

THE WESLEYAN MISSION TO THE HBC TERRITORIES .. 1840-54

by

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The British Wesleyans, serving as Chaplains to the Company and missionaries to the Indians, contributed a brief but significant chapter in the Canadian story. Their work was obscured by some of the difficulties and unhappiness that developed, the major documents were buried in secret files for many years, and since the men all returned to England, there were few reminders in the Canadian public.

They were the first missionaries to gain access to the western prairies, made a major cultural contact with the native peoples, and initiated the pattern of church work which would prevail for 35 years. They created the first visual form of the Cree language, an ingenious, simple device so that native peoples could very quickly read and write in their own language. They experienced a unique and difficult partnership of monopoly business with Evangelical Church demonstrating some advantages and many problems. And finally, they marked a transition from the assumptions of the British-related colony towards the independent Canadian nation.

WHY DID IT HAPPEN?

The Roman Catholic Church was solidly established at the Red River and made repeated applications to move westward into the Territories, but were consistently refused, including a refusal in February of 1840.

The Church of England was solidly established at the Red River, placed Henry Budd at the Pas in 1840, had plans for Cumberland House and Fort Ellice and to establish a Bishopric of Rupert's Land. But the generous endowment in the Leith Estate was disputed and held in Chancery for 9 years.

But to the great exasperation of authorities in both Churches, the Honourable Company negotiated an agreement with the Wesleyans, and took missionaries right past the waiting churches to initiate work in the Territories. Three freshly ordained young Englishmen were assigned to posts at Fort Edmonton, Fort Norway House, and at Moose Factory. A Superintendent and two native assistants were soon added. Why 1840? and why Wesleyans?

1. The Methodists of Upper Canada were pressing westward having heard "that at Red River they are coming six hundred miles enquiring for missionaries." Methodism in Canada, Vol i, p.416. James Evans, Thomas Hurlburt, and Peter Jacobs were sent on an extensive tour along the North shore of Lake Superior in 1838. Evans met Governor Simpson on May 18, 1839 and reports,

"he proposes an arrangement with the Committee in London as to our supplies and assures me that the whole country is open to our Missionaries. To God be the glory."

- Evans Papers, UWO.

2. The Company badly needed an improvement in public relations.

"The red men of the far west have suffered as much as, if not more than, any other class belonging to the coloured portion of the human family, from the conduct of their white brethren towards them. The loss of those extensive territorial possessions, of which they were at one period the undisputed occupants, is the least in that catalogue of evils of which they have been the uncomplaining victims."

- Guardian Vol X11, No. 28, May 5.41, page 110.

"A respectable and very influential society has been formed in England, of which the Royal Family are members, called the Society for the Protection of the Aboriginal Inhabitants of the British Dominions ... the day is not far distant when oppression shall cease."

- James Evans, July 4, 1837, quoted in McLean: page 107.

"The number of persons of colour attracts the notice of every stranger - not Indians, for these unhappy, persecuted, and deeply injured beings are exhibited as curiosities in New York."

- Robert Rundle Journals, April 12, 1840.

"You can have no idea of the popularity we have gained by patronizing this sect, the most zealous, well-regulated and well-conducted in England, and from every pulpit throughout the United Kingdom where their mission is established we have been spoken of in the most gratifying manner."

- Simpson to Donald Ross, from London, Dec. 2.40
Ross Papers, B.C. Archives AE R73 La5.

3. The English Company was resisting French power over a broad front, and feared the development of Roman Catholic Missions as an expression of that power. Governor Simpson wrote from Hawaii to Donald Ross as follows:

"I observed with concern that the Roman Catholic missionaries are gaining much influence ... it appeared to me that we should be empowered to communicate on behalf of the Government with some of the principal religious sects of England, and to encourage their sending missionaries to the Islands who would cooperate with the American missionaries as the field is too extensive to be occupied advantageously by them alone in opposition to the Roman Catholics backed and supported as they are by the French Government. By having the cooperation of such a sect as the Wesleyans a powerful influence would be raised in England, which would direct and call forth the interference of not only the British Government but of the British public in the event of such conduct as that which was recently exercised at these Islands."

4. There was considerable personal concern amongst the Company officials for the well-being of the native peoples. Donald Ross, Chief Factor at Norway House, J. Edward Harriott of Rocky Mountain House, and many others had urged a more concerned policy and welcomed the prospect of missionaries.

