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Article abstract

A.E. Smith was a central figure in the Communist Party from the mid-1920s until his death in 1947. An advocate of the radical Social Gospel until at least 1923, Smith's interchange with leading members of the Canadian Communist movement, the growing prestige of the Soviet State, and his disillusionment with the social democratic movement in Canada and abroad, combined during the post-war epoch of reaction to cause a shift in his perspective away from the optimistic verities of the Social Gospel to his apocalyptic vision of the Communist International. While he retained his basic epistemological perspective after 1923, Smith's estrangement from the non-Communist left led to his political isolation and, in early 1925, to his entry into the Communist Party.

From the Social Gospel to “the Plain Bread of Leninism”: A.E. Smith’s Journey to the Left in the Epoch of Reaction After World War I*

Tom Mitchell

JOAN SANGSTER has suggested that one of the principal themes to be addressed in the rewriting of the history of Canadian Communism concerns “why many men and women devoted their lives to the Party.”¹ This paper examines this question in relation to the life of the Rev. A.E. Smith. Smith was a central figure in the Communist Party from the mid-1920s until his death in 1947. He joined the Party in 1925 at age 54 after a long career as a Methodist minister and, from 1919 to 1923, as the “missionary of the Labour Church movement in the West.”² Jaroslav Petryshyn has explained Smith’s transformation from clergyman to Communist in apocalyptic terms. He asserts that “after 32 years within the Methodist Church he renounced his position as a high-ranking minister to become a leading member of the communist movement in Canada.”³ In a similar vein, Ramsay Cook has concluded that Smith’s commitment to Communism was the product of an almost inevitable transition from Biblical liberalism, to moralism to Marxism which “required no great intellectual effort for Smith, once he recovered from the shock

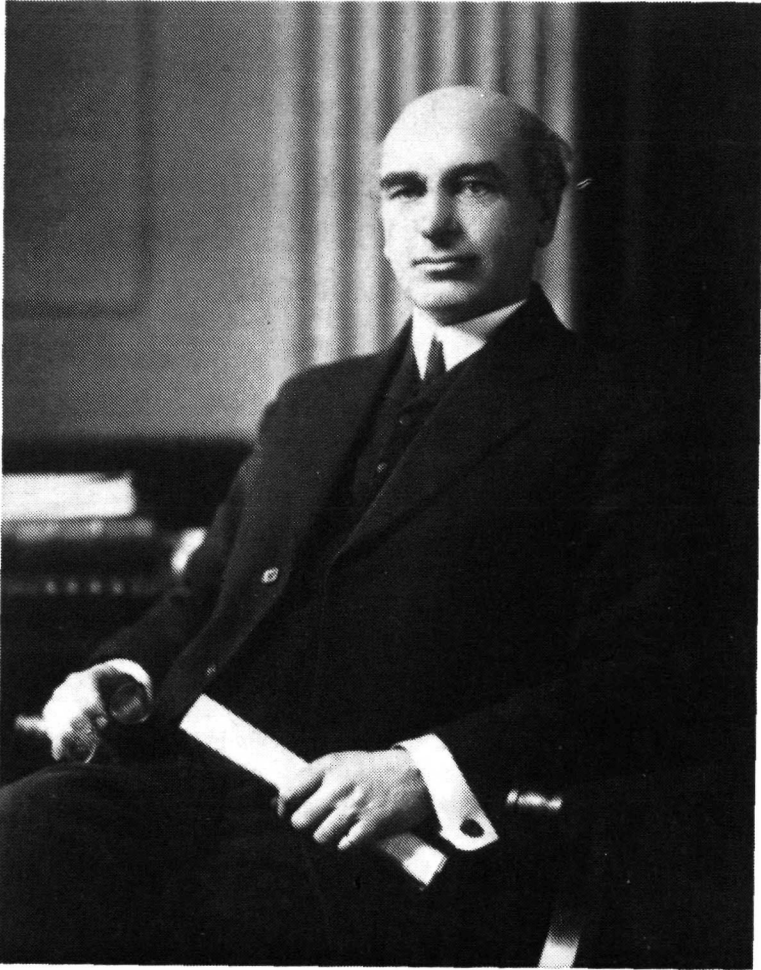
*The quotation in the title is derived from RCMP Report, 23 June 1925, *Access to Information File 117-92-049*, Canadian Security Intelligence Service, 396.

¹Joan Sangster, “Rewriting the History of Canadian Communism,” *Canadian Dimension*, January/February 1990, 11-3.

