

The Canadian Society of Church History--a twenty-year retrospect

by

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* The substance of this paper is drawn primarily from the minutes of the Society, and also from the records of the secretaries and treasurers. The complete records of the Society have recently been deposited on indefinite loan with the United Church Archives (Victoria College, University of Toronto) and are available there to interested researchers.

Although our sister societies, the Canadian Catholic Historical Association and the Canadian Church Historical Society, were respectively a quarter-century and a decade old when our Society was inaugurated, the intention for this society was "to promote the study of Canadian Church History" outside of any denominational context. The idea for such a society seems to have originated with the late Dr. Lorne Pierce, who as editor-in-chief of Ryerson Press had published H.H. ("Nick") Walsh's The Christian Church in Canada in 1956. The dust-jacket of that book announced that the volume was "a pioneer attempt to give a complete view of the religious development of Canada, based upon research into original sources." This attempt, as Walsh and Pierce knew, was beyond the capabilities of any single author at that stage in Canadian religious historiography, but Pierce had in mind the production of a larger and more definitive work in three volumes to mark Confederation's centenary in 1967. With this larger project in view the two men fostered the formation of this Society, to learn

precisely who was doing what in the field of Canadian church history.

Together these two godfathers asked Arthur Reynolds, then Archivist/Historian of the United Church, to convene a meeting of the history professors of the larger Protestant theological colleges of Toronto in February, 1959. Principal Kenneth Causland of Emmanuel, Tom Millman of Wycliffe, Allan Farris of Knox and Lyndon Smith of Trinity were invited but only Tom Millman could attend. Millman, Pierce and Walsh, with Reynolds as secretary, agreed that the need for publication of scholarly Canadian works in the field required the formation of a church history society and interested persons should be invited to meet in April that year when Emmanuel College was hosting a gathering of church historians.

The April meeting actually took place under the aegis of Knox College--seventeen persons of the thirty-six invited were present. These founders of our Society accepted a proposal to form such a body, named Walsh as president, Reynolds as Secretary-Treasurer, and George W. Brown, Allan Farris and Tom Millman as executive members. They also asked each participant to contribute one dollar to defray expenses--only \$16 was collected--and agreed to request Abbe Arthur Maheux to join their organization. The honour roll of founding fathers includes, as well as those already mentioned, Gaylord Albaugh, George Boyle, C.R. Cronmiller,

Earl B. Eddy, Goldwin French, J.L.H. Henderson, Henry Hill, Keith Markell, R.K. Naylor, D.M. Schurman, W.E.L. Smith, Neil G. Smith, and George Spragge. Obviously the churches and seminaries were heavily represented--only French and Schurman were connected exclusively to university departments of history, with George Brown of the Dictionary of Canadian Biography and Spragge, the archivist of Ontario, being the other two laymen.

The executive met in September to examine a draft constitution and plan a day-long meeting of the Society. A letter from Abbé Maheux conveyed his desire to support the Society (although there is no record that he ever joined), and a letter from D.M. Schurman suggested the Society should approach English-speaking as well as French-speaking Catholics, a suggestion accepted because as the minutes noted, "it is our desire to open our Society to all who are seriously interested in Church History." The first regular meeting of the Society was planned for the following May, to coincide with those of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies and the Canadian Theological Society. The executive ended its session by deciding to send its minutes and an offprint from the Canadian Journal of Theology of Walsh's paper, "The Challenge of Canadian Church History to its Historians", to all persons on the mailing list.

The first regular meeting, held in Toronto, attracted twenty-six persons including two more laymen, four members

of the working clergy and two professors of theology. Another twenty persons sent regrets. The draft constitution was discussed and adopted with one amendment; the Treasurer reported a balance on hand of \$3.72; and then the delivering of papers began. The presidential address was followed by reports from some ten persons on religious archival resources in Canada. An evening session was addressed by John Grant, Pierce's successor at Ryerson Press, on "Indigenization in Canadian Church History." Originally the meeting had been planned for one day only, but instead the historians were at it again the next morning, hearing addresses from Goldwin Smith on Canadian Methodism and from George Brown on his great enthusiasm, the DCB. When elections followed, Lorne Pierce was chosen honorary president, Walsh president, and Waldo Smith vice-president, while Clyde Smith assumed the care of the modest treasury. In the full executive of seven members no less than three belonged to the ubiquitous Clan Smith, the third one being Neil Smith of Knox College.