In any case, Governor Simpson presented the request of James Evans to the Governor and Committee of the Hudson's Bay, and after suitable interviews and negotiations, Simpson reported to the Rev. Dr. Alder of the Wesleyan Society,

"I beg leave to state the substance of the arrangement as I understand it, viz. - that the Mission shall appoint three of their missionaries to proceed to the Company's Territories this ensuing summer; one of these gentlemen to be located or stationed at Moose Factory, another at or in the neighborhood of Norway House, and the third at one of the establishments on the Saskatchewan River. The salaries of those gentlemen to be paid by the Society, and the expense of conveying them from Canada to the Interior and of their Board and Lodging in the country to be defrayed by the Company."

- HBC Archives D 4/25.

The Society then proceeded to recruit their missionaries in England, apparently overlooking entirely the Upper Canada initiative where both Evans and Thomas Hurlburt were ready to move west. The British Society selected Messrs. George Barnley, William Mason, and Robert T. Rundle, ordained them on March 8, and on March 16, 1840 shipped them under sail from Liverpool to New York and thence to Montreal. But in the meantime, by some agreement not presently known, a decision was made to add James Evans as Superintendent. After the tour of 1838-39 and his interview with the Governor, he had been settled in Guelph. On April 7 he was summoned to Toronto where he learned that he was to join the Brigade in Montreal by May 3. He hastened home to Guelph, packed up the requirements for a prolonged stay in the West with his wife and grown daughter, and made his way to Montreal by April 24 - only to discover that the Brigade had left the day before because of an early breakup of river ice. The Brigade

expected to meet Evans in Sault Ste. Marie. So he had to make private plans for travel requiring two months to reach Norway House where Rundle had been waiting to meet him before continuing to Fort Edmonton. Late decisions, poor planning, and faulty communications gave the Mission a costly and poor start.

However, by fall the four men were settled into their posts - Rundle at Fort Edmonton, Evans at Norway House, Mason at Lac la Pluie, and Barnley at Moose Factory. Each of these men is deserving of deeper study than has thus far been done, and of more attention than can be provided in this paper.

George Barnley has had the least attention and is generally not well-known. He won the respect and support of the Company and of the natives in his area, a well-intentioned hard-working man working well with others and sharing in the educational pursuits under Evans' inspiration.

"While at Ruperts House I spent a great deal of time in trying to cast type; and at the vice, carpenter's bench and ladle of molten lead, wrought sometimes hard enough to produce a good deal of fatigue. But my ink, not being sufficiently fine - the black employed was soot from the funnels - together with the existence of many defects in the type itself, rendered my first attempts to print abortive, though the hope of eventual success is far from being abandoned. In the meantime I have cut wooden blocks, and from them some impressions have been taken off, which are perhaps preferable for elementary use to those which would have been produced by lead, in consequence of the letters being much larger."

- Sept. 23, 1843, Missionary Notices

Barnley's career changed when he was given leave to return home to be married. Rundle had been refused the same request in 1842, and Mason had married Miss Sophia Thomas of Red River, so Barnley was the only one to attempt to introduce a European bride into the Company Fort. They lived in Company rooms though a house was eventually

promised them. There was neither place nor function for a missionary wife in the congested and highly structured Fort community, nor was there any relief for her loneliness. Barnley was no longer free to make the long journeys to Ruperts House and Whale River or to native encampments and she could not accompany him. Resentments and tensions built up until in 1847 the Barnleys returned to England and released their complaints to the public press.

Rundle at Fort Edmonton is a more familiar name since it is carried by one of the more famous mountains known to tourists, and since the settlements of Central Alberta offer more resources for research. His mission was more scattered and developed more slowly. There was no native community in or near Edmonton, and he met many who came to trade and to visit at the Fort, his main mission required continuous and extensive travel. Nor did he attempt to share in the printing. He did, however, have the great advantage of Chief Trader J. E. Harriott's competence in Cree, and warm support of the Protestant Mission. In November of 1841 Fort Edmonton was host to a meeting of profound importance. Harriott brought his knowledge of Cree and of the Scriptures, James Evans brought his decade of experience in native languages and in particular the newly-created writing form known now as the Cree Syllabic, Rundle brought his eagerness to learn. For three weeks all attention was given to perfecting the language of worship in the Cree language. Rundle learned the Syllabic form quickly, and worked for the rest of his years to learn the Cree language itself. But even before he knew the language, he could use the symbolic form of the Cree syllables so that natives could read. Since printing was not available in quantity for some time, he prepared handwritten copies of what he called "Sunday Books," Scripture texts, hymns and prayers so that each enquirer might have his own set of words to take home and share with his camp. So effective was this learning process that within two years he could exchange notes with leaders such as Maskepetoon and interpreters were no longer necessary - or rather, the native communities provided their own.