²Richard Allen, *The Social Passion: Religion and Social Reform in Canada 1914-1918* (Toronto 1973), 162-3. Smith recalled his varied career in his autobiography *All My Life* (Toronto 1949). For a discussion of Smith’s career as a Communist see William Rodney, *Soldiers of the International: A history of the Communist Party of Canada 1919-1929* (Toronto 1968) and Ivan Avakumovic, *The Communist Party in Canada* (Toronto 1975.)

³J. Petryshyn, “From Clergyman to Communist: The Radicalization of A.E. Smith,” *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 13, 4 (Winter, 1978-79), 67.

Tom Mitchell, “From the Social Gospel to ‘the Plain Bread of Leninism’: A.E. Smith’s Journey to the Left in the Epoch of Reaction After World War I,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 33 (Spring 1993), 125-51.



Albert Edward Smith, M.L.A. Brandon (c 1921).
Photo courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.

of the higher criticism.”⁴ Neither explanation does justice to the complexity of Smith’s journey to the left in the epoch of reaction after the Great War.⁵

⁴Ramsay Cook, “Ambiguous Heritage: Wesley College and the Social Gospel Reconsidered,” *Manitoba History* (Spring 1988), 8. See also Ramsay Cook, *The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada* (Toronto 1985), 223-7.

⁵On this general theme, see John Herd Thompson and Allan Seager, *Canada 1922-1939: Decades of Discord* (Toronto 1985), 58-65.

An examination of Smith's career from 1919 to 1925 suggests that Smith remained a firm and articulate advocate of the radical Social Gospel until at least 1923. Following his departure from Brandon and arrival in Toronto in the summer of 1923, Smith's contact and collaboration with members of the Communist movement in Toronto gave him a new and more compelling vision of social change. While he retained his basic epistemological perspective, Smith exchanged the metaphysical verities of the radical Social Gospel for the apocalyptic vision of the Communist International. Smith's growing association with members of the Communist movement also resulted in his estrangement from the non-Communist left, leaving him to choose between the gradualism of the social democratic movement and the insurgency of the Communist Party. His eventual decision to join the Communist Party, though not inevitable, is unsurprising. Throughout his career, Smith was incapable of embracing a worldview that did not promise an end to history and the triumph of the oppressed. Moreover, his commitment to the working class as the subject of history and to the transformation of capitalist society demanded a form of personal agency which went beyond the predictable war of position of electoral politics. Early in 1925, Smith's journey to the left ended with his embrace of what he termed "the plain bread of Leninism" and his entry into the Communist Party.⁶

From the beginning of his career as a Methodist minister in the West, Smith had been an unrelenting critic of the established order. As early as 1903, he had urged his congregation to take a role in the reform of society, characterizing some churchgoers as "moral cowards" who avoided the fight against "wickedness and vice." As a youthful Methodist minister, Smith had been convinced that Christ regarded the Kingdom of God as a "social entity" and had called for the reconstruction of "society on the principles of Brotherhood." Entrance into this Kingdom was not through individual salvation, but through serving one's fellow man in this world.⁷

Smith arrived in Brandon in 1913 to become minister to the wealthy First Methodist Church. In October 1913 he was appointed to the Brandon Trades and Labour Council as Brandon Ministerial Association's first delegate to that body. Such an appointment was a natural extension of Smith's ministry. In the spring of 1919, when a series of dramatic strikes occurred in Brandon, Smith positioned himself squarely on the side of the strikers. At large open-air labour rallies, he spoke

⁶RCMP Report, 23 June 1925, *Access to Information File* 117-92-049, Canadian Security Intelligence Service, 396. This file consists of approximately 180 pages of RCMP reports for the years 1923-1930 dealing principally with Smith's entry into the CPC and his public activities on behalf of that and allied organizations.

⁷*Prince Albert Advocate*, 14 May 1900 as quoted in Lorry W. Felske, "Science and the Radical Social Gospel in Western Canada," MA Thesis, University of Calgary, 1975, 74, and *Portage la Prairie Weekly Manitoba Liberal*, 5 December 1907 and 11 February 1907, as quoted in Felske, 79.

in support of the strikes and used his pulpit at First Methodist to advance the case of the militants.⁸

Such solidarity was not appreciated within the city's business community. Feeling against him among some leading members of First Methodist was very bitter; some believed that "Smith deserved to be shot."⁹ During a meeting of the official Board of First Methodist Church held on 26 May 1919, Stephen Clement, a leading Brandon lawyer and Brandon's Liberal MLA, advanced a motion that the Minister be restrained from any further preaching in First Church. The motion was declared out of order as it had originated outside the Church with members of the business community organized as a "citizens' committee" to oppose labour.¹⁰ Still, Clement was successful in securing Smith's resignation from First Methodist effective 15 June 1919.