The annual fee for membership had been set at \$3--it remained unchanged until 1976!--but historically there were few takers for the exalted ranks of sustaining member at \$10 or life member at \$100. When the next annual meeting was held the Treasurer announced that he had in hand the princely sum of \$137.10. Meanwhile progress was being made in other directions. President Walsh reported to the Executive

a plan to integrate the meetings of the three learned religious societies and an offer from McGill University's Faculty of Divinity to pay for the meals (breakfast excepted) and accomodation of all participants. Apparently the executive was unanimous in accepting this generous offer; however the announcement of the programme in February carried the warning that "accomodation for ladies is not available in the Colleges, but members wishing to be accompanied by their wives" could have a double room at the Berkeley Hotel for \$11.00.

At McGill the three societies met jointly to hear the presidential addresses, thus assuring the speaker of a larger audience than his own society alone could provide. In the historical society meetings the possibility of affiliating with the Canadian Historical Association and other bodies was discussed and rejected in favour of the existing arrangement with the CSBS and the CTS. Perhaps the nostalgia of hindsight colours one's impressions, but certainly those meetings with the other two groups were particularly satisfying. The clientele was small enough that one could even make friends, and the interdisciplinary atmosphere seemed to provide a mental stimulus for all. With the subsequent decision to join with the Learned Societies, meeting a fortnight later than was then our custom, these personal contacts were first weakened and then broken entirely by the scheduling of meetings for the three religious societies at differ-

ent times. The joint presidential papers became less frequently attended even before the staggered scheduling, and the death blow may well have been delivered at St. John's in 1971 when the historians collectively and happily lingered very long over lobster dinner and wine.

Only fourteen persons attended the McGill meetings in 1961, the beginning of a regrettable trend, although membership in the Society continued to climb slowly. Two other developments at that meeting are worth noting--the first was the inclusion of papers on other than Canadian topics, and the second the use of a general theme to connect not merely the historical papers but those of the two other societies as well. Other traditions were also being established for the young society--the meetings now stretched to three very full days, and the addresses, hitherto largely by Protestants, for Protestants and about Protestants, included a paper by Fr. G.E. Giguère on "The Roman Catholic Tradition in Canada."

It was at the McGill meeting that the final arrangements for Pierce's three-volume history were made, as John Moir replaced George Boyle in the roster of authors and John Grant agreed reluctantly to edit the series. Also set on foot, as an example of aroused Canadian Nationalism in the face of American historical insensitivity, was a project to outline on a denominational basis the traditions which make up the Canadian religious experience. This provided

the title to the small book of essays also edited by John Grant, published in 1963. At these meetings the Society elected Neil Smith its second president and regretted the passing of Canon Kelley, archivist of the Anglican General Synod.

The new executive met twice that year (its meetings were still opened with prayer, a practice that disappeared early in the general meetings) to plan its session for Toronto in 1962. Among the notable events of that meeting were the glad tidings that the coffers of our treasury now contained over \$200. For the next seven years this sum remained fairly constant, but suddenly in 1971 our balance jumped to over \$450. Two years after that it passed the \$600 mark and in 1975 nearly touched one thousand dollars. Since then, however, our status as non-profit organization has been assured by a sudden decline to a mere \$400, despite our belated decision to recognize the real presence of inflation and raise the fee to \$5. In 1962, however, overwhelmed by this heady new of affluence, the Society granted \$25 to the Canadian Journal of Theology, a practice continued with fair regularity until the unfortunate demise of that excellent periodical. Only twelve persons attended those sessions at Wycliffe College during a spell of oppresively hot humid weather, but the proximity to beer dispenserries along Bloor Street brought some relief in the evenings. Everyone of the six papers read in 1962 was on a Canadian topic.

Early in the life of our Society the Canadian Journal of Theology had expressed interest in publishing more articles on church history and after 1960 it became in a large measure the publishing vehicle for our members. John Grant served on the directorate of the Journal for several years, and normally several historians were on its Editorial Advisory Committee, but the Journal for the most part relied more heavily for personnel on the CSBS and the CTS. Throughout its fifteen years the CJT carried historical articles in most issues and a high percentage of these had originally been presented to our annual meetings. With few exceptions the presidential address to the Society found its way into the pages of the Journal, and during the early sixties off-prints of articles which had originated as papers in the Society's programme were regularly distributed to the membership.

