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Anent the Kirk Session: The Elders in Colonial Canadian Presbyterian Religion

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One of the distinctive marks of the Reformed tradition has been the role of the ruling elder in church government and community life. Thanks to Robert Bums and Sir Walter Scott the Presbyterian elder has been generally condemned for hypocrisy and hard-heartedness, and for hunting down the obvious transgressions of the weak but failing to censure the hidden sins of the high and mighty. Popular accounts of Canadian Presbyterianism perpetuate the quaint stereotype, while most contemporary scholars focus upon the writings, sermons and missionary endeavours of Presbyterian ministers, and not their elected counterparts. Perhaps the time has come for students of Canadian faith to have a closer look at their kirk sessions, and parish dynamics through the prism of the eldership.

In the area of piety and society, the elder did far more than serve communion and take up the offering. Kirk-session (the council of elders and minister) governed the local congregation, while the elder who served as Session Clerk kept its records. In areas where the ethnic and denominational constituency permitted, Presbyterian elders ruling the flock through the session thus played a powerful role in the moral, spiritual and even temporal government of settlers. If the eldership is located at the heart of Presbyterianism, then Canadian religious scholarship must come to a better understanding of how the session in action indicates the ideals and concerns of the parish. The state of the eldership may reveal the condition

of Presbyterianism (perhaps more in the pre-1875 period than after) more authoritatively than newspaper accounts, pastoral journals or sermon notes and lectures.

The session also exercised a religious discipline that is still the least understood aspect of Presbyterianism in Canada. Perhaps this can be explained by the traditions of session governance. Session minutes are closed private documents: they are the property of the local church and tradition bans non-elders from discussing or reading session minutes. Animosity between Presbyterian and United Churchmen since the temporalities disputes of 1925 (when Presbyterian clerks claimed old minutes as their personal property, sometimes concealing rather than surrendering them to the United Church) adds to the mystery surrounding the session court. Add to this log cabin fires, long-buried (but not forgotten) church feuds and family scandals (plus many, many misplaced cardboard boxes), and one can see that there are far more impediments to the researcher of Presbyterian parish piety than the student of Presbyterian preaching and teaching!

Nevertheless, the discovery of a significant body of session records in various archives, and the recent interest shown by scholars of religion in family and personal piety as well as the laity in Canadian ecclesiastical life has prompted the following case study of the Bathurst District of Upper Canada and Canada West between 1816-1875.[1] From the session minutes of fourteen churches – eight Church of Scotland and six Free Church – a profile of Presbyterianism can be sketched which seems far different from that debated in contemporary scholarship. In the Bathurst District, Scots and Irish settlers arrived in large numbers after 1816, many evidently transplanting from their homeland a vigorous tradition of session discipline, resurrected in the revival fires which swept Britain in the Napoleonic era, and exercised over a wide field of moral and spiritual offenses in the Clydeside, Ulster and Scottish Highland parishes where the settlers originated. Often the Presbyterian congregations which emerged from this period, with its chronic shortage of ministers, depended upon the leadership of former elders who drew on the variety of elder manuals recently published in Scotland and which crossed the Atlantic with them.[2]

In contrast, many of the first settlers in villages such as Perth, Bytown, Ramsay and Richmond, were military veterans and their families, or children of adventurous Loyalist speculators, who often clashed with such pious latecomers, or at least their zealous elders. Soon kirk Sessions in this district punished sins considered beyond their religious jurisdiction,

citing members for offenses usually left to the civil magistrate. The first recorded case of session involved the Military Settlement of Perth, where, in 1818, elders of William Bell's newly-organized secessionist Presbyterian kirk summoned a member. A townsman was accused of getting a church member drunk and trying to seduce her. The woman who made the charge had, in turn, been charged with slander. Session confirmed, after questioning, the truth of the woman's case and dismissed the charge of slander against her. Then the husband of the woman challenged her accuser to a duel. Session summoned both men and forced the challenge to be withdrawn. Unfortunately for the outraged couple, session was unable to punish the man who had made the seduction attempt, for he was not a Presbyterian.

