

## **“The Making of a Nation”: Nationalism and World War I in the Social Gospel Literature of Ralph Connor<sup>1</sup>**

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The rise of liberal theology in general, and the social gospel in particular, during the late-nineteenth century has been attributed to a number of factors. The frequent expressions of unqualified faith in progress that accompanied the Industrial Revolution evoked an aura of the dawning of a new era, full of unlimited potential for improving the quality of life through technology. Changing demographic and economic patterns created a new complex of social issues which challenged philosophers, social scientists and theologians to find corresponding new approaches to these problems. Urbanization brought with it the development of slums in which huge numbers of the working poor were alienated from the support and authority systems of family, village and church. The gap between rich and poor widened, both socially and economically. In North America especially, but also in England, these problems were complicated further by immigration which brought with it language and cultural barriers. The question confronting the church and, in fact, all of society was how to adapt to this new social configuration.

Intellectual developments also brought challenges to traditional Christian theology in the nineteenth century. The evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin, and the use of historical and social-scientific methodology by biblical scholars, demanded a new Christianity that could withstand the challenges of this new scientific and social-scientific age. Thus the social gospel may be seen as a product of these intellectual movements, and a whole complex of nineteenth-century currents of thought, including the

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revivalist emphasis on perfectionism and active Christianity, the Darwinian recognition of the importance of the environment for progress, the new positive view of the state, a Hegelian view of history as a progressive expression of the eternal idea, and the search for the historical Jesus.

William R. Hutchison, in *American Protestant Thought: The Liberal Era*<sup>2</sup> has however identified the liberal enthusiasm for modernity as a strain of thought unique to nineteenth-century liberal theology. This concern with cultural adaptation, and making theology “relevant” to the modern world, may be seen as an attempt on the part of liberal theologians to create persuasive religious rhetoric at a time when traditional religious authority was being seriously questioned.

The social gospel is one such endeavour. For the purposes of this discussion, the social gospel may be defined as that movement of Christian social thought emerging in the late-nineteenth century, which emphasized the social ethics of the Gospels as principles for ordering modern society and the immanence of God in human history. Building on these two ideas social gospellers urged the church, as embodied institutionally and by individual believers, to work towards the building of the Kingdom of God on earth. A key premise of such work was the prior necessity of social salvation to the salvation of individuals, especially among the poor. It was an essentially optimistic movement, based on a belief on the innate goodness of human beings, and a faith in progress. As such, it was particularly suited, or to use the terminology of that era, “relevant” to the Canadian situation in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

The achievement of Confederation in 1867, the opening up of the West (and with it an increasing awareness of the wealth of Canada’s natural resources), and the great floods of immigrants entering the country created a sense of excitement about the potential development of this new nation. Wilfrid Laurier’s oft-quoted belief that the twentieth century would be Canada’s century was sincerely shared by the majority of his contemporaries in Canada. The future of Canada, and the development of a Canadian identity, was a favourite topic in the public forum. Among those who voiced dearly cherished hopes for the character of the Canadian identity were the Protestant churches of Canada. As Keith Clifford pointed out in his article, “His Dominion: A Vision in Crisis,”<sup>3</sup> the leadership and membership of the Canadian Protestant churches, particularly those in Ontario, were anxious to preserve, in the face of immigration from Catholic and non-English speaking countries, the cultural dominance that

the English Protestant tradition had historically enjoyed in the nation. Thus, the churches took on an active role in the task of nation-building. Visions of “His Dominion” emerged; Canada was to be the Kingdom of God on earth. At the Fifth Ecumenical Methodist Conference in London, Nellie McClung asked the delegates:

Does it thrill you to think of a new land to be settled, where the pages of life are all white, ready to be written upon; where precedents are being made every day, and history written? We want to make it a Christian country . . . We need doctors, teachers, preachers; we need Christian people, who will prepare the way of the Lord, and make His path straight, for we know that in spite of our wonderful country, with its untold riches of mine and forest and plain, its oil-fields, coal-mines, and wheat-fields, it is only righteousness that can exalt a nation. “Unless the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it!”<sup>4</sup>

