

Fundamentalism and the Family: A Preliminary Examination of P.W. Philpott and His Children

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At present I am in the process of writing a biography of Peter W. Philpott (1865-1957), an exceptionally irenic fundamentalist who was able to work with variety of religious leaders of various persuasions. Peter and Jessie Philpott also had a remarkable family of thirteen children, twelve of whom reached adulthood and had considerable influence in their respective fields of endeavour. One of the questions I am investigating is what made his family life exceptional and how it compared and contrasted with other evangelical families beginning during the last decades of the nineteenth century. A number of Philpott's fundamentalist associates, whom I have already investigated, had very dysfunctional families. Placing the Philpott family in the larger context of Canadian and American society has not been easy since most of the available historical studies of Canadian and American children have focused on orphans, immigrant children, delinquents and the school systems or sexual attitudes and courtship patterns.¹ The internal dynamics of lower and middle-class families have not received the historical attention they deserve.²

Let us first examine the career of P.W. Philpott to place his family in context. In 1892, while he was one of the leading officers of the Salvation Army in Toronto, Peter and Jessie Philpott withdrew from that movement³ and organized the Christian Workers Churches in Canada which had a loose affiliation with the Christian and Missionary Alliance⁴ and later formed the basis of the Associated Gospel Churches of Canada.

In 1896 the Philpotts took over the Christian Workers Gospel Taber-

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nacle in Hamilton and quickly built that small mission into one of Canada's largest independent churches by 1920. Peter was also in heavy demand as a speaker at the holiness and prophetic conferences and was one of the leaders of the emerging fundamentalist movement.

In 1922 Philpott was called to take over the troubled Moody Church in Chicago, reorganized the finances, built up the congregation and oversaw the building of the new Moody Church.⁵ He was also an active board member of nearby Wheaton College.⁶ While ministering in Chicago, Philpott was constantly being wooed away by other churches, including Calvary Baptist Church in New York City. In 1929 he finally accepted a call from another of the citadels of fundamentalism, the troubled Church of the Open Door, contained in the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (BIOLA). He stayed there until the end of 1931 when he went into semi-retirement.

From 1932 until his death in 1957, Peter Philpott conducted an itinerant ministry as a conference speaker across North America. He and his wife Jessie made their home in Toronto, but for several years he became interim pastor of his old church in Hamilton. The rancorous T.T. Shields at Jarvis Street Baptist Church often called upon Philpott to supply his pulpit in Toronto. Philpott also filled in for Charles Templeton's Avenue Road Church. Then, from 1944 to 1954, Philpott served as associate pastor for Oswald J. Smith's Peoples Church. It should be noted that Shields and Smith were religious competitors and Philpott seems to have been able to lessen the conflict between these warring fundamentalists. When Philpott died at the age of 92, he was busy working on his next day's sermon. He had completed seventy-four active years in the ministry from the time he had become a Salvation Army officer at the age of eighteen. His funeral was conducted by the Reverend Howard Bentall of Walmer Road Baptist Church in Toronto, a family friend who had also buried Jessie Philpott two years before.

The Philpotts were a very close family and supportive of each other. The children had a high regard for their parents Peter and Jessie. On Jessie's ninetieth birthday the children and grandchildren gathered in Toronto to honour her and stressed the positive role that she and Peter had been in their lives. Two of the children, Ruth and Stuart, wrote family histories which at present remain unpublished manuscripts because they died before their work could be revised and published. I think it important to quote Stuart Philpott's preface to his manuscript.

Eighty-two years of activity in business, sport and community affairs have afforded me the privilege of associating with many leaders in most facets of Canadian and U.S. life, but I still place mother and father at the very pinnacle of my personal monument of magnificent men and women.⁷

What did Peter and Jessie Philpott have in their personalities and parenting skills that had such a positive impact on their children? When we look at their backgrounds they do not appear as likely candidates as successful parents. Peter's father, an alcoholic, had died when Peter was seven years of age. The family was broken up, the older children being farmed out to relatives and Peter and his younger brother were brought up by his young widowed mother and a later a succession of two step-fathers. Peter received only an elementary education and began to work as a blacksmith in his teens. He was a rough and tumble sort, known for his skill in fist fights. At eighteen he was converted at a street meeting and entered the Salvation Army.⁸ Jessie's mother had died when she was six years old and she was raised for another two years by her grandmother until she also died. Jessie's father, who was a railway bridge builder, basically abandoned her, leaving her to be brought up by her older brother in Toronto and then a family who took her in. She, too, was converted at a Salvation Army meeting while in her teens. The positive factors in their lives were Peter's loving mother, Jessie's grandmother and the family which virtually adopted Jessie.

