Dr. Jonathan Woolverton: A Nineteenth-Century Canadian Physician and Educator with a Protestant Conscience

SHARON MARIE BOWLER
Tyndale University College and Seminary

Dr. Jonathan Woolverton died on 12 April 1883 at the age of seventy-two. At his death, his son Algernon recorded that the greatest monument to his father was the memories of the people of Grimsby – "a memory of love and a remembrance of kindly deeds enshrined in the hearts of his people that speak louder than monumental structures, however grand."[1] Dr. Jonathan Woolverton was a physician, surgeon, professor, temperance society president, local school superintendent, chairman of a grammar school board, justice of the peace, husband, father, and son. After more than one hundred and twenty years, Jonathan Woolverton's cemetery stone, diary, journals and letters are fading.

Jonathan Woolverton did not seek to be remembered for his works and his tombstone; rather, he sought out a reward that was primarily eternal. Woolverton's diary revealed his conviction in an eternal relationship with God. This was a relationship that he was able to maintain during times of triumph and tragedy, a relationship that he held as supreme over his professional and personal works, and in guiding his life's path.

Dr. Woolverton seems an unlikely candidate for a biography.[2] He is not remembered for anything grand. His reputation was not of national significance, or of significance within his denomination, and it may be contested as to whether he has any enduring local significance. Yet, the study of his life provides insight into the intellectual and spiritual pursuits of a relatively unknown, non-clerical nineteenth-century Upper Canadian

with a Protestant Conscience.

This research sheds light on faith outside of the nineteenth-century institutional church. John Webster Grant has argued that there is a need to explore the faith of ordinary citizens because "we attach undue weight to the writings that have come down to us, which represent in the main the opinions of clerics and heretics, or we draw such inferences as we can from the public activities of Ontarians."[3] Likewise William Westfall has shown that the faith of many Protestants in early Upper Canada was based on a belief in "a rational being who worked according to certain principles and did not choose to disrupt the course of human events, it did not draw such a clear line between sacred and secular space: the two were joined together in nature, the social system, and the institutions that sustained society."[4] This paper builds on Grant and Westfall's research by exploring the historical significance of Protestant Conscience in an ordinary professional man through the careful study of a selection of his reflections on the interconnection between the secular and spiritual.

Jonathan Woolverton had a strong interest in medical science, a keen enthusiasm for educational reform, and a deep commitment to his family, community, profession, country and God. He disseminated his views on faith, education, science and the family within his diary, temperance and education speeches, and letters to the Department of Education. Taken together, these records not only provide a detailed public statement of the concerns of an Upper Canadian citizen and professional man, but also offer a rich and unusual insight into the inner life of a man who was profoundly influenced by his faith.

Protestant Conscience is a concept that can be understood as the implementation of those shared and scripturally-informed Protestant principles, beliefs and practices that would, according to nineteenth-century believers, work actively to improve individuals and society.[5] The term Protestant Conscience is used in reference to the faith process or lens through which Dr. Woolverton sought to engage his world both personally and professionally.

Jonathan Woolverton called the small rural village of Grimsby, Upper Canada his home and although he spent the majority of his lifetime in this rural community, his family was able to provide him with the economic and social connections that enabled him to venture often to the "cities" of Hamilton and York, make a number of visits to Philadelphia, with travel beyond to Montreal, New York, Liverpool, London and Paris. His rural life provided him with his Protestant foundations, allowed him

a place of refuge and stability, and a platform from which to promote his ideals and practice within his profession. The city provided him with the intellectual, professional, spiritual and political stimulation necessary to allow him to grow in his faith and his community service. Woolverton was able to secure both a formal and informal education within the city which far surpassed that of his peers, many of whom never ventured out of their Grimsby village.

Woolverton's parents differed in many ways from that of their Grimsby neighbours. Parental division on both religious and political lines placed the young Jonathan in a unique situation. His mother considered herself a United Empire Loyalist with strong ties to the Anglican Church. Her family shared loyalties to the Crown and the Family Compact. Jonathan's American father was not an United Empire Loyalist or an Anglican. In politics, Jonathan's father was a member of parliament who demonstrated allegiance to the Reform cause. Within this divided family, Jonathan Woolverton found a diversity of ideas regarding Reform politics, Americanism and Protestantism.