This almost millennialist view of the future of Canada as a Christian nation prepared the way for the propagation of the social gospel. The social gospel, with its emphasis on active, practical Christianity and the techniques of social science and education, presented a plan for building the nation on Christian principles, the social teachings of Jesus, translated into social and political action. The nationalist hopes for Canada were linked to the modernist social gospel as a principle for building a truly Christian nation, and for avoiding the problems of urbanization, industrialization and immigration as experienced by the older nations of the United States and England. The social gospel also provided a way of dealing with the threat to the English Protestant vision of Canada posed by immigration. “Canadianizing” immigrants became a part of the social gospel’s mission. As Ralph Connor wrote in the preface to his 1909 novel, *The Foreigner*,

in Western Canada there is to be seen today that most fascinating of all human phenomena, the making of a nation. Out of breeds diverse in traditions, in ideals, in speech, and in manner of life, Saxon and Slav, Teuton, Celt and Gaul, one people is being made. The blood strains of great races will mingle in the blood of a race greater than the greatest of them all.

It would be our wisdom to grip these peoples to us with living

hooks of justice and charity till all lines of national cleavage disappear, and in the Entity of our Canadian national life, and in the Unity of our world-wide Empire, we fuse into a people whose strength will endure the slow shock of time for the honour of our name, for the good of mankind, and for the glory of Almighty God.<sup>5</sup>

Linking theology to nationalist hopes for Canada was an effective selling tactic for the social gospel. At a time when traditional religious authority was being questioned, nationalism, whose positive value few doubted, could be used to make Christianity relevant, current and interesting. The popular success of such best-selling novelists as Nellie McClung (1873-1951) and Ralph Connor (1874-1958) is indicative of the effectiveness of this approach to the social gospel. Both McClung and Connor were proponents of the social gospel and their books served as vehicles for propagating this particular brand of Christianity. They wrote stories of nation-building with a strong emphasis on active social Christianity and social reform. These social gospel novels are valuable historical sources which have too frequently been overlooked by historians. Literary critics, too, seem to have neglected this genre of writing, perhaps because its didactic character frequently overpowers any artistic achievement. But this approach to the social gospel draws attention to an important aspect of the theology, that is, how it was presented to the person in the pew, or to an entire nation of readers. These novels can be used as a source for locating and understanding the social gospel as it was received by the culture at large.

The topic of the relationship of nationalism and the social gospel is an enormous one; there are many interesting themes one can pursue within the topic such as the Christianization / Canadianization relationship mentioned above, or promised land and Kingdom of God theology. This paper focuses on one particular aspect of the relationship which I have found especially interesting: interpretations of the First World War. Traditionally, studies of the social gospel have emphasized the disillusionment suffered by proponents of liberal theology as a result of World War I. The war, it is said, demonstrated the inherently evil nature of humanity. After witnessing such devastation, the optimism and faith in progress espoused by liberal theologians could no longer be sustained. An alternative interpretation maintains that the war simply accelerated or intensified the self-criticism which had begun among liberal theologians

before the war, or shattered a consensus already beginning to fall apart. Whatever the particular relationship between the demise of the social gospel and World War I, many scholars believe that there is a direct relationship and that the social gospel movement ended with World War I.

There are, of course, other interpretations. For example, Roger Hutchinson has argued on the basis of his studies of the United Church of Canada that the social gospel continues within the church well into the late 1930s, and perhaps beyond.<sup>6</sup> Related to this contention that the social gospel survived World War I, I would like to present some evidence for an alternative interpretation of World War I based on the writings of a leading Canadian social gospel figure, Ralph Connor. Surprisingly enough, this interpretation emphasizes, from a nationalist perspective, the positive aspects of World War I. These optimistic understandings of the historical significance of the First World War may provide at least a partial explanation for the ability of a theology built on such optimism and faith in progress to withstand a devastating world event such as the war. Ralph Connor, and to a much more limited extent, Nellie McClung, saw in World War I some positive results, the primary one being the coming of age of Canada as an international power.