Let us now examine some of the factors which made Jessie and Peter Philpott successful parents: the Philpott children recognized that their parents loved each other and were very supportive of each other. Peter's diary entries demonstrate how deeply he was devoted to Jessie and how he regarded her as a partner in ministry. At one point he maintained a vow of celibacy for over a year because he feared that another pregnancy would destroy her health. Jessie convinced him that his celibacy was unrealistic.⁹

In the Salvation Army Peter and Jessie had been exposed to attitudes of sexual and social equality and those principles were demonstrated in their dealings with people of every social station, race and creed. They maintained positive relationships with the Jewish and Catholic communities, inviting the Jewish rag-man in for lunch and sending their daughter Ruth to the Catholic convent for music lessons. After Peter raised money for Jewish relief in Palestine during World War One, he was invited to be

the guest speaker at a convention of rabbis.¹⁰ The Philpott children saw practical Christian charity being constantly demonstrated as Peter and Jessie welcomed into their home vagrants, “fallen women,” and the destitute, whom they housed, fed and clothed.

Care was taken to ensure that the children were healthy even though Jessie had little use for the medical profession and was an advocate of homeopathy. Her children were born without a doctor’s assistance. She called upon mid-wives, but the babies were usually born before the mid-wife arrived. All of her children survived infancy; only Donald died at the age of seven when he contracted diphtheria.

Peter and Jessie took an active interest in their children’s lives. They taught them skills ranging from animal husbandry, horticulture and agriculture, to carpentry, piano playing, photography and journalism. As new children were born, the older girls were given responsibility for the care of the middle children. Peter was an active sportsman and organized sports activities for his children and participated with them. With eight boys, Peter had his own baseball team, he being the ninth player. They also participated with the many local baseball teams which dominated the working-class culture of Hamilton.¹¹

The Philpott children were exposed to a great variety of interesting people, missionaries and journalists, who passed through the house and told their stories from exotic places such as India, Africa and Tibet. The children were active participants in the dinner conversations, even when guests were present. The attitude that “children were to be seen but not heard” did not exist in the Philpott household. The children were made to feel that they were valuable members of the family. At the same time they were encouraged to be part of the family of God.

Physical punishment was kept to a minimum even though the boys were sometimes very undisciplined. Psychological pressure and isolation from the others were the common punishments. The children were encouraged to seek forgiveness from God “who sees all.” A spirit of Christian grace appears to have dominated that household. God’s forgiveness and salvation was available to anyone who asked for it. Even after an assailant made two attempts on Peter’s life, Peter went to court and pleaded on behalf of the convicted man.¹²

An important thing which united the family was a summer home which was purchased at Bronte, near Burlington. There the family spent their summers for thirty-five years; even when Peter and Jessie were

ministering in Chicago or Los Angeles, they returned to Bronte for the summers where they were joined by the extended family.

Probably the most important factor in promoting a positive family situation were the approximately 20,000 letters which Jessie wrote to her children until her death in 1955. As each child left home Jessie wrote them a letter each week, informing them of what was happening in the family and inquiring into their spiritual state. The children also knew that each day Jessie rose early and prayed for them individually. This practice began when four of the boys and Ruth were overseas during World War One. Three sons also served overseas in World War Two.

The Philpotts encouraged the post-secondary education of their boys and girls; various children were sent to the Ontario Teacher's College in Hamilton, A.B. Simpson's Missionary Training Institute at Nyack, NY, Wheaton College, McGill University, the University of Michigan, Northwestern University, the University of Toronto, nurses training and the Ontario College of Art. As the children pursued their careers across North America some of the boys began a family newspaper, *The Family Informer*, which investigated family genealogy and kept the rest of the clan acquainted with recent family happenings.

How does the Philpott family fit into what we know of the Victorian Christian family? In Colleen McDannell's study of the American Victorian family she noted that home ownership was an important dimension of the Victorian family, not only as an avenue to financial stability, but also as a means to control their social environment. Living in the suburbs was especially encouraged to avoid the vice and pollution of the cities.¹³

The Philpotts appear to have heeded that thinking. Until 1902 the Philpotts had lived in rented quarters in the industrial districts of Toronto and Hamilton. In that year they purchased a small farm on Mountain Avenue at the western limits of Hamilton. Part of the reason for the move may have been the need for more space for the family which was constantly growing with a new baby arriving on the average of every two years. A change of environment may also have been necessary. Jessie had suffered a nervous breakdown after the birth of her eighth child in 1901 and spent most of a year recovering on a Mennonite farm near Lake Huron.