The 1963 meetings were at Waterloo Lutheran University under the umbrella theme of "God and the Secular World." The history programme included one paper on the English-speaking Catholic church in Canada and one on late medieval England. A previous proposal to develop a single society for religious studies had been examined and rejected by a tripartite committee, in large part because the historians were satisfied with the existing arrangements. The Waterloo meetings saw the replacement of Neil Smith as president by Waldo Smith. The last of the unrelated Smith triumvirate, Clyde, passed the office of Treasurer to John Moir. At this

point in time the executive appears to have ceased meeting, and all planning and decision-making was conducted by mail. The three members-at-large henceforth had nothing to do but bask in the honour of their prestigious appointment, although there were occasional complaints from newly elected members-at-large, unacquainted with the rules of this academic game, that they were being underemployed.

By now two facts about the presidency has become established. The vice-president was given the apostolic right "cum successione" on his election, but he (we have still not found ourselves a female president!) had to give presidential papers in both of his presidential years. Waldo Smith complained of this burden during his incumbency, but the two-year term was not abandoned until his successor, Pierre Letellier, had served his time in 1966. Since then no president has served more than one year, which may reflect the membership's opinion of its presidents, or more likely a presidential desire to see others suffer in their turn.

From Waterloo the meetings moved to Kingston in 1964 where the theme was "Calvin and His Significance", but of the four historical papers presented, only that of Allan Farris concerned the confernece theme. Our Society noted with regret the passing of its second honorary president, George Brown, and elected the Venerable N.K. Naylor in his place. The records suggest that this position was considered a life appointment for Naylor was succeed-

ed at his death in 1968 by the beloved Tom Boon, upon whose death in 1972 the post was left vacant for no stated reason. The fact that no honorary president lived beyond his fourth year in office may provide a clue.

When the 1964 meeting learned that our assets has soared to a staggering \$277 the members undertook to reduce the embarrassment of riches by giving an unprecedented \$75 to the CJT (our sister societies, the CSBS and the CTS, habitually gave nothing), and also proposed to establish a prize for church history writing. The latter project was referred to the executive but nothing has been heard since of the prize suggestion.

Declining or at best stable membership (the roll still included many who were years in arrears with dues) began to bother the Society about 1964 and has continued to be a hardy perennial for discussion. As president in 1965 and 1966 Letellier made a concerted but fruitless effort to win support among French-speaking Canadian historians. At Letellier's first election another tradition commenced, that the Nominating Committee shall be formed of three past presidents. That same year, 1965, the offices of secretary and treasurer were again combined as Art Reynolds, secretary since that first meeting in February, 1959, passed his chores to John Moir. At that 1965 meeting, in Huron College, the CSBS proposed the joint publication of a volume of essays to mark Canada's centenary. With the proviso that the theme of the volume should be Canadian, the project was passed to

the inevitable committee, with John Grant and John Moir to represent church history in a planning session at Toronto on 17 June. It is doubtful if that meeting was ever held--our minutes make no reference to it and John Moir was literally on that day in the midst of moving his worldly goods from Ottawa to Toronto.

When next the historians foregathered, at Master University in May, 1966, surprises and excitement awaited them. The expenses of bringing the late G.R. Cragg from the United States as a guest speaker was about to flatten an already reduced bank balance. Further, a purging from the roll of non-paying members of long standing reduced the membership to less than forty. A membership drive among English-speaking historians had been no more successful than President Letellier's efforts with francophones. In the discussion that followed the working clergy were singled out as the target of another membership drive, but John Grant asked whether our policy of separation from the Learned Societies should be reconsidered, particularly as the founding of the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion raised again the question of our relationship to the CSBS and the CTS. To date our Society had met only in Montreal or Ontario--was it time to consider the possibility of meeting in western Canada? Other members regretted that the Society could not support a publication to advertise our existence, and invited the executive to explore the possibility of merg-

ing the existing publications of other religious history societies into a new quarterly.