Duelling remained a concern of First Presbyterian Church, Perth, as hot-headed youths frequently appealed to the trial of honour to settle their romantic difficulties. In 1833, this led to the famous fatal wounding of Robert Lyon by the banks of the Tay. It was Bell's session that suspended the penitent survivor, John Wilson, from communion for manslaughter. In 1836, when the congregation entered the Church of Scotland, its constitution forbade members "to go to law" against each other without first submitting their dispute to session arbitration.[3]

Such zeal was denounced by dissident Perth Presbyterians, (among them leading citizen Alexander Morris) who called another minister, reputedly more moderate on moral and spiritual issues, to found a rival Church of Scotland kirk in the village. Ironically (and to First Presbyterian's amusement) Rev. T.C. Wilson proved to be an even more zealous evangelical than William Bell, and St. Andrew 's session waxed vigilant against both drinking and shady business dealings as well as the other sins of the flesh. Between 1830 and 1848, St. Andrew's kirk session dealt with 103 cases involving drunkenness, sexual offenses and absenteeism, as well as charges including shoplifting, dancing, fraud, attempted murder, exposure of newborns, and the setting of a man's dog on his mother-in-law.

The nearby hamlets of Beckwith and Ramsay also developed a strong and vibrant session government. Here moral offenses provoked elder summons for fornication. Confession to session and private admonition by the minister was usually followed by baptism of the child and reconciliation to membership for parents . Surprisingly, given the reputation writers such as Peter Ward give sessions for dour, old-world severity, the Beckwith session (and others surveyed) sometimes took great

pains to spare the feelings of the women involved, exempting some from public rebuke because of ill health or epilepsy.[4]

In the sizeable Ramsay (later Almonte) parish, a major clash between members and session over the choice of minister took place resulting in a disastrous four-year pulpit vacancy as some elders rejected the induction of the "Auld Kirk" minister (believing him not an evangelical) and boycotted the services until 1846. Then, through their influence, the congregation joined the Free Church movement and the rebel faction returned.

Ramsay's session, once reunited, disciplined a wide population of members, for offenses including drunkenness, brawling on militia training day in Carleton Place, and domestic quarreling. Husbands who beat their wives were forced by session to confess and repent. In 1836, when a woman was suspended for quarreling, her emotional state was so unstable that, a few minutes before the meeting closed, the husband returned and

> said that his wife refused to go home with him, and was afraid she might be driven to extremity of despair-but thought that she would be pacified, and would live quietly with him, if she knew that he was punished as well as her. He therefore, requested the Session to suspend him as well as her in the meantime. This, in the painful circumstances of the case, was agreed to.[5]

As in Perth, the Ramsay, Bytown and Smith's Falls churches also policed a wide range of crimes which arose in more urban and commercial environments than the countryside. Alcohol related offenses occupied half of their caseload in addition to business infractions and petty crime. Here sexual crimes ranked a poor third as, significantly, Free Church elders evidently believed that drink, land and money created more trouble than sex. Nor did they demand more from a penitent than flesh and blood (or pocket) could bear: Presbyterian tavern-keepers were told to sell off their stock at the end of the current logging season, rather than close immediately with unpaid debts! The implication of some elders in land and property disputes created some of the most unedifying spectacles in the parishes – perhaps elders enjoyed the deference of most of the flock when it came to moral leadership, but this obedience could be swiftly withdrawn when the one compromised his integrity. When they harvested trees off other peoples' back lots, committed perjury, shoplifted or harassed members for unpaid debts, appeals to Presbytery soon brought visitation and inspection by elders and moderators of other parishes. Several elders

were themselves disciplined in this period which makes it hard to see sessions as closed oligarchies that could not be unseated by surly congregations.[6] Of whom much was entrusted much was expected, and some elders did not pass the test. Nor, in the eyes of many elders, was a Moderator himself above discipline or even outright dismissal as the Osgoode parish history reveals.

In the township of Osgoode, ruling elders founded the first Presbyterian church near the village of Vernon in 1832, petitioning the Church of Scotland to provide a minister. After several years of neglect by the under-manned Church of Scotland Synod (and one attempt to take over the building by ex-Presbyterian converts for the preaching of Baptist itinerant Daniel McPhail), elders locked the doors and pocketed the key until a Presbyterian Evangelical minister was recruited from New York state. In 1844 the Osgoode session led the congregation into the new Free Church communion being organized in the Canadas. Between 1844 and 1875, the Osgoode session spread its influence from the east bank of the Rideau River eastward deep into Russell county, and from Bytown to the hamlet of Winchester over twenty miles to the south. By 1860 a session of ten elders ruled over 150 families in the parish (comparable in size both to Perth Free Church and Knox Presbyterian Church in Bytown (Ottawa).[7]