As a young man, Woolverton was exposed to a variety of political and religious beliefs and conflicts in a time of social and political change. He was born at a time when his family and country were exploring practices and values, and experiencing radical changes in physical environment, political process and technological advancement. Familial and political conflicts spurred him toward decision rather than the blind adoption of values, beliefs, and practice. In religion, family tensions between his family's Anglican and Baptist traditions demanded that Jonathan resolve his own religious affiliation, and at the age of twenty-one he was baptized and accepted into membership in the Baptist Church.[6]

Dr. Woolverton's efforts at improving the school system in his community and the province began in 1850 with his appointment to the role of local superintendent of education and continued into the 1860s. Dr. Woolverton was an Upper Canadian reformer who saw education as a vehicle for the acquiring of scientific, political, and spiritual knowledge. Dr. Woolverton believed that in order to ameliorate the opportunity for evil that existed in society, an educational system needed to "guide and guard us safely through this state of our probation to bring us to our end in peace and give us a blessed hope of immortality beyond this transitory scene of our existence." Woolverton stated that the words of God "should therefore be assiduously impressed upon the mind and especially upon the minds of the young." He was adamant that the Bible was to be viewed as

"the pocket companion of every individual," in order to develop and protect the conscience.[7]

Woolverton was influenced by Chief Superintendent of Education Egerton Ryerson. Although both Woolverton and Ryerson viewed Bible-based education as free from "any sectarian bias" or "any peculiar dogmas," this form of educational delivery remained offensive to those nineteenth-century citizens with a Catholic faith. [8]

Ryerson based his educational directives to local superintendents such as Dr. Woolverton on his belief that Protestants and Catholics shared a common set of fundamental principles that would allow them to be educated together – in what was labelled "mixed schools." Here Protestants and Catholics would be bound together through six common principles that included a desire to live peacefully with love, without hate or violence, treating one another as one wished to be treated, being convincing without being abusive and finally, behaving in kindness and gentleness.[9] The use of the Bible in the classroom, however, remained a point of nineteenth-century educational division, a division that Woolverton wished without success to see eliminated.

Melding the secular with the spiritual, Woolverton explained in his educational and temperance speeches that conscience held a very critical role in the development of the human body and its successful existence on earth. He believed that Protestants who endeavoured "to keep a conscience void of offence towards God & towards man, health and peace of mind," would surely follow. In his opinion, those with a pure conscience would be able to rejoice in "*Mens Sana in Corpore Sano*," or a sound mind in a healthy body. He believed that if the "mind is at all times free and unclouded," the individual would be "prepared for every emergency," able to anticipate in his words, "the coming storm" and remain sheltered from such through an ability, as he stated, to "forseeth the evil," and hide from it.[10]

Woolverton felt that by striving towards the development of a pure conscience, he was able to protect himself from an intemperate lifestyle, loss of fortune and reputation, and future punishment. He instructed teachers, parents and students that the man of Protestant Conscience would "not permit his judgements be dethroned nor wander with its 'helm of reason lost,'" in order that he be "enabled to pursue 'the even tenor of his way' unruffled by the storms and commotions of life.'"[11]

Ample documentary evidence about Jonathan's faith indicates that he would not deny the existence of God or his belief in a personal

relationship to his God. As he stated with reference to his nineteenth-century studies in the sciences, within either the "dance in the transient sunbeam" or "the depths of the great abyss," humanity should become, "equally surprised, delighted and astonished at the Wisdom, the Goodness, the adaptation, and the perfection displayed in the manifold works of God."[12] Woolverton's reflections with regard to science and religion indicate that he found no conflict between the two studies that provided him with the foundations for his life's work and an ability to meld things sacred and secular.

In examining Dr. Woolverton's medical career, it is clear that he merged his faith, his practice, and his community advocacy. His experiences with death demonstrate his melding of the secular and spiritual. During his medical career, he attended many bedside lectures and witnessed and participated in amputations, bleedings, surgeries, and a variety of unsuccessful treatments for disease. One of Dr. Woolverton's colleagues wrote that these dreadful treatments would make even "angels weep."[13] Woolverton performed surgeries without chloroform, set broken thighs without the use of weights or pulleys, and had no hot water after amputation or for the draining of wounds. He tried unsuccessfully to save the lives of a number of adults and children who succumbed to painful and agonizing deaths.

In working out his own personal belief about God, faith, and death, Woolverton reflected on the story of Jesus' birth: "But is it not lamentable to reflect that although it is now more than 1800 years since their glad tidings were first published, there are so many who have not as yet heard of a Saviour and consequently are ignorant of the way of salvation and still more lamentable that so few among those who have heard thereof, have embraced it."[14]

Woolverton felt that life was short, uncertain, and insidious. He reasoned that if it was only by chance that people lived and died, then it would not matter which path was taken in life. As a consequence, he resolved that a life of temperance and order would be his choice. Woolverton believed that God presented the incentive that so many were rejecting. God's power of wisdom, justice and mercy, he realized, did not protect him from an unavoidable death which he believed could come at anytime. Woolverton wrote that he aimed to pursue the road of reason rather than inclination, boldness rather than temerity, liberty rather than slavery to lusts, and discretion in serving his God in the world, stating that: "It is not the discretion of a wise man but the folly of a fool that instigates any one

to forego future happiness in order to indulge his present inclination."[15]

Each of the cities where Dr. Woolverton received his medical training and experience afforded him an opportunity to witness a culture that would to some extent be felt in his rural hometown only in later years. Urban experiences in York, Montreal, the United States and Europe enabled him to begin advocating in advance for medical and social needs that may not yet have been of critical importance to the people of the small rural nineteenth-century Upper Canadian village of Grimsby. Urban life allowed Dr. Woolverton to see other ways of social, criminal and educational reform and mirrored in many ways the manner in which other reformers, such as Egerton Ryerson, sought out ideas through travel. Urban life challenged his faith and his practice.