Following Jessie's breakdown, Peter appears to have taken a more active role in childcare. After moving to the small farm Peter and Jessie had greater opportunity to teach the children practical skills in house-keeping, canning, carpentry, agriculture and animal science. The farm

allowed them to produce their own food and sell the surplus. Later, the purchase of the summer cottage at Bronte provided the family with additional recreational facilities outside the city.

McDannell has also noted that family devotions were a dominant feature of the Protestant Victorian family with the father taking a leading role in family worship. In the Philpott household family worship occurred at both breakfast and supper. Peter led it usually; when he was away, Jessie conducted it, having the children read from the Bible. They had to finish their reading before they could leave for school. She gave them free reign in the selection of the Scripture passages, until one child chose to read Psalm 119, causing everyone to be late for school.

McDannell found that religious mottos or samplers decorated the rooms of the Victorian Protestants. Ruth Philpott especially remembered a motto on her bedroom wall. It consisted of a painting of a large eye, with the words, "Thou God seest Me." That eye seemed to follow her around the room and had an uncanny effect upon her.¹⁴

A final factor which McDannell identified as prominent among American protestants of the Victorian era was the emphasis on "Christian nurture" rather than dramatic conversion. Certainly the Philpotts emphasized the Christian education of their children, but did they leave it at that? Given their background in the Salvation Army, with the emphasis on conversion and Peter's work as an evangelist, it is unlikely that they neglected to seek the religious conversion of their children. We do know that when Stuart Philpott was well into his forties, Jessie's weekly letters pleaded with him to turn over his life to Christ.¹⁵

A final question has to be asked. How effective were the Philpotts in instilling their religious values and beliefs in their children? Most of their children were born and raised before the hardened lines of fundamentalism were formed. Even though P.W. Philpott became a leader of the fundamentalist movement, his own attitudes were much broader than those of many of his associates who rejected the surrounding culture. Philpott was very much involved in his society and taught his children responsible citizenship. However, none of the Philpott boys followed their father into the ministry, nor does Peter appear to have made any attempt to found a religious dynasty which had characterized the Booths of the Salvation Army, or the religious empires of his contemporaries Aimee Semple McPherson and Oswald J. Smith. It must be remembered that the major reason why the Philpotts left the Salvation Army was because the children

of the Booths lacked their parents' religious vision and appeared to be mainly interested in the power and glory associated with their positions.

It is important to observe that while none of the Philpott children remained with the fundamentalist movement, most joined mainline denominations. The eldest and youngest daughters were closest to their parents in religion; they became Baptists. Three were Anglicans; four belonged to the United Church of Canada. Two of those who moved to the United States became Methodists and Congregationalists. Murray, who had been sent to Wheaton College, but skipped classes to play semi-professional baseball, had no religious affiliation.¹⁶ The children of P.W. Philpott were quite different from his friend L.E. Maxwell. Maxwell gloried in the fact that all of his seven children were in full-time Christian service.¹⁷

Nevertheless, as parents, Peter and Jessie Philpott seem to have equipped their children very well for life. Most of the Philpott children developed into well-integrated adults with a remarkable degree of "social passion" who made their mark in the fields of religion, nursing and medicine, journalism, social service, advertising, sports, the military and politics.

The first three of the thirteen children were girls. Grace (1888-1984), the eldest, became the first woman to serve as vice-president of the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec. Ruth (1890-1975) went to India as a missionary in 1914 and ended up working as a nurse in Red Cross military hospitals in Africa and England. Later she moved to St. Louis, Missouri where she worked as a journalist and wrote children's books. Leah (1892-1987) became a nurse and worked primarily in the United States.

The next eight children were boys. Four of oldest boys fought in World War One; the three older boys were at Vimy Ridge. Gordon (1894-1965) became the chairman of the board of the Ralston Purina Company in St. Louis. Elmore (1896-1964) was famous as a journalist and a politician. He was the leader of the Ontario C.C.F. and later a Liberal Member of Parliament for Vancouver.¹⁸ Stuart (1898-1984) became an advertising executive in Toronto and headed the Big Brothers organization in Toronto. Wilbur (1900-1972) was the editor of the Canadian edition of *Liberty Magazine*. Murray (1901-1970) was an athlete who later became a professional soldier with the Canadian Army. Newell (1903-) became a gynaecologist and obstetrician, eventually serving as Dean of the Medical School at McGill University and was sometime president of the American College of Surgeons. Douglas (1906-1984) had a more troubled life,

marked by marriage failure and alcoholism during his middle years. Eventually, he straightened out his life. He became vice-president of the Transit Advertising Company in Toronto. The youngest son, Donald (1907-1914), did not survive childhood. He died after contracting diphtheria after chasing a baseball into a sewer pool.