This dynamic is evident in a number of Ralph Connor's novels. *To Him that Hath* (1921) is the story of a northern Ontario labour dispute set in 1919. The hero is a young returned soldier, Jack Maitland. A recurrent theme in the novel is the benefit that Jack's wartime experience has brought him in terms of personal development and maturity. He has developed leadership qualities, the ability for teamwork and compassion for others. He has even become a better hockey player. In short, the war has made Jack a "real man" (by Connor's repeatedly enumerated standards of manhood), and Canada, whom Jack represents in microcosm, a real nation. Most interestingly, the war is credited with bringing to Jack (and to all Canadians) a restored faith in the human race and the ability of good to overcome evil. The war also serves as a unifying force for Canadian society. During the labour dispute shared war-time experience gives labour and management a common patriotic ground on which to meet each other and begin negotiations. And, just in case the reader still fails to grasp the moral of the story, Connor provides one or two more blatant statements of his message. The following excerpt is taken from the reflections of the clerk at Jack's father's mine:

Thirty-one years at the desk! And to show for it a home for his wife and himself, a daughter in a home of her own, a son dead for his country, leaving behind him a wife and two lads to carry the name – was it worth while? Yes, by Jove, it was worth it all to be able to give a man like Stephen Wickes to his country. For Stephen Wickes was a fine stalwart lad, a good soldier, steady as a rock, with a patient, cheery courage that nothing could daunt or break.<sup>7</sup>

Another of Ralph Connor's novels which deals with the First World War is *The Major* (1929). It is the story of Larry Gwynne and his Quaker family who move from Ontario to the West in search of a more prosperous life. The novel largely consists of lengthy speeches and dialogues between rather stereotypical characters, who are endlessly debating the Quaker pacifist position, or extolling the glories of Canada, with the plot taking a position secondary in importance to the rhetoric. To summarize the plot: Larry and his sisters grow up; the sisters each get married; Larry goes to university, takes a job in Chicago, wrestles with the question of his participation in World War I, and ultimately returns to Canada to enlist "for the high and holy mission of justice for the wronged and protection for the helpless"<sup>8</sup> and to marry his childhood friend Jane. Instead of riding off into the sunset together, they head off to war together. And Ernest Switzer, the German neighbour, loses his temper frequently, beats his mother and his sister, attempts to assault sexually Larry's sister, Kathleen, tries to destroy the Gwynne family mining business and enlists in the German army.

There are many fascinating themes one could pursue in this novel, if time allowed. But for now, just a sampling must suffice. As in *To Him That Hath*, the war is presented as contributing to the development and maturity of individuals, such as Larry and Jane. Connor is anything but subtle in his presentation as the message, as the following excerpt will illustrate. Larry is visiting the home of Jane and her father in Winnipeg after his lengthy absence in Chicago:

such animation, with such radiant smiles, with such flashing eyes, such keen swift play of thought that Larry could hardly believe his eyes and ears, so immense was the change that had taken place in Jane during these ten months. He could hardly believe, as he glanced across the table at her vivid face, that this brilliant, quick-witted, radiant girl was the quiet demure Jane of his college days, his good

comrade, his chum, whom he had been inclined to patronise. What was this that had come to her? What had released those powers of mind and soul which he could now recognise as being her own, but which he had never seen in action. As in a flash it came to him that this mighty change was due to the terribly energising touch of War. The development which in normal times would have required years to accomplish, under the quickening impulse of this mighty force which in a day was brought to bear upon the life of Canada, this development became a thing of weeks and months only. War had poured its potent energies through her soul and her soul had responded in a new and marvellous efflorescence. Almost over night as it were the flower of an exquisite womanhood, strong, tender, sweet, beautiful, had burst into bloom. Her very face was changed . . . Yet withal there remained the same quick, wise sympathy, quicker, wiser than before war's poignant sorrows had disciplined her heart; the same far-seeing vision that anticipated problems and planned for their solution; the same proud sense of honour that scorned things mean and gave approval to things high.<sup>9</sup>

While Jane matures as a person, Larry matures as a Canadian and a Christian. During the early days of the war, while living in Chicago, Larry comes to a realization of his Canadian identity as distinct from the Americans among whom he lives. As he wrestles with the issue of the responsibilities attached to his Canadian citizenship, he is also confronted with the duties of his citizenship in the Kingdom of God. The war brings him to a realization that Christian love does not always mean pacifism. Sacrificing oneself to protect those who are weaker is the truest expression of Christian love. Larry, by going off to war, is imitating Christ. Connor's description of the farewell scene between Larry and his pacifist Quaker mother leaves nothing to the reader's powers of interpretation: "we must not grudge our offering. No, with willing hearts we must bring our sacrifice." She passed into prayer. "Thou, who didst give thy Son, Thine only Son, to save Thy world, aid me to give mine to save our world to-day."<sup>10</sup>