While unable and unwilling to preach, Osgoode's elders were anything but passive pawns of the Moderator. They conducted the hiring and firing of precentors, supervised the trustees, visited homes in each of their districts of the parish, and conducted prayer meetings and Sunday Schools in nearby Kenmore and Russell hamlet where Osgoode's first daughter church was born by the 1850s. Pastoral care by elders extended to the poor: Osgoode's session never did elect a deacon's court, caring for the widows and destitute out of church funds themselves.[8] Over half the cases of discipline involved alcohol, as offenders crossed eider's paths at town meetings, elections, fairs, and the July 12 Orange Lodge parade in the village of Metcalfe with its numerous taverns. Elders soon visited many of the taverns run by members or adherents. They were rewarded with several closures, though two individuals were suspended briefly from membership when they renewed their licenses. In spite of the predominance of sexual offenses in old world sessions, Osgoode only disciplined nine couples for such misdemeanours; all were restored to membership with admonition after confession.

Significantly, sixteen cases of disturbances of the civil peace came before the Osgoode session, which, as in Perth, often became the

unofficial civil court for Presbyterians falling out of fellowship in business or other secular pursuits. Perjury, shoplifting, family feuds, assault (when one member prevented a local youth from trying to brain another with an axe handle at a barn raising) and usury (in kind) all provoked session summons which included the discipline of at least three elders themselves (for oppression and harassment of poor tenants). This led to some lively exchanges and appeals to Presbytery by elders so rebuked, but the most divisive battle took place between session and the minister himself. The revelation of a secret romance between the minister's daughter and the son of the most powerful of Osgoode's elders brought out the worst in both fathers. Their mutual recriminations become so widely known that the Presbytery of Ottawa censured both and made an official visitation to peace-make in the parish.[9]

This time session was vindicated (though the angry elder left the church) and censured the minister, but continued battles between elders and minister led to congregational fission by 1856. The Presbytery of Ottawa decided that the rising tide of session-led anticlericalism in Osgoode could only be resolved by splitting the congregation into two charges for one year, until the Osgoode minister could settle elsewhere. Given the lack of deference to clergy shown by the three Osgoode elders who remained from the founding days of the parish, it was a great relief when they resigned their seats and a new minister arrived in 1858 to heal the deep divisions in the Osgoode charge.

As with other churches in the Bathurst District (Beckwith, for example), the worst debates in session were caused not by outright sinners, but members, elders and even ministers who considered themselves the godly of the flock. Many of Osgoode's elders insisted upon recognition of their own authority by the entire parish, even non-Presbyterians, sometimes even summoning members and each other for offenses which might have been better left for the magistrate. Some elders, perhaps after years of unquestioned congregational hegemony, chaffed under strong-willed ministers and challenged their leadership, as in the case which split the parish in 1856. The resulting power struggles allowed three elders to make martyrs of themselves, while the minister left convinced that Osgoode was a hotbed of anticlericalism. This pious but proud disunity made Osgoode parish, along with those of Perth, Ramsay, and Beckwith, among the strictest disciplining sessions in the district, and left a lasting memory of elders who ruled, not wisely, but too much.

While in the Bathurst parishes of the Church of Scotland disciplin-

ary zeal moderated after the 1850s, the practice continued in the Free Churches into the 1860s and even 1870s. After Presbyterian union in 1875, kirk discipline, though not strong, continued until 1925. Here the story of the elders in the battles over Presbyterian survival has been examined, but what are the linkages between the sessions of the pre-1875 era and their successors?

Canadian Presbyterian studies have undergone a major expansion that have stimulated the debate over secularization in Canadian churches. Thanks to the efforts of a wide number of scholars over the last few years, we know now a great deal more about the development of Presbyterian thought, the approaches to modernity which teachers and ministers proposed and the extent of their success by the middle of this century.[10] We know more about the organization and work of the Free Church in contrast to the older emphasis on the Church of Scotland.[11] The role played by leading Presbyterians in religious thought and culture remains a strong interest of Presbyterians writing their own history.[12]