Yet Smith was not to leave Brandon just yet. At a meeting in the Starland Theatre on the afternoon of 8 June 1919, about 200 supporters met in connection with the formation of a People's Church "... where the gospel of social Christianity could be fearlessly propounded."¹¹ The idea of creating the Church had originated with the organizing committee of the Brandon People's Forum which, through winter 1918-19, had sponsored addresses by Smith, William Ivens, Salem Bland, and others. The Brandon Sympathetic Strike was "... the occasion, not the cause ... , for the organization of the church."¹² At the meeting, J.H. Skene, a prominent

⁸For a discussion of the Brandon Sympathetic Strike, see Tom Mitchell, "Brandon 1919: Labour and Industrial Relations in the Wheat City in the Year of the General Strike," *Manitoba History*, 17 (Spring, 1989).

⁹RNWMP Report, 25 May 1919, *Access to Information File 117-92-020*, Canadian Security Intelligence Service (hereafter *Access/CSIS*), 016. This file consists of 295 pages of Royal North West Mounted Police reports for the years 1919-1923 dealing principally with Smith's addresses to the People's Church, his political activities in Brandon, and his organizational efforts on behalf of the labour church movement outside Brandon.

¹⁰Accounts of these events are based largely on Smith's own recollection as provided in the *Canadian Tribune*, 10 February 1945, and in *All My Life*, 59-60. See also Eugene Pirie, "Rev. A.E. Smith", 11. *MSS 72 Ed Rea: Research Papers in Manitoba History*. University of Manitoba Archives. The Brandon's Citizens Law and Order League was formally organized in early June 1919 by the city's leading businessmen. It sought to use its influence and every legitimate constitutional means to remedy existing social and industrial ills. League members were required to "assist the council of the City of Brandon to maintain in operation all public utilities ... [and] to be sworn in as a special constable at the request of the Mayor from time to time, or at the request of other duly constituted authority ... " #61727, Borden Papers, C4341, National Archives of Canada (NAC).

¹¹Tom Mitchell, "'A Square Deal for All and No Railroadng': Labour and Politics in Brandon 1900-1920," *Prairie Forum*, 15, 1, (Spring, 1990), 57.

¹²Beatrice Bridgen to Dr. T.A. Moore, 26 July 1919. *Brigden Collection*, Provincial Archives of Manitoba (PAM), MG14, C1 4. For a discussion of Bridgen's early career see Joan Sangster, "The Making of a Socialist-Feminist: The Early Career of Beatrice Bridgen, 1888-1941," *Atlantis*, 13, 1 (Fall 1987), 14-28. Smith confirms Bridgen's explanation in a

radical in the city, announced that about 125 individuals had returned pledge cards in support of the proposed Church. Smith told the assembly that the church of today would not stand for the teaching of the Social Gospel of Jesus, and that was why he wanted another platform.¹³

Though he was committed to the People's Church, Smith did not plan to leave the Methodist Church. He hoped to remain a Methodist and to reinvigorate that Church through his work in the People's Church. Committed to securing a leave from the Church to pursue the work of the People's Church, in mid-June he travelled to Winnipeg to attend the annual convention of Manitoba Methodists. William Ivens, who had created a labour church in Winnipeg in 1918, was also intent on working outside the Methodist mainstream. The Stationing Committee granted Smith's request to be left without station, but the decision was rescinded when a motion was put to refer all special cases to the conference as a whole. Iven's request to be left without station was also denied. Richard Allen has concluded that, with the decision to reject the requests from Smith and Ivens, "the Labour churches were cut adrift from the church and the breach between the radical and progressive social gospel yawned ominously wider."¹⁴

On the afternoon of 22 June 1919, Smith addressed the first meeting of the new People's Church. The building was filled to capacity; there were about 400 people present. In his address Smith asserted that, with the arrest of the Winnipeg General Strike leaders, the Strike could not be settled by an adjustment of wages or working conditions. The Strike had "... become a very crusade and nothing but the abolition of the profit system and exploitation will end it."¹⁵ Smith believed that the People's Church had a central role to play in this crusade; in Brandon, it would be the means of splitting the community into two big factions. The question that would cause the split was "that of the right to free utterance and whether or not the churches [would] ... apply themselves to the great social questions ... [of the day]."¹⁶

letter to Rev. M.C. Flatt, President of the Manitoba Methodist Conference. See Rev. A.E. Smith to Rev. M.C. Flatt, 13 June 1919. *A.E. Smith Papers* Box 3, File 64. United Church Archives, Toronto. Yet, the idea may have originated with Smith who was a member of the organizing committee of the People's Forum. Beatrice Bridgen recalled Smith explaining that the idea of creating a labour church had originated with him while on a summer course at the University of Chicago where he had become acquainted with a minister who had been the minister of such a church. Eugene Pirie, "Smith," 48.

