or setting light verse to familiar hymn tunes.¹⁷ It was a fitting tribute that, at a memorial service last December, congregants sang "O Holy Spirit, By Whose Breath."

A personal word may be in order. I began teaching Canadian church history in 1976. During department meetings of the Toronto School of Theology and at CSCH meetings, Grant was very supportive of me and other young scholars. As recently as July 2006, I taught at an Anglican school in Nunavut and used *Moon of Wintertime: Missionaries and the Indians of Canada in the Encounter since 1534*.¹⁸ This book reflects our common interest in Christian mission as central to the wider story of Christian history.

Initially, when approached to make a presentation, I declined due to other commitments but left open a crack in the door. When asked a second time, I accepted because of my regard for one of the most gracious scholars I have known. My experience of John Webster Grant is congruent with that of others, as shared at these meetings, or in print.¹⁹

To close, if I had but one word to characterize John Webster Grant, it is integrity. He lived what he taught and created space in which he practiced obedience to truth. His legacy remains vibrant in the lives of relatives, former colleagues and students, even members the Trinidad

congregation he visited years ago, with whom I have talked to prepare this brief article, and in his many publications that broke ground we continue to till.

Endnotes

1. Neil Sutherland, "Introduction: Towards a History of English-Canadian Youngsters," in *Education and Social Change: Themes from Ontario's Past*, ed. Michael B. Katz and Paul H. Mattingly (New York: New York University Press, 1975), xii; and John S. Moir, "Religion," in *The Canadians 1867-1967*, ed. J.M.S. Careless and R. Craig Brown (Toronto: Macmillan, 1967), 601.
2. John S. Moir, "The Canadian Society of Church History – A Twenty-Year Retrospective," *Canadian Society of Church History Papers* (1979): 89.
3. Robert T. Handy, *A History of the Churches in the United States and Canada* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 442; and Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).
4. Course on Religion in Canada, lecture 12 "New Religious Movements," John Webster Grant Fonds, 2005.059V, Box 4, United Church of Canada/Victoria University Archives, Toronto, ON.
5. Darren Dochuk, "Redeeming the City," *Historical Papers: The Canadian Society of Church History* (2000): 68, n. 23; and Bruce L. Guenther, "Populism, Politics and Christianity in Western Canada," *Historical Papers: Canadian Society of Church History* (2000): 94-98.
6. John S. Moir and C. T. McIntire, eds., *Canadian Protestant and Catholic Missions, 1820s-1960s: Historical Essays in Honour of John Webster Grant* (New York: Peter Lang, 1988).
7. John Webster Grant, *Free Churchmanship in England 1870-1940 with Special Reference to Congregationalism* (London: Independent Press, 1958), 64.
8. Grant, *Free Churchmanship in England*, 394.
9. John Webster Grant, *God's People in India* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1959), vii.
10. John Webster Grant, *Divided Heritage: The Presbyterian Contribution to the United Church of Canada* (Yorkton, SK: Gravelbooks, 2007), 20.

11. Kenneth J. Grant, *My Missionary Memories* (Halifax, NS: Imperial Publishing Co., 1923); and Arthur Charles Dayfoot, *The Shaping of the West Indian Church 1492-1962* (Kingston, Jamaica: Press University of the West Indies, 1999).
12. Grant, *Divided Heritage*, 22-23.
13. John Webster Grant, *The Canadian Experience of Church Union* (London: Lutterworth, 1967), 54-55.
14. Grant, *Divided Heritage*, 200-201.
15. "Working Group," John Webster Grant Fonds, 2005.059V, Box 5, File 20. United Church of Canada/Victoria University Archives, Toronto, ON.
16. "#17, With Joy We Go Up to the House of the Lord"; "#246, O Holy Spirit, By Whose Breath" (#200, *Voices United*; #501 of *The Hymnal* of the Episcopal Church in the United States); "#248, Holy Spirit, Font of Light" (#228, *The Hymnal*); "#445, The Flaming Banners" (#161, *The Hymnal*); "#500, King of the Martyrs' Noble Band" (#236, *The Hymnal*).
17. Phyllis Airhart, "Memorial" entered into the minutes of the Senate of Victoria University, April 2007.
18. John Webster Grant, *Moon of Wintertime: Missionaries and the Indians of Canadian in the Encounter since 1534* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984); Dr. Grant signed my copy.
19. For example, letter of Sharon Wilson, *United Church Observer* 70, no. 8 (March 2007): 8.