Rundle seems to have had an uncomplicated philosophy of life - he believed that the love of God was the essential corrective to the need of man, and that native persons were as needy, and as deserving, as any other. Because he was not highly educated, claimed no personal accomplishments, and had little talent for leadership or organization, he came to depend upon the leadership and talents of the native communities. And they responded to him. Maskepetoon, James and John Wetaskimakan, Makokis, Chagta (Master Bow), Eagle Man, Pacaskahas and many others took the initiative in proposing mission sites, planning visits and tours. A form of native church was evolving which lasted several years beyond his departure.

The excessive hunting for furs had seriously depleted the animals on which native people depended for food. Hunger and starvation became familiar scenes to Rundle, and he longed to share the Good News of the seed, and of storing food. In his first year he began planning a settlement, but neither Company nor Society provided the support or the necessary consent. He could not know what is now apparent to us that the growing tension between his Superintendent James Evans and Sir George Simpson was steadily restricting the mission effort. There would be no expansion, no new support, no new ideas, until the crisis reached the breaking point in 1845 when the Company requested the recall of James Evans, and in 1846 when Evans did return to England for questioning and then died suddenly of heart attack. With the Superintendent gone, the Company readily agreed to grant passage to Ben Sinclair to travel from Norway House to Edmonton as an assistant in the new settlement.

The opportunity came almost too late for Rundle, however, for his left wrist was broken before Sinclair arrived. However, in spite of being incapacitated they explored the proposed site for settlement in consultation with native people, moved from Battle Lake to Pigeon Lake, had prayers in the new house, cultivated the ground for the first time, planted seeds, organized the first official Class Meeting,

wrote out yet another Sunday Book. Then back to Edmonton to build a bateaux, gather up a supply of food, and on July 4 Rundle, James Wetaskimakan and George Makokis pushed off into the currents of the North Saskatchewan for a most arduous trip to Norway House. He was entitled to free passage on the Company Brigade which left at the end of May but declined the opportunity because the Brigade travelled on the Sabbath. For 8 years he had accepted gratefully the support of the Company but had never become a dependent Company man; he frequently writes of his own weakness and inadequacy but still had the strength to follow his own convictions.

The intentions of the British Mission were clearly expressed by Rundle near the Rockies, and by Barnley near the Bay, but the central drama and the critical relationships were being shaped at Norway House where the Evans family, the Mason family and native assistants lived in daily contact with Chief Factor Donald Ross who in turn corresponded regularly with the Governor Sir George Simpson. The copious correspondence of each of these parties now collected, along with the gossipy letters of Letitia Hargreave of York Factory present an amazing and complicated interplay of mission and Company.

THE COMPANY SIDE -

The original agreement anticipated one missionary at each of three posts, with the possibility of marriage in which case a house would be provided. Now at Norway House there were three adult Evans, joined by William and Sophie Mason, and Henry Steinhauer - all dependent upon the Company supplies. Donald Ross who had to deal with the problem urged a new policy of a set payment per year to avoid the hassle of trying to control supplies. Mrs. Evans attracted most of the criticism as reported by Letitia Hargreave -

"May 14, 1842 ... When Mrs. Evans passed Oxford House last fall on her way home, she had the cool impudence to plunder Mr. Clouston's garden & carried off all the pease the boy was chuckling over ... carried all off in her boat, and Evans lifted one of the Company canoes there being no one but a half-breed guide to protest it."

"Sept. 10, 1843 ... Mrs. Ross's hatred of the parson's wife has reached a pitch. Mr. Gladman declares that she consumed between 30 & 40 kegs of butter, each weighing 56 lbs, the flour was even worse."