While the most recent published monographs and graduate dissertations dealing with Canadian Presbyterianism give the impression that the life of the denomination-the flame in the burning bush that adorns the well-known emblem of the Presbyterian Church in Canada today depends upon the ardour of its ministers' preaching, the intensity of their idealistic teaching and their considerable organizing skill, a few Canadian writers have argued that "the Presbyterian system works with an efficiency varying directly with the respect with which its ruling eldership is held."[13] These acknowledge the work of generations of session, presbytery and synod clerks whose chronicles are among the best windows we have into the history of Presbyterianism in Canada. Some scholars, in fact, have now turned their attention to the role of the Presbyterian anti-Unionist elder in preserving the church from many of its own clergy who left their pulpits to found the United Church of Canada in 1925.Their work reminds us that at every level of Presbyterian life decision-making and deliberative power has been shared between minister and elder in the ascending hierarchy of church courts which were not managed solely by the clergy
(though they often did most of the talking) but in tandem with elders sent by their home sessions.[14]

The pace of Presbyterian revivalism through the last century has been recognized with special attention being paid to the role of the "Long Communion" or "Holy Fair" as it intensified the enthusiasm and piety of parishioners in both the Canadas and colonial Cape Breton.[15] Such

regional studies of kirk and society in both Glengarry and Cape Breton highlight that the parishioners as well as ministers of the nineteenth century were far more pietistic than their predecessors, and that elders played a vital if not always well-recorded role in upholding a church chronically short of clergy. It is hard to imagine such a cadre of lay leaders, many with military, business and educational experience, allowing themselves to be led meekly along by pulpit princes without a firm assertion of their independence.[16]

The story of the mingling of secular and sacred concerns in colonial Nova Scotia has yielded promising insights into evangelical Presbyterianism and the history of education.[17] Research into the Presbyterian origins of Canadian missionary evangelicals, such as A.B. Simpson, founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, as well as the world of Presbyterian women as missionaries, has moved beyond the traditional confines of Presbyterian history and opens up wider prospects for innovative research.[18]As studies of other denominations' lay associations advance our knowledge of church identity and rank-and-file adherence, piety and obser- vances, similar work on the Presbyterian parallels (if there are any) remains undone.[19] Perhaps the session is the next logical level of Presbyterianism to examine?

And yet, where are, or what were, the sessions? Who were the elders and how did they shape the face (and fire the heart) of the Canadian kirk? Were they involved as participants in the revivals? What role did they play in the Holy Fairs (besides the disciplinary meetings held before admitting members to full fellowship around the table)? How did session discipline bridge the categories of private and public space in a pioneer community? Were sessions meekly led by clerics, or did they temper the enthusiasms of their Moderators even to the extent that they acted as a reservoir of the endemic anticlericalism which characterises much of Presbyterian culture in Canada? And why did discipline decline after 1875, and practically disappear by 1925? Were sessions defeated by pluralism or secularization? Were they undermined by the professionalized clergy? Were the battles between sessions and ministers in 1925 the last stand of the sessions to preserve an identity (and forum) where their role remained central? If we are going to examine the power of Christian faith in the history of the Canadian Churches, we must reassess the role of the ruling eldership in the Presbyterian tradition.

In Eastern Upper Canada, there were few Presbyterians as well known as William Bell. A zealous and tireless minister whose pioneer

ministry began in the Perth Military Settlement in 1816, he presided over Presbyterianism in the Rideau back-country until his death in 1857. Usually characterized as austere, dour and sour, his journals reveal a wry sense of humour, sensitive to the comic side of Scots Presbyterian life and worship. One Sunday in 1825, after the congregation was dismissed, he noticed a man "sitting in a pensive mood in the corner of a back seat. He was so fast asleep that he had to be shaken before we woke him up. You may judge of his surprise on seeing him surrounded by the Session. He offered no apology but made a quick retreat."[20] Perhaps Canadian religious scholars must make a more better effort than that drowsy Canadian to know and understand the Presbyterian elder!

Endnotes

1. Marguerite Van Die, "Recovering Religious Experience: Some Reflections on Methodology," *Historical Papers: Canadian Society of Church History* (1992): 155-169.

2. For example, see Alexander Hill, *The Practice of the Several Judicatories of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: J. Waugh, 1830); David King, *The Ruling Eldership of the Christian Church* (Edinburgh: Oliphaunt, 1846); and J. Lorimer, *The Eldership of the Church of Scotland* (Glasgow: Collins, 1842). On the new type of disciplinary zeal and democratic tensions emerging from the revivals in the Highlands and brought to the New World, see Laurie Stanley Blackwell, *The Well-Watered Garden* (Sydney: University College of Cape Breton Press, 1983).