¹³RNWMP Report, 9 June 1919, *Access/CSIS*, 025.

¹⁴Richard Allen, *Social Passion*, 115. For Smith's explanation concerning why he wished to be left without station see Rev. A.E. Smith to Rev. M.C. Flatt, President Manitoba Methodist Conference, *Smith Papers*. For a discussion of the unsuccessful appeal on behalf of Smith and Ivens to the Methodist Appeal Board in spring 1920, see *Brandon Daily Sun*, 28 April 1920 and Richard Allen, *Social Passion*, 117-9.

¹⁵RNWMP Report, 23 June 1919, *Access/CSIS*, 032"A."

¹⁶RNWMP Report, 30 June 1919, *Access/CSIS*, 033"A."

¹⁷Beatrice Bridgen to Dr. T.A. Moore, 26 July 1919. *Bridgen Collection*, PAM, MG14, C1 4.

The original congregation of the People's Church was predominantly working-class with a heavy representation of east end railway workers. Still, the ethnic and congregational origins of the new church's membership were diverse. In celebrating this diversity, Beatrice Brigden, who was associated with the People's Church throughout its existence, and was second only to A.E. Smith in its leadership, observed concerning an early meeting of the Church that

in one sweep of the eye, I saw three men -- one who had served time for attempting to murder his wife -- second, an influential Jew -- third, an Austrian Greek Catholic who bears the nickname of "King of the Austrians", on the flats he holds the key to every Austrian home -- and all three men were eager and susceptible.¹⁷

From the outset, Smith was determined to expand the congregation of the Church. In particular, he sought to draw the non-Anglo Saxon "foreign" population of the city's North End into the Church. As he told the congregation of the People's Church in August 1919, the Ukrainians were going to be an immense power to reckon with. He had been asked to go and hold services for them some Sundays and he had great hopes of getting them affiliated with the People's Church movement.¹⁸

The Church would expand not only in the city, for it was Smith's conviction that the Peoples' Church constituted a great new movement which would spread all over Canada in support of a new democracy. In Smith's assessment, the People's Church movement was only the forerunner of a movement that every church in the country would have to take up eventually.¹⁹ Smith was determined to challenge the hold of the traditional church and transform religious life in the country. In order to achieve this object, he believed that labour churches in Winnipeg had to cooperate with their Brandon counterpart, and that additional congregations had to be organized in centres across Canada.

In spring 1920, Smith launched a successful effort to establish labour churches throughout western Canada. He travelled to a variety of centres on his way west to Victoria and Vancouver where he explained how branches were being established in all the important cities of the West. He hoped that in summer 1920 the Chatauqua method could be adopted to spread the influence of the movement to the smaller towns in the West.²⁰ In Vancouver Smith explained that a new church was needed - a church which would retain religion but one that would strike out dogma, rituals, and mysticism, and replace them with the study of sociology, economics, and "class problems." The People's Church would retain religion but a religion divorced from

¹⁸RNWMP Report, 6 August 1919, *Access/CSIS*, 045.

¹⁹RNWMP Report, 14 July 1919, *Access/CSIS*, 034.

²⁰RCMP Reports, 28 March 1920, 26 April 1920, 6 May 1920, *Access/CSIS*, 094. Effective February 1920 the Royal North West Mounted Police became the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (hereafter RCMP).

²¹RCMP Report, 6 May 1920, *Access/CSIS*, 109.

what he considered to be the old superstitious beliefs.²¹ On his return, Smith reported to the congregation of the Brandon People's Church that he had succeeded in forming labour churches in Vancouver, Victoria, Calgary, and Edmonton.

The development and expansion of the labour church movement in the West following 1919 was an ongoing preoccupation of the Royal North West Mounted Police (RNWMP) and the Methodist Church of Canada. RNWMP surveillance of Smith's activities beginning in spring 1919 was part of a larger state reaction against perceived protagonists of crisis.²² An early report characterized Smith as "an agitator of the Soviet system, ... more dangerous than any other Bolshevik Agitator for he has intelligence and influence."²³ In October 1919, this surveillance continued; the RCMP Officer Commanding at Brandon was instructed to detail a constable in plain clothes to report on the meetings of the People's Church.²⁴