So much for the surprises--the excitement, first in the history of the Society, was provided on the second morning by Tom Boon, that venerable English gentleman, priest and scholar, who apologized twice in the midst of Morris Zaslow's paper and then fainted on the floor. Dr. Boon was rushed to the hospital and later the same day, when visited by concerned friends, expressed dismay because the hospital had forced him to reveal his true age, some ten years more than he normally admitted to.

Perhaps it was the fringe benefits of meeting in Montreal, close to Expo, that made the 1967 meetings more successful, if less exciting. Whatever the cause a larger than usual attendance heard the Treasurer report that an increase in memberships and the prompt payment of fees made the financial outlook of the Society much brighter.

The programme for that year included papers on the Church of England, the German Reformation, and the middle ages, but a promising innovation was the inclusion of a paper by a senior graduate student. By this date most of the academically established members had presented one or more papers and scarcely needed much more public exposure, whereas younger members, especially graduate students, could be and were deliberately offered through the Society an opportunity to make a mark in the great world of learned

societies and publications. Publication took the form of a mimeographed volume of as many of the papers as the Secretary could collect from each annual meeting. Since the CJT could accept only a small number of historical papers and since the supplying of offprints from the CJT was never dependable, the volume of papers proved to be an acceptable alternative. Since 1967 the "Papers" have appeared annually except for a double volume covering 1972 and 1973.

Expo was visited by the historians but only after they had chosen John Grant as president. Before the next regular meeting the Executive met, apparently for the first time since 1962. The Secretary was authorized to begin publication of the "Papers", while other societies were sounded out about the possibility of a single journal for the field. At the same time it was decided to discuss at the next business session the subject of joining the Learned Societies. A second interesting event of that year was the joint meeting of the American Society of Church History, the American Historical Association and the Canadian Historical Association in Toronto at the end of December. On that occasion three of our members, Goldwin French, John Grant and John Moir gave papers, two of which were later published in Church History.

During the famous centennial year Nick Walsh's volume of the three-part history of the church in Canada had been published, a reminder of why and how the Society had been started. Nick, however, was suffering from stomach cancer

and had been unable to supervise the proofreading and indexing of his book. He was still in the hospital, a shadow of his former hearty self, when we met in Montreal. Two years later he was back in the hospital, terminally ill. The remaining two volumes by John Grant and myself were delayed by Ryerson Press and did not appear until 1972 when the American purchasers of Ryerson issued them as a part of their policy to Canadianize their image.

The next annual meeting, held at St. Michael's College, opened with John Grant's after-dinner presidential address, "The Reaction of WASP Churches to Migration in the Laurier Era." While the topic sounds timely today, and Grant's study has been seminal, Canada was not ready for such scholarship in 1968--the paper was rejected by the academic journals and is known to posterity only through the exclusive pages of our Society's annual "Papers". The other papers given in 1968 ranged from "Civil Disobedience in Elizabethan England" to "The American Religious Press before 1830". In the business session we inched forward on two fronts as the executive were directed to investigate the possibility of establishing a journal, and the possibility of meeting with the Learned Societies.

This second objective was achieved in 1969 when the president, John Henderson, addressed the Society at one of the galaxy of Learned Societies meeting at York University. Although bibliographical papers had been presented before,

Keith Clifford's analysis of Canadian religious historiography was a first of its kind for the Society, and particularly interesting because several of the persons discussed were present in the audience. A third first in 1969 was the election of a layman as president. The previous year John Moir had been relieved of his duties as Secretary and Treasurer and promoted to Vice-President. The new Treasurer, the ever-dapper Bill MacVean, was in Saskatoon, but John Kenyon the Secretary, occupied the office next to myself at Scarborough College which made that change of command simpler.

Our tenth annual meeting, at Winnipeg, produced another first, a joint meeting with the Canadian Catholic Historical Association. This was so successful that it has become an annual habit of the two societies. On the debit side 1970 marked the death of the CJT because Canada Council refused to support a "religious" journal and offered its largesse to a new periodical, SR or Studies in Religion, which was supposedly uncontaminated. At least there was good news on the financial front. Since the appointment of a new treasurer the Society's assets had increased by twenty-two per cent, and the Treasurer reported that of the forty-eight members, twenty were clerics, sixteen were laymen, and twelve were academics.