The Company felt that Evans was too anxious to intrude in Company business, was unreasonable in his demands re Sabbath travel, had gained tyrannous control over native behaviour, was encouraging them to trade outside the Company. The regular reports from Donald Ross provide the details until the crisis in May 1845.

"Our Reverend neighbor here has at length shown the cloven hoof and unmasked himself ... I am quite aware that if Mr. Evans' career be not speedily checked, the trade of this valuable section of the country will soon be lost to the Company Last fall we had before us the prospect of passing a happy peaceable and contented season, the affairs of the Company and the Mission bearing a fair promise of success and prosperity each in perfect harmony with the other when this man like an evil genius came back to disturb our repose after having destroyed the life of a fellow creature (Thomas Hassels) I do not say wilfully, but with a degree of fatal forgetfulness and careless use of firearms almost amounting to criminality."

- HBC Archives D 5/14

In June 1845 Governor Simpson wrote to request the Missionary Society to remove Mr. Evans. In June 1846 Evans received the invitation to come to England to talk things over and to consider resuming his old post at St. Clair in Upper Canada.

THE MISSION SIDE -

Mr. Evans in his reports could document with considerable satisfaction the rapid growth of the Indian Village, Rossville, the thriving school, the growing project of translation and printing though the long delay in delivering the new press from England was a severe disappointment. He had a real dilemma as Superintendent in that he could not gain permission to open new positions. Mason's ministry at Lac la Pluie did not develop satisfactorily, and there was a promising opening at La Ronge, but the Company would not allow

it. The Masons then moved into Norway House, rather than into Rossville, for the Evans family had been moved out of the Fort into the village.

He had some grievances too against the Company in their treatment of Indian women discarded when the Gentlemen went home, in their unjustifiably high prices for supplies on which the natives depended. Did every fur belong to the Company? When an independent merchant can provide flour at a tenth of the price, should he honour the Company monopoly? These questions never did get properly discussed, however, for the abundant rumours of Evans' sexual indiscretions burst into the open in February of 1846 resulting in a Church Trial under the Wesleyan Discipline conducted by Mr. Mason. Since the complex and emotional issues of that experience were the main topic of my paper appearing in The Bulletin Number 26, 1977, I will not discuss them now except to remark that Mason declared him not guilty but imprudent, and sent the papers to the Society for their judgment. The invitation to visit England was providential to Evans since he could now discuss the whole matter with the Secretaries. While the letters and reports were still being added to the original trial papers, Mr. Evans died suddenly of heart attack, November 1846. The Secretaries agreed with Mason's verdict of not guilty but 'unseemly and improper'.

And the gathering issues of conflict with the Company were never presented nor discussed. Not unnaturally the men of the Company each commented on the misfortune that such a rascal should have been sent on such a worthy service. Then the matter was buried in Mission files and Company files for a century.

Twenty years later, April 3, 1865, a man named Richard Jones of London, England, wrote to the Rev. J. Carroll,

"... It affords me much satisfaction to see that you are inclined to do what you can to rescue the good name of one of the most successful missionaries we ever had among the Indians from the grasp of the slanderer and from being forgotten by the Church of his choice."

- Evans Papers UWO #242

About the same time, Ephraim Evans, brother of James, also wrote to the Rev. J. Carroll as follows:

"As regards the difficulty to which you allude, that it has been hinted that he fell into disgrace &c., you have been misinformed in supposing that the HB Co were prominent, if at all connected with the attempt to blast his reputation. At least I have no evidence of that. He was antagonism (sic) with their policy on the Sabbath question, and other matters, but I have reason to believe that the attempt to injure his moral character was made by an assistant in the Mission who soon after left our work, and became a Puseyite ultra."

- Evans Papers UWO #243

In August 1865, Secretary Elijah Hoole informed Mr. Carroll,

"(re Memoir of the late James Evans) ... I regret to state that the conclusion to which we have come is that we cannot encourage the enterprise, but must advise you to relinquish it."