The existence of the People's Church, its radical message, and Smith's efforts in spring 1920 to spread the People's Church movement to other western centres, also drew a hostile reaction from the Methodist Church which concluded that the labour church movement in the west was a threat to its congregational integrity. A liaison developed between Dr. T.A. Moore, director of the Methodist Social Service and Evangelism branch, and Lt. Col. C.F. Hamilton, chief intelligence officer of the RNWMP. Their mutual hostility to the labour church movement resulted in their cooperation in the collection of information on the labour church movement in the West and the production of a Police report entitled "Notes on the Labour Church" in which the condition of the various labour churches in the West was discussed.²⁵

It is likely that this report was also the basis for an assault on the Brandon People's Church in summer 1920 when, in a supplement to the August 1920 edition of the federal Department of Labour's *Labour Gazette* entitled *Information Respecting the Russian Soviet System and Its propaganda in North America*, it was denounced as an organ of Russian propaganda. In a two-page discussion of this document, the *Canadian Forum* lamented the lapse of the *Gazette* from serious journalism to "propaganda." A.E. Smith responded to the *Gazette* supplement in the pages of the *Confederate* with the assertion that responsibility for the publication of the pamphlet rested with a government that had usurped office through the War Times Election Act and was the equivalent of a "Canadian Bolshevik Party,"

²²For a general discussion of the shape of this crisis see Gregory S. Kealey, "State Repression of Labour and the Left in Canada, 1914-1920: The Impact of the First World War," *Canadian Historical Review*, LXXIII, 3 (September 1992), 281-314. See also Tom Mitchell, "'To Reach the Leadership of This Revolutionary Movement': A.J. Andrews, the Canadian State and the Suppression of the Winnipeg General Strike," forthcoming in *Prairie Forum*.

²³RNWMP Report, 7 May 1919, *Access/CSIS*, 002.

²⁴RCMP Report, 27 October 1920, *Access/CSIS*, 131.

²⁵"Notes on the Labour Churches", File 22, Box 7, *Evangelism and Social Service Branch*, United Church Archives, Toronto.

for like the Bolsheviks it had turned to propaganda and spies as instruments of government.²⁶

Like the RNWMP, some historians have concluded incorrectly that Smith was transformed by the postwar crisis into a Marxist revolutionary. Ramsay Cook dates Smith's fall from grace from his first encounter with the higher criticism while a student at Wesley College. As Cook explains

Smith, at first, was devastated, but a moralistic liberalism reassured him for a couple of decades until he discovered another faith, this time in Marxism.²⁷

While more thorough in his treatment of Smith, Jaroslav Petryshyn nevertheless has offered an oversimplified explanation of Smith's transformation. In particular, his treatment of Smith's Brandon experience is inadequate and in some instances incorrect. Neither Cook or Petryshyn has provided evidence to detail the process of Smith's intellectual transformation or to illuminate the dynamics of this move from the sacred to the profane. In fact, Smith did become a Marxist, but not a "couple of decades" after his first encounter with the higher criticism. In June 1920, J.G. Davies, who had followed Smith to the People's Church from First Methodist, reported concerning Smith that "To our knowledge there has been no change in the minister's theological views in the last ten years."²⁸ Contrary to what Cook and Petryshyn have argued, Smith's intellectual world was not transformed by World War I or by the immediate postwar crisis. These developments simply confirmed for Smith the inequity of a society dominated by a predatory capitalism, and provided him with the challenge to fulfil his subjectivity as an advocate of radical social reform.

In the postwar era of reaction, when the advocacy of the Social Gospel became unfashionable, even dangerous for one's career in the Methodist Church, and made its advocates the objects of interest to state security, Smith clung to the principles which, since his days at Wesley College, had guided his ministry. Until at least a year after his departure from Brandon in 1923, Smith remained a dedicated social democrat who was convinced of the need to respect constitutional and democratic procedures, who viewed the British Labour Party — not a Marxist Revolution — as the ideal political instrument for change, and who was convinced that political gradualism was essential if durable change was to be achieved. In Smith's view,

²⁶*Information Respecting the Russian Soviet System and Its Propaganda in North America*, Canada Department of Labour, August 1920. (NAC), Records of the Department of Labour, RG 27 Vol. 168, file 613.04:1. *The Canadian Forum*, 2 (November 1920), 42-3. For Smith's reaction to this publication see *The Confederate*, 3 September 1920.

²⁷Ramsay Cook, "Ambiguous Heritage," 8.

²⁸*The Confederate*, 25 June 1920. For Petryshyn's views, see J. Petryshyn, "Clergyman to Communist." Petryshyn indicates that the Manitoba provincial election took place in 1921. In fact it took place in 29 June 1920. Petryshyn also indicates that