The amount of detail recorded in Dr. Woolverton's medical accounts indicated his frustration and stress with death. Woolverton recorded that his "mind almost recoils upon itself" when he contemplated the scenes of the "sick, the dying or the dead" and the "dozen bodies mangled" and dissected.[16] His reflections regarding his experiences as a physician and surgeon stimulated his belief that he had to reflect on his treatment plans and autopsy results, carefully, research new and alternative forms of medicine delivery, participate in ongoing education and cope with death through faith.

In reflecting on death from cancer, Dr. Woolverton noted that cancer had given one of his patients time to think and reflect on his spiritual life, something that his patient had not done in his past. He recorded that his patient "was mercifully led to consider his ways and to seek after the one thing needful," noting that the patient "thought the Consumption was one of the happiest diseases ever a person has."[17] This opportunity for spiritual growth that could be taken during a time of illness was accepted by Woolverton as a gift from God and a last opportunity to gain an everlasting life.

Woolverton found the "dealings of Providence and His ways" most mysterious. He recorded the reflections on the life and death of one of his patients whom he believed was a central member within her family, stating that she was "in the prime of life, in whom the affections of a husband centered, to whom a young and numerous family looked for direction; the only comfort of her aged Parents." He understood the grief of her family and friends but he wanted to consider the young woman's new state. Being taken away by God was something that he felt any Christian would want as it provided an opportunity to leave the evils and snares of the world to

experience a perfect life in heaven. Jonathan rhetorically asked his diary, "Who would not die a Christian?"[18]

Realizing that he could not always affect a cure, Dr. Woolverton began the process of learning how to provide comfort and pain relief to the sick. He consistently relied on his relationship with his God and reflected on the spiritual aspects of illness and death, and in these reflections he was able to find hope, support, a life's focus and leave behind a witness and an example of an ordinary nineteenth-century professional man with a Protestant Conscience.

The opportunity to delve into the life of a man of Protestant Conscience is representative of only one small step to accomplishing Grant's challenge of "perhaps some day a massive exploration of private diaries" that "will make possible a more thorough expose of the religious mind – or minds – of the province."[19] Grant's words have inspired my study of Dr. Jonathan Woolverton, a study which has provided for an opportunity to explore some complex issues as experienced and perceived by an ordinary Upper Canadian with a Protestant Conscience.

Endnotes

1. William Canniff, *The Medical Profession in Upper Canada, 1783-1850* (Toronto: W. Briggs, 1894), 668. CIHM 00470.

2. Dr. Bowler is currently editing Dr. Woolverton's primary source documents and her doctoral thesis material to produce a biography entitled, *The Cry was 'Keep him Up'!: The story of Dr. Jonathan Woolverton.*

3. John Webster Grant, *A Profusion of Spires: Religion in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), ix.

4. William Westfall, *Two Worlds: The Protestant Culture of Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), 127.

5. Sharon Marie Bowler, "Protestant Conscience in Ontario Education" (M.Ed. thesis, Brock University, 2002); and Sharon Marie Bowler, "Biography as History: Dr. Jonathan Woolverton and Protestant Conscience in Nineteenth-Century Ontario" (Ed.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 2006).

6. This church was located in York. It was later named Jarvis Street Baptist Church.

7. Jonathan Woolverton, *Speech Journal,* 79-81, Grimsby Museum, Grimsby, ON.

8. Woolverton, *Speech Journal,* 79-81.

9. Egerton Ryerson, "Report on Education," *Appendix P of the Legislative Assembly of 1846, 9 Victorieae*; and Egerton Ryerson, "The Constitution and Government of the Common Schools, in Respect to Religious Instruction," in J.G. Hodgins, *Historical and other papers and documents illustrative of the educational system of Ontario, 1856-1872, Volume II* (Toronto: L.K. Cameron, 1911), 65. This advocacy for the common principles of Christianity was emphasized by Ryerson because he believed that a Christian morality could be the common thread binding Catholics and Protestants together within the Common School system.

10. Woolverton, *Speech Journal*, 30. From a Temperance Speech dated January 1848.

11. Woolverton, *Speech Journal*, 30. From a temperance speech dated January 1848. See James 3:4.

12. Woolverton, *Speech Journal*, 151. From an educational speech 1850.

13. Canniff, *The Medical Profession in Upper Canada*, 515-7.

14. Jonathan Woolverton, *The Diary*, 4 (24 December 1832); Grimsby Museum, Grimsby, ON.

15. Woolverton, *The Diary*, 5-6 (31 December 1832).

16. Woolverton, *The Diary,* 35 (Winter 1835).

17. Woolverton, *The Diary*, 36 (23 May 1835).

18. Woolverton, *The Diary*, 40 (8 June 1835).

19. Grant, *Profusion of Spires,* ix.