- Evans Papers UWO #244

The Canadian Methodists could never entirely relinquish the idea of a suitable Memoir. He was known in Ontario, his brother Ephraim continued in the Ministry of the Church for many years, and his crowning achievement, the Cree Syllabic was being more broadly used every year. In 1890 John McLean wrote his book "James Evans, Inventor of the Syllabic System" but of course had no access to files of either Mission Society or the Hudson's Bay Company. In 1900 Egerton Young wrote "The Apostle of the North" drawing largely

on his own experience of the Mission field to interpret the sketchy records he had of Evans. In 1966 Mrs. Shipley wrote "The James Evans Story," weaving a golden blanket to adorn a man she truly and properly admired. But Elijah Hoole was right - the complete file does not make a golden blanket. They do reveal a zealous man of genius proportions who did create the Cree Syllabic, and did all the things the Church remembers proudly, but who was also beset by his own weaknesses, struck by the tragedy of shooting his friend and interpreter, suffering chronic illness culminating in a heart attack at the age of 45 years. A sad story of a great man.

And William Mason - the Puseyite ultra? The anger of the Methodists is understandable for they had only sparse and incorrect information. The verdict of Ephraim Evans was widely believed that Mason was the slanderer, and that he soon after left the Methodist Church taking the manuscripts with him. The Methodists were indignant when the first Cree Bible carried only the name of Mr. Mason, and when in 1877 Edward Barrass saw "in the Guardian a week ago, an article respecting the fraudulent conduct of a clergyman in declaring that he originated the Syllabic character for the Indians in the Northwest."/UWO. #246. Nor were they satisfied when Archdeacon Kirby wrote,

"Whilst in charge of the Mission at Norway House, Mr. Mason married a daughter of one of the Hudson's Bay Co's officers a half-caste lady thoroughly well educated ... She longed to see the entire Bible printed for their use, and she with her husband began. Possibly at that time Messrs. Steinhauer and Sinclair may have helped them ... but it could not have been to any extent as they were not educated men. Anyway the translation was not completed until long after Mr. Mason had left the Wesleyans and had taken charge of the York Mission I am not aware that the Wesleyans have ever translated the Bible into the Cree language."

- United Church Archives, John McLean Notes.

As the controversy developed, Mr. Mason was prompted to write from England, December 30, 1886,

"In the translation of the Bible into the Cree language I was assisted by Henry Steinhauer and John Sinclair ... The final revision was the joint work of myself and my wife. I never claimed to be the inventor of the Cree Syllabary that honour belongs to the Rev. James Evans."

- McLean Notes, U.Ch. Archives

The correspondence of the time reveals a much more responsible Mason than the Canadian Methodists talked about. He had been raised in the Church of England, accepted ordination by the Wesleyan Society in 1840, stationed at Lac la Pluie until 1844. In the meantime, James Evans had invented the Cree Syllabic and initiated the printing and translation program. Both Mason and Steinhauer were moved into Rossville to share in the work. Mrs. Mason was an admirable helpmate but heavily burdened in bearing and raising their young family. The printing press did not finally arrive until 1845 so that only limited editions of hymns and scriptural portions could be produced.

In 1846 Mr. Evans was removed to England following a most unpleasant season of rumour and trial. Mason remained at Norway House to re-assemble the Mission and develop the printing program. For 8 years he reported and served faithfully as a Methodist responsible to the Wesleyan Missionary Society.

When Bishop Anderson arrived in the Red River in 1849, Mason was interested and attracted. The Bishop was not impressed with the Cree Syllabic at first, but after witnessing its use, Mason reported to the Secretaries that the Bishop had approved its use, and their missionaries used it widely.

In 1854 the Wesleyan Society transferred the Western missions to the Canada Conference. Mason had advised, and Bishop Anderson had requested that the western Missions be placed under his care.

It seemed incredible that the great barrier of rocks and trees and lakes separating Toronto from the western territories could be effectively bridged. But the Methodists were ready to take a step towards a Canadian nation so Mason accepted the invitation to return to the Church of England. He had been a Methodist Minister for 14 years, and most of that time in charge of their printing. His letter of resignation is full of gratitude for his experience, and respect for the Church in which he had served.

Four years later, the Masons returned to England. The New Testament appeared in 1859, and the entire Bible in 1861. Methodist Mason and Church of England Mason had been working on it for at least 15 years.

It is unfortunate that it should have become a matter of denominational rivalry. When Evans was on the 1838 tour, he wrote of the need,

"We want a translation of the Scriptures ... that one version approved by all denominations, would be preferable to several. (We need) ... a uniform orthography. Could not the Bible Society take this in hand?"

- Christian Guardian, May 15, 1839

He made his contribution to the vision, and would have welcomed the contributions of others.