There had in fact been a subtle shift occurring over the years--older teachers in church-related institutions had passed away and their replacements showed no interest in church history societies, whereas secular historians

were joining the Society in increasing numbers each year. Indeed the next president, Gaylord Albaugh, asked whether the term "religious history" was not closer to the Society's interests, than "church history" with its institutional and denominational presuppositions. In the meantime, however, the Society had become aware of both the advantages and disadvantages of membership in the Learned. For the first time members could receive travel grants from the Canada Council, which was particularly important to professors in seminaries where money was always embarrassingly scarce. The disadvantages lay in the feeling of loss of identity in the madding crowds attending the Learned, and especially the separation from old friends in the CSBS and CTS. These last two groups preferred to meet at the time of the new Canadian Society for the Study of Religion, whereas the historians felt drawn to the Canadian Historical Association. In an effort to have our cake and eat it the Society wanted the CSSR to meet about the same time as the CHA. Nothing came of this proposal, but at least the CCHA accepted the plan of joint sessions while rejecting the idea for joint publications as too problematical an undertaking.

From Winnipeg in 1970 the Society journeyed east to St. John's in 1971, where our programme was particularly broad in terms of themes, periods and geography. In the business meeting discussion centred on relations with the Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion (CCSR) which was to

publish SR. Some fears were expressed that history seemed to be low in the priority of interests of the new body, but in the end it was agreed that the Society should give the venture its support. Henry, now Bishop, Hill was elected president and Ed Furcha took over the secretaryship. During the next year members were canvassed as to what type of volume we might publish as an invited supplement to SR. Much thought and effort went into this and John Grant and Keith Clifford were made an editorial committee, but in the end no volume was ever produced for or by the historians.

When the Society met in Montreal in 1972, for the first time a president was unable to attend, and the minutes fail to record what papers were given. The secretary's correspondence suggests that an unusually large number of problems had arisen in the planning of this programme and that new difficulties occurred right up to the moment of meeting. By contrast the next year's session at Queen's went particularly smoothly and twenty-six persons registered. This 1973 programme concentrated heavily on Canadian history and younger members were prominent as speakers. Once again, however, the external relations of the Society were a cause of concern. Clifford, president, recommended that the Society should apply for membership in the Humanities Research Council to show that the CSSR did not speak for the other societies involved in religious studies. Perhaps because of the high cost of membership in the HRC the

Society never did make such an application. The meeting admitted that it had an internal conflict between those attracted to history and those drawn to the field of religion, and it was symptomatic of the uncertainty developed since 1969 that a member demanded to know why there was so little interaction with related societies. The meetings elected Tim Suttor as president and John Netten as Secretary-Treasurer to replace Ed Furcha who had assumed the combined jobs a year earlier but was now leaving for a teaching post in India.

What had started as a most enjoyable session at Queen's was ended sadly by the news that John Henderson had died suddenly in Venice, the third president of our Society to pass on in the space of four years. A year later, 1974, the Learned's were back in Toronto. Our sessions started well, but ended less successfully. President Tim Suttor was absent because of illness but his presentation was available because it was an audio-visual TV-taped discourse on art and religion. Modern technology was found to have feet of clay when the tape and tape deck could not be co-ordinated to put colour into the presidential message. The result was an interesting talk accompanied by continuous and hazy pale blue images floating on the silver screen.

Allan Farris, one of the Society's founding fathers, was elected president, and the CCSR was on the carpet again as in the business session at Memorial University. Dissatis-

faction with the Corporation's policies and with the contents of SR seemed general and Keith Clifford was sent as representative of the Society with a mandate to seek improvements that would mollify historians. At the same time it was announced that the Corporation was planning a series of "mini-publications" from typescript and that one mini-volume would be primarily about the history of religion in Canada. With the decision to poll the members for their reaction to this latest project, the Society adjourned for another year.

Our next meeting, in Edmonton, will be remembered for several reasons, including the copious liquid hospitality consumed by a few members. Of course the Corporation business, or lack of business, was again on the agenda. A letter from the Corporation asked for a committee of the Society to prepare a "mini-publication" on Canadian religious history. The Society had some understandable forebodings but agreed to form yet another committee provided the Corporation understood clearly that the Society could not and would not finance such a book. By now the consensus was that the Corporation and its offspring, SR, should put up or shut up about any supposed interest in reviewing historical books, printing historical articles, or publishing historical collections. Not surprisingly John Grant reported no progress a year later and the tenuous connection of the Society and Corporation was cut once more.