3. First Presbyterian Church, Perth, Ontario, *Session Minutes, 1817-1857*, 4 January, 1818, 1February1818, 17December1818, 1 September 1833, and 1 January 1836.

4. United Church of Canada Archives, Beckwith-Franktown-Black's Comers Presbyterian Church, *Minutes of Session, 1844-1867.* This session's activity has been cited by Ward as a classic case of religious shaming being used as a deterrent by moralistic religious authorities in *Courtship, Love and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century English Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 26-27. In contrast, see Allan Farris, "Mark Young Stark: Pioneer Missionary Statesmen," in *The Tide of Time: Historical Essays* by the Late Allan L Farris, ed. John S. Moir (Toronto: Knox College, 1978), 90-91.

5. Almonte United Church, *"Auld Kirk" Minutes of Session, 1834-1867*; 16 December 1836; see also Minutes of the Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Canada in Connection With the Church of Scotland, 1843, 8-17; and United Church of Canada Archives, Presbytery of Bathurst, "Minutes," January-June, 1843.

6. Perth United Church, *Free Church Minutes of Session, 1844-1867.*

7. Canada Presbyterian Church, *Minutes of Synod, 1862* (Toronto: various publishers, 1862).

8. Osgoode Presbyterian Church, *Session Minutes, 1847-1865.*

9. Osgoode Presbyterian Church, *Session Minutes, October 1854 to 31 May 1862.* Significantly, the record of the uprising has been heavily censored by an Ottawa Presbytery delegation of 1862 which simply glued pages of the Session record together and razored out offensive paragraphs from the old minute book!

10. David Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); and Michael Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991).

11. Richard Vaudry, *The Free Church in Victorian Canada, 1844-1875* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989).

12. William Klempa, ed., *The Burning Bush and a Few Acres of Snow: The Presbyterian Contribution to Canadian Life and Culture* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1994).

13. John Waldie, "The Church Courts of Presbyterianism," Knox College Archives, Toronto, n.d. [1930s], Book l, 34.

14. Keith Clifford, *The Resistance to Church Union in Canada, 1904-1939* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985). For an example of the promising line of enquiry opened up by this research, see Shelley McKellar, "Clergy and Elders: A study of congregation and community dynamics surrounding the Church Union issue of 1925 in urban Presbyterian Churches in Ontario," unpublished paper, McMaster University, 1993.

15. Blackwell, *The Well-Watered Garden*; and John Webster Grant, "Brands from the Blazing Heather: Canadian Religious Revival in the Highland Tradition," *The Canadian Society of Presbyterian History, Papers* (1991): 1-32. See also "Burning Bushes: Flames of Revival in the Nineteenth Century Canadian Presbyterianism," *Historical Papers: Canadian Society of Church History* (1991): 97-111.

16. The only recent study of Presbyterian life that notes the formidable power and influence of the session in parish life is Donald N. MacMillan's, *The Kirk in Glengarry* (n.p.: private, 1986). For a sample of the types of career profiles and public prominence of elders, survey Rev. W. Cochrane's, *Men of Canada*, Vol. IV (Brantford: Bradley, Garretson and Co., 1895). Although privately-subscribed and too unrepresentative of all elders, it highlights the substantial wealth and independence of leading Presbyterian laymen.

17. B. Anne Wood, "The Significance of Evangelical Presbyterian Politics in the Construction of State Schooling: a Case Study of the Pictou District, 1817-1866," *Acadiensis* 20, 2 (Spring 1991).

18. Darrel R. Reid, "'All for Jesus': The Early Life and Presbyterian Ministry of Albert Benjamin Simpson, 1843-1882," Ph.D. Dissertation, Queen's University, 1994. See also Ruth Compton Brouwer, *New Women/or God: Canadian Presbyterian Women and India Missions, 1876-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990); and Alvyn Austin, *Saving China: Canadian Missionaries in the Middle Kingdom, 1888-1959* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986).

19. Brian P. Clarke, *Piety and Nationalism: Lay Voluntary Associations and the Creation of an Irish-Catholic Community in Toronto, 1850-1895* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994).

20. Queen's University Archives, *William Bell Journals* (1825): Vol. 2, 175.