As in *To Him That Hath*, so in *The Major*, Canada also comes to maturity during the war, following a pattern that parallels the development of the hero and heroine; that is, Canada matures as a nation, as Larry and Jane mature as people, coming to terms with their own responsibilities to their country in the war effort. The government's declaration of war

“rallied and steadied the young nation, touched her pride, and breathed serene resolve into the Canadian heart.”<sup>11</sup> Canada realizes her “Canadianness,” as Larry realizes his “Canadianness.” National unity is strengthened, Connor writes, as Canadians from all regions, classes and ethnic backgrounds wholeheartedly enter into the war effort. And, for the first time, a genuine patriotic Canadian spirit surfaces:

A completely new set of emotions filled their hearts, a new sense of exultation, a new pride in that great British Navy which hitherto had been a mere word in a history book, or in a song . . . Some of them were carrying little Union Jacks in their hands. For the first time in their lives that flag became a thing of pride and power, a thing to shout for. It stood for something invisible but very real . . . Hitherto they had taken that flag for granted. They had hung it out of their windows on Empire Day or on Dominion Day as a patriotic symbol, but few of them would have confessed, except in a half-shamed, apologetic way, to any thrill at the flapping of that bit of bunting. They had shrunk from a display of patriotic emotion. They were not like their American cousins, who were ever ready to rave over Old Glory. That sort of emotional display was un-Canadian, un-British. But to-day somehow the flag had changed. The flag had changed because it fluttered in a new world, a new light fell upon it, the light of battle. It was a war flag to-day. Men were fighting under it, were fighting for all it represented, were dying under its folds, and proudly and gladly.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, Connor tells us, Canada comes to a realization of the real meaning of Christian faith, as did Larry, as the onset of the war brought people back to the church:

On the first Sunday of the war the churches of Winnipeg were full to the doors. Men, whose attendance was more or less desultory and to a certain extent dependent upon the weather, were conscious of an impulse to go to church. War had shaken the foundations of their world, and men were thinking their deepest thoughts and facing realities too often neglected or minimised. “I have been thinking of God these days,” said a man to Mr. Murray as they walked home from business on Saturday, and there were many like him in Canada in those first days of August. Without being able definitely to define it there was in the hearts of men a sense of need of some clear word of



guiding, and in this crisis of Canadian history the churches of Canada were not found wanting.<sup>13</sup>

The enormous success of Ralph Connor's novels would seem to indicate that there is some significant degree of resonance between Connor's views of the war and those of the general reading public in Canada. Indeed, Connor's interpretation of World War I is not unique. Other Canadian writers of the period echo many of Connor's themes and attitudes. It seems only fitting, given the location of our conference, that I should offer as an example, Lucy Maud Montgomery. In her journal we find the following echo of Connor's words regarding the war and its implications for the church: "oh, we all come back to God in these times of soul-sifting – humbly, starkly, unconditionally. Perhaps this is why this awful war has come. The world was forgetting God. It had to be reminded of Him."<sup>14</sup>

Montgomery's novel *Rilla of Ingleside*, part of the second generation of the Anne series, is set during World War I and largely drawn from Montgomery's own war-time journal entries. Montgomery presents the same pattern apparent in Connor's work, the maturity story. Her heroine, Rilla, a rather frivolous, silly girl becomes a responsible, independent and mature woman through war-time experience. Another theme of this novel is the new-found unity in Canadian society. Nellie McClung also testifies to the effectiveness of World War I in enabling Canadians to disregard traditional social barriers. She tells the story of her journey by car to speak at a Red Cross meeting, accompanied by three other women speakers. They lost their way and sought directions from an Indian, who offered to guide them, riding on the running board of their car. As they talked, the women discovered that the Indian man had a son who was fighting in the war.