After this debate on the Corporation the Society seemed headed towards another of its academically satisfying but

uneventful sessions. Unfortunately the Treasurer and the attending members were due for a rude surprise. All the travel grant cheques were bounced by the bank on the specious grounds that it could not locate our account of two-year's standing in its St. John's branch. Embarrassment reigned, and the reddest face of all belonged to an esteemed Anglican scholar who had passed his rubber cheque to the Roman Catholic college as payment for room and board in Edmonton. But even our Society's stories have happy endings, for the bank eventually lost one of the controversial cheques and unaccountably refused to debit the \$100 from the Society's account. A year later the Society homologated the bank's strange behaviour and spent the hundred dollars again!

The 1975 Edmonton meetings had an additional reason for celebration--the Society's bank balance was just \$10.46 short of the thousand dollar mark. Such affluence was unprecedented--but it was also ephemeral. By the time we gathered together again in 1976, at Laval, the balance had shrunk by half, back to its usual level around the beginning of the decade. Attendance was down even further from the declined numbers at Edmonton, and we were becoming aware of the painful truth that going to the Learned's has become an expensive luxury in this age of recession. At Edmonton the Society had elected John Moir as Secretary again, but wisely, in view of Moir's previously displayed incompetence as a bookkeeper, had retained John Netten in the treasurership. The

Society had also elected its second lay president, John Kenyon, so for the academic year 1975-6 most of the Society's correspondence and the annual "Papers" issued from those adjoining offices in Scarborough College.

The Edmonton programme had for the first time involved the Society in joint sessions with both the CCHA and the Canadian Association for Scottish Studies. This arrangement proved profitable and was repeated again at Laval in 1976. Before leaving the Laval meetings the Society elected Frank Peake as president and it was his pleasure to convene the 1977 session at Fredericton amid fog, drizzle and downpours. Again good papers were presented and new faces introduced to the Society as has been the trend and desire in recent years. After an absence of one year relations with the Corporation for Religious Studies reappeared on the agenda with Tom Sinclair-Faulkner arguing effectively that the Society should give the Corporation one more chance to show or develop an interest in religious history. A motion to renew membership in the Corporation for one more year was carried, amid grumblings, at the second business session of the meetings. Rick Ruggle was elected president and John Netten, presumably as part of the Society's registered retirement programme for aging historians, was promoted from treasurer to heir apparent, or vice-president, with Charles Johnston assuming charge of our dwindling, inflation-battered finances, which had dropped below the \$400 mark in the last year.

The last entry in these chronicles of Zadok must concern our meeting at London in 1978. For the first time the Society entered fully into the scientific spirit of the twentieth century: all registrations were computerized with predictable results--general chaos. The registration list included names never seen before or since. As for the programme it reflected particularly the professional interest in missiology that has become apparent in our meetings, as elsewhere, in the past half-dozen years. As might be expected John Netten was elected president of the Society by the unanimous vote of the members, thus maintaining inviolate what is probably the oldest and most hallowed tradition of our twenty-year old Society.

In retrospect--and in a more serious vein--over the span of these twenty years the Society has attempted with some success to meet its avowed purpose "to promote and encourage research in Church History, with particular attention to Canadian Church History". We have failed to develop an effective publishing programme, but the annual meetings are an incentive to research and writing. In our historiographical interests we have transcended denominational and institutional allegiances and interests. Our programmes have offered an opportunity for promising young scholars to be heard and seen--and for older members to reminisce. The Society's programmes have mirrored and to some degree we hope led in the changing historical emphasis of the past

generation. Similarly our membership reflects the coming of age of religious history as a reputable academic discipline. What began as a largely seminary-oriented group has seen the steady increase of interest and participation by university-related, lay historians. Finally, from a small and semi-isolated organization we have changed into a small society accepted and integrated into the Learned Societies, a society that has developed close relations and co-operation with similar learned bodies sharing our interest in the historical study of religion. As a society, I believe, we have made some solid and creditable progress, however slowly, towards our objectives during these past twenty years.