The last two Philpott children were girls. Florence (1909-1992) became a social worker and headed the Toronto Welfare Council. Dorothy (1910-) looked after her parents and worked in the Toronto headquarters of the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec.

We have examined the factors which made most of the Philpott children successful. A short explanation needs to be made as to why Douglas, the youngest surviving son, had so much difficulty in life. He seems to have been a victim of circumstances which were mostly beyond the control of his parents. The trouble seems to have started in 1914 when his younger brother Donald died. Within months the family was further fractured when four of his oldest brothers and a sister went overseas for the duration of the war. When they returned from the war they soon moved away. Then, Doug's two immediate older brothers went off to university or work. Much of his social world had disintegrated and he was at loose ends. The family had also moved away from the farm, as they could not keep it up with most of the children having left the nest. At the same time, Peter's increasing involvement in the fundamentalist movement was taking him away from home more often as he conducted meetings across the continent. Doug's delinquency became so pronounced that his parents sent him away to a military academy. His subsequent marriage failure and addictions caused Peter and Jessie much grief.¹⁹

This paper has shed light on how one evangelical couple raised their children. Rather than withdrawal from "the world," which many of fundamentalists advocated, Jessie and Peter Philpott with their emphasis on promoting practical Christianity, manual skills, sports, patriotism, military service, post-secondary education and social service appear to have fit into the social and educational consensus identified by Neil Sutherland as the creation of Canadian social reformers at the turn of the century.²⁰ However, more work needs to be done to determine how Philpott's associates in the fundamentalist movement raised their children.

Endnotes

1. Neil Sutherland, *Children in English-Canadian Society: Framing the Twentieth-Century Consensus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976); Joy Parr, ed., *Childhood and Family in Canadian History* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982); Michael Gordon, ed., *The American Family in Social-Historical Perspective* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973; and Edward Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).
2. One wishes that a study similar to the one done by Michael B. Katz, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West: Family and Class in a Mid-Nineteenth Century City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), were available for the period 1896 to 1922 when the Philpotts lived in Hamilton. Katz, however, failed to investigate family dynamics.
3. P.W. Philpott and A.W. Roffe, *New Light Containing a Full Account of the Recent Salvation Army Troubles in Canada* (Toronto: Rose Publishing Co., 1892).
4. Lindsay Reynolds, *Footprints: The Beginnings of the Christian and Missionary Alliance in Canada* (Beaverlodge, AB: Buena Book Services, 1981), 171-172, 271, 464.
5. Robert G. Flood, *The Story of Moody Church: A Light in the City* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 21-25.
6. Paul M. Bechtel, *Wheaton College: A Heritage Remembered 1860-1984* (Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1984), 94, 145.
7. Stuart McGregor Philpott, "They Made the Devil Run," unpublished manuscript, preface.
8. P.W. Philpott, *Sixty Wonderful Years* (Los Angeles: Bible House of Los Angeles, 1946), 5.
9. A copy of Philpott's diary is in my possession.
10. P.W. Philpott, "Coming Events Cast Their Shadows Before," in *Light on Prophecy* (New York: Christian Herald, 1918), 208-209.
11. Bryan D. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1869-1914* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979), 52-54.

12. "Pastor Philpott of the Gospel Tabernacle," *Hamilton Spectator*, 1 October 1921, 18.
13. Colleen McDannell, *The Christian Home in Victorian America, 1840-1900* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 24-25.
14. Ruth Philpott Collins, "Not One Too Many," unpublished manuscript, 77.
15. The letters of Jessie Philpott to Stuart Philpott are in the possession of Stuart's daughter, Lynn Butler.
16. Interview with Miss Dorothy Philpott, Toronto, 25 May 1994.
17. Bernice Callaway, "Prairie celebrates jubilee year," *The Enquirer*, December 1971, 15.
18. *Canadian Parliamentary Guide*, 1954, 237-238.
19. This was a reoccurring theme in Peter and Jessie's letters to Stuart Philpott.
20. Sutherland, *Children in English-Canadian Society*, 236.