Then suddenly it occurred to the whole four of us that the running board of a car was not the place where this man should be riding. We stopped the car, and we found room for him in the back seat by putting one big valise on the front. He was no longer a plain Indian with torn clothes and a dirty face. He was one of us – and one who had made a big contribution. We were all citizens of the British Empire; we were all of the great family of the Next-of-Kin, and, after all, what is a dirty face and a torn coat?<sup>15</sup>

McClung and Montgomery also share Connor's solid belief in the immanence of God acting in human history. All three writers firmly believe that God is on the side of the Canadians – Montgomery even refers to the failed German siege of Paris as the "finger of God" holding back the enemy.<sup>16</sup>

A key element of these interpretations of World War I is the conviction that this is truly the war to end all wars, the great triumph of good over evil which will bring the dawning of the new age, perhaps even the Kingdom of God on earth. Nellie McClung predicts that

there will . . . come out of the war a new idea of empire, clear as the sunlight and wide as the earth! We will cease to think locally and to boast of a narrow patriotism . . . Our citizenship will be world citizenship – our neighbour will be every man, of whatever race, or creed, or color, or tongue . . . There will be no war lords with the iniquitous power to plunge innocent and inoffensive people into warfare! Women are going to come into their own. We will hear less about woman's unfitness for public life. Man's pride in masculine statecraft has received a jolt, and they are not so sure of things as they were four months ago! There can be no true democracy where one-half of the race is ignored, and this war, if it has any significance at all, is a war against autocracy. The mother's point of view will be represented in the days to come – the good days to which our longing eyes are turning in hope and faith.<sup>17</sup>

In McClung's position, we see a somewhat more ambivalent interpretation of World War I. While McClung recognizes the necessity of the war and presents it as a noble cause she is sharply critical of the very idea of war, and doubtful about the notion of an unqualified victory. This brings me to question, then, Connor's seemingly absolute confidence in, and repeated insistence on, the ultimate triumph of good over evil that was signified by the Allied victory in World War I. It is almost as if he "doth protest too much." To what extent is Connor attempting to reconcile himself and his readers to the incredible losses of human life sustained by Canada, and the other nations who fought the war? To represent the war as a "sacred cause" in which Canadians were assured that "[t]he God of righteousness was still ruling in his world, and righteousness would be done"<sup>18</sup> was perhaps a way of making the horrible realities more bearable.

Perhaps then it is not World War I itself that causes the social gospellers such as Connor to doubt the adequacy of liberal theology, but an unavoidable confrontation with the Great War's failure in the form of the rise of Hitler in the 1930s and the beginning of World War II.

### ***Endnotes***

1. Ralph Connor, *The Foreigner: A Tale of Saskatchewan* (Toronto: The Westminster Co., 1909), preface.
2. William R. Hutchison, *American Protestant Thought: The Liberal Era* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1986).
3. N.K. Clifford, "His Dominion: A Vision in Crisis," *Sciences Religieuses / Studies in Religion* 2, No. 4 (Spring 1973): 315-326.
4. Nellie L. McClung, "Address to the Fifth Ecumenical Methodist Conference," in *Proceedings of the Fifth Ecumenical Methodist Conference Held in the Central Hall, Westminster, London, September 6-16, 1921*, intro. Rev. Dr. Workman and Dr. H.K. Carroll (Toronto: The Methodist Book and Publishing House, [n.d.]), p. 260.
5. Connor, *The Foreigner*, preface.
6. Roger Hutchinson, "The Canadian Social Gospel in the Context of Christian Social Ethics," in *The Social Gospel in Canada*, ed. Richard Allen (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1975), p. 286-316.
7. Ralph Connor, *To Him That Hath: A Novel of the West Today* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1921), p. 42.
8. Ralph Connor, *The Major* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1929), p. 366.
9. Connor, *The Major*, pp. 377-378.
10. Connor, *The Major*, p. 372.
11. Connor, *The Major*, p. 346.
12. Connor, *The Major*, pp. 322-323.
13. Connor, *The Major*, pp. 333-334.
14. Lucy Maud Montgomery, *Selected Journals of Lucy Maud Montgomery*, eds. Mary Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988), II:154.

15. Nellie L. McClung, *The Stream Runs Fast* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1946), p. 158.
16. Montgomery, *Journals*, II:158.
17. Nellie McClung, "What Twelve Canadian Women Hope to See as the Outcome of the War," *Everywoman's World* III, No. 4 (April 1915): 33.
18. Connor, *The Major*, p. 312.