

Reflections on John Webster Grant's Influence on Catholic Historiography in Canada

MARK G. MCGOWAN

St. Michael's College, University of Toronto

The title of this short paper may be very baffling to many observers of Canadian religious history. John Webster Grant has been celebrated as one of the pioneer church historians in Canada for a corpus of research that was primarily concerned with the developments in Canadian Protestantism. This career began in the military in 1943, when he served on the Wartime Information Board, where he wrote on subjects germane to non-Roman Catholic Churches. John Grant never wrote a book or paper on an overtly and singularly Roman Catholic subject (although the first three chapters of *Moon of Wintertime* were effectively on Catholic missions in New France);¹ he did not, as a rule, attend sessions of the Canadian Catholic Historical Association, except during joint sessions with the Canadian Society of Church History, and his writing was almost exclusively in English, thus creating certain linguistic barriers between his work and the majority of Canadian historians studying Catholic history in this country. Given this litany of incongruities between the two principal subjects of this paper, perhaps I had better cease and desist in this line of thought.

Bear with me for a few moments and it may appear that there was method in my madness, and that the relationship between Grant's work and Canadian Catholic historiography is not such a far fetched idea. Significance is sometimes measured in odd ways. John Webster Grant's writings emerged from a period of great hope for the Canadian churches and the optimism inspired by the ecumenical movement of the 1950s and 1960s, as energized significantly by the work of the World Council of Churches and the declarations of the Second Vatican Council; this remarkable era provides an initial point of convergence between our two subjects. Secondly, historians of the Catholic tradition, particularly an emerging generation of professionally trained scholars in English Canada, could not help but become enamored by the quality of Grant's scholarship. As American historian Robert Handy cited, in a volume celebrating Grant, in 1988: "His appreciation for historical accuracy, theological flexibility, cultural diversity, and human empathy with every concrete situation make this work endure as a benchmark for its genre."² This type of critical

acclaim spoke volumes to a new generation of religious historians, many of whom were members of both the Canadian Catholic Historical Association and the Canadian Society of Church History. Thirdly, his three most significant monographs of his mid-and late career – *The Church in the Canadian Era* (1972; reprinted 1988) *Moon of Wintertime* (1984), and *A Profusion of Spires* (1988) – provided sweeping narratives of religious history that departed significantly from the biographical and denominationally-focused studies of the past. In this way, Grant’s work helped to create a new environment wherein the writing of Canadian religious history was grounded in the grand sweep of Canadian history, and pushed Catholicism into the main narrative in a serious and scholarly way. This rethinking of the way in which “church history” was written provided the appropriate trans-denominational contexts in which Roman Catholicism found itself as a significant player among other churches across both regions and time periods. If one, however, is looking for a most tangible link one might find it by turning to Hymn 305 in the first edition of the *Catholic Book of Worship*. There one would discover “O Holy Spirit, By Whose Breath,” to the music of Eisenach, with lyrics by John Webster Grant.³

John Grant’s Great Ecumenical Project

John Grant’s status as a United Church minister and his early fascination for the great ecumenical projects of the twentieth century were undeniable. In 1956, the appearance of his first book, *World Church: Achievement or Hope* signaled a deep and abiding interest in ecumenism and signaled an early thrust of his scholarship. Grant became known for his articles and books on the United Church of Canada, its founders, and its perceived mission. Rooted in an ecumenical tradition, inspired further, perhaps, by the developments at Vatican II in its declarations *Unitatis Redintegratio* (1964) and *Nostra Aetate* (1965), and surrounded by the optimism of the 1960s, it is not difficult to see why – as an historian – Grant would use his writing to build bridges between Christian groups, where few had existed before.

In their monumental multi-authored edition of *The Oxford History of the Christian Church in Canada*, Terrence Murphy and Roberto Perin (both historians of Catholic Christianity in Canada) identified this ecumenical concern as one of the salient themes within Grant’s edition of a series of three volumes titled *The Christian Church in Canada*.

Commenting on Grant and his two co-authors H.H. “Nick” Walsh and Grant’s lifelong friend and colleague John S. Moir, Murphy and Perin observed:

In addition, the *History of the Christian Church in Canada* reflected the ecumenical spirit of the 1960s and 1970s and the intense preoccupation with Canadian identity which was characteristic of that era: the use of “church” instead of “churches” in the title signaled the authors’ commitment to the ideal of Christian unity; and one of their central concerns was to identify what was distinctively Canadian about Christianity in the country.⁴

Grant’s concern for all of the Christian churches and the common experiences they shared in Canada came at an interesting transitional point in Canadian religious historiography; John Moir has demonstrated that, until the mid twentieth century, our field of study had been dominated by providential approaches to history, denominational studies that scarcely looked beyond the walls of one’s own congregation of communion, and rather pious biographies of clergy. When reflecting on the state of the craft at the 50th anniversary of the Canadian Catholic Historical Association, Moir confessed:

Canadian Religious History in forms other than biography also seems to suffer from the same distortion [no denomination really wants to hear about the humanness of its particular saints]. In past denominationalism projected into history gave the reader so often the impression that the only Christians, perhaps the only humans, to inhabit Canada were members of “Denomination X.”⁵

Grant had recognized this himself and had tipped his hand using a case from the history of Canadian missions. In his introduction to Moir’s *The Cross in Canada*, Grant’s thoughts could have been applied equally to the religious historiography of Canada in an earlier time:

Similar as the churches of nineteenth-century Canada may appear to students of another era, contemporaries were most aware of their differences. The early mission to Canada was consciously conceived as so many separate missions to Canada, intersecting only at points of mutual irritation. It is actually possible to read the journals of some early missionaries without suspecting that any others were at work in

the same region, for Canadian life outside the sphere of God's chosen emissaries is described to us in terms of complete spiritual destitution. Denominational conflict seemed to be the primary phenomenon, while the underlying unity of purpose was sensed only by a few leaders in moments of unusual clarity.⁶

Grant helped to change this. In his major works Grant was expert at pulling together the disparate parts of the Christian church together under one roof. Grant's own contribution to the Centennial trilogy, the third and final volume titled *The Church and the Canadian Era*, offered a sweeping overview that included all churches, and a careful eye to the developments of the Church in Quebec and how these related to other parts of the country. Upon reflection, the trilogy, and for that matter *Moon of Wintertime* and *Profusion of Spires* provided broad frameworks for the consideration of Christian development in Canada (or in the case of the latter, Ontario), or perhaps, what Paul Dekar once referred to as "the outer story."⁷ In each of the major works Catholic and Protestant could be seen cheek-by-jowl with one another, working on their various enterprises in full knowledge of, admiration for, and, sometimes, hostility to the other.⁸ An excellent example of this integration, or contextualizing the traditions, emerged in chapter eight of *A Profusion of Spires*, wherein Grant summarizes each of the Ultramontane movement, Tractarianism, and the Great Disruption in the Scottish Kirk as particular responses to the encroachment of the state on religious life.⁹ In a sweeping analysis, Grant crossed denominations, demonstrated points of intersection, and discussed the transfer of ideas and movements from a European metropolis to a Canadian hinterland. Likewise, in the trilogy, Grant and his colleagues had provided a similar narrative structure inclusive of the major issues facing each of the Christian traditions, thus providing scholars young and old with fertile ground for rethinking the past and the posing of imaginative questions; as new generations of historians moved forward in their work, they would help to reveal the "inner stories" by means of thematic studies, denominationally-based studies on themes, or micro-historical studies. For Catholics, these works by Grant, Moir, and Walsh helped break down the silos in the historiography and encouraged some historians of Catholicism to see their own historiography in a different way.

The Canadian Society of Church History

In practical terms Grant's role as one of the founders of the Canadian Society of Church history in 1960 also enabled Catholic historians to come out of the cloister. Open to scholars of all denominations or no denominations, the CSCH served and continues to serve as an embodiment of what Grant and other founders had hoped for: a meeting of the minds on questions germane to the study of Canada's religious history. Although the Society functioned primarily in English (with joint sessions with French in 1987 in Hamilton, in 1989 at Laval and 1993 in Ottawa) and a majority of members were studying the numerous Protestant groups in the country, there was, and continues to be, many members of the society who study Canada's Catholic churches; co-operation was also evident when in "every-other-year" at the Learned's/Congress, the Canadian Society of Church History and the Canadian Catholic Historical Association, would meet in a joint session. There are numerous historians and archivists who are members of each.

In some small way this Society was an extension of Grant's abiding interest in the ebb and flow of religious history wherein all groups could be seen within the context of one another and, in these encounters, scholars could present and study themes that were trans-denominational in character, regionally specific, or grounded in one particular point of time. Moreover, the Society was a window on the transition that was taking place in the craft as the dominance of church historians who were professors of divinity, or active clerics, began to give way to a stronger representation of scholars who were trained in, or currently taught in departments of history, religion, or one of the social sciences. Whether conscious or oblivious to these developments, those studying the history of the Catholic Church in Canada have much to thank Grant for seeing the "big picture" and helping to foster these scholarly interchanges.

I for one am grateful. In 1968 his Presidential address to the CSCH was titled "The Reaction of Wasp Churches to non-Wasp Immigrants." It was a crisp and concise essay on how Protestant Canadians attempted to deal with the religious and cultural "others" who flocked to Canadian shores during the Laurier-Borden Period. Setting forth a template of Protestant responses that were categorized as a threat to church and society, a call to evangelize the *papist* and Orthodox hordes, and the challenge to maintain the values and virtues of Victorian Canada, Grant invited scholars to explore Catholic-Protestant-Orthodox relations in a new

and innovative way. I took up the gauntlet, under the watchful eye of Grant's colleague John Moir, and began the study of Ukrainians of the Byzantine Catholic Rite, their migration to Canada, and their interaction with Protestants and Latin Rite Catholics. There were other graduate students similarly engaged by Grant's probing questions and pleasant personal manner.

Grant's Work and "the Big Picture"

Finally, I would like to return to the three works that I consider important invitations to expand our historiography and discover the inner stories of Canadian Christianity, and Canadian religion for that matter. In Grant's major books, not only were all the varieties of Christianity gathered into one tent, facing and encountering their similarities and differences, they were also cast expertly within the context of their times. In *Moon of Winter Time*, *Church in the Canadian Era*, and *Profusion of Spires*, Grant was careful to engage the development of churches with the ebb and flow of life in Canada. It did not seem possible, having read Grant's sweeping approaches to religious history – which by and large were historical narrative with pointed themes running throughout the chronological approach – that historians of religion in Canada, let alone researchers of any specific denomination, could write their history without a sense of the history of Canada writ large. Grant appeared sensitive to the manner in which religious concerns were woven into the fabric of general historical developments, or how religion itself was transformed by social, economic, and political variables in the world around it, and vice-versa. Canadian religious historians would by necessity have to be better Canadian historians. Church history, in this sense, was not necessarily just another handmaiden to theology. For Canadian historians to appreciate fully the historical importance of religion in Canadian life, religious or "church" historians would have to do a much better job engaging the historiographical debates within the discipline and the changing trends afoot among mainstream Canadian historians.

In the wake of the 1960s and the reformulation of Canadian religious historiography by Grant and others, there has been a notable difference in the way in which the history of the Catholic Church in Canada has been approached. First, it has become increasingly clear that historians of Canadian Catholicism, by necessity, must transcend the linguistic divide and recognize the key relationships that existed within

Canadian Catholicism between Francophones, Anglophones, and Allophones. Moreover, as Grant's sweeping narratives indicated, there is more to Canada than central Canada. Those working in the Catholic historiography have had to become more aware of the need to break away from narrowly constructed studies of individuals, religious orders, and topical issues in Canadian Catholicism, and instead have set their research against the broad canvass of Canadian history. Terry Fay's recent survey *A History of Canadian Catholics: Gallicanism, Ultramontanism, and Canadianism* (2002) comes to mind as a Grant-style work, weaving together disparate players, salient themes, and the integration of religion (in this case Catholicism) with other aspects of Canadian society. What results is a concern for readers to not only appreciate the broad strokes of Canadian Catholic history, but to propose new points of departure, foster new research, and stimulate scholarly debate. Although Grant was neither the first to be conscious of the Canadian historical panorama, nor was necessarily the most effective, his major synthetic works set serious benchmarks for all those who would follow. If religion was to be taken seriously as a variable in Canada's historical development, it would have to be written with an attention to the sweep of Canadian history itself. Research and work by Terrence Murphy, Brian Clarke, Brian Hogan, Gerald Stortz, Vicki Bennett, Roberto Perin, Luca Codignola, Raymond Huel, John Zucchi, Robert Choquette, Elizabeth Smyth, Paula Maurutto, and Mark McGowan, reflect the need to see Canadian Catholic history as an integral part of Canadian religious history and Canadian history as a whole.

Perhaps these reflections have been entirely too personal, but to some extent I have been part of the historical generation most affected by the broad brush strokes painted by Grant and Moir. When I joined the CSCH in 1984 and attended my first meeting of the Society in Guelph, there was a different cast of historical characters in the audience; the presence of Moir and Grant loomed large over the room, even though they did not give papers. Where it showed most was in the question and answer session after every paper: their questions made you think, pushed your brain harder, and invariably challenged your historical certainties. John Webster Grant helped to open doors and open minds; historians of the Catholic Church in Canada are in his debt.

Endnotes

1. John Webster Grant, *Moon of Wintertime: Missionaries and the Indians of Canada in Encounter since 1534* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 3-70.
2. Robert T. Handy, "Foreword," in *Canadian Protestant and Catholic Missions 1820s-1960s: Historical Essays in Honour of John Webster Grant*, ed. John S. Moir and C.T. McIntire (New York: Peter Lang, 1988), ix.
3. *Catholic Book of Worship* (Ottawa: Canadian Catholic Conference, 1972).
4. Terrence Murphy and Roberto Perin, ed., *A Concise History of Christianity in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1996), ix.
5. John S. Moir, "Coming of Age, But Slowly: Canadian Religious Historiography since Confederation," *CCHA Study Sessions* 50 (1983) I: 91.
6. John Webster Grant, "Introduction," in *The Cross in Canada*, ed., John S. Moir (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1966), x.
7. Paul Dekar, "Church History of Canada: Where From Here?" *Canadian Society of Church History Papers* (1980): 11-20.
8. See *A Profusion of Spires: Religion in Nineteenth-Century Ontario*, Ontario Historical Studies Series (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 67.
9. Grant, *A Profusion of Spires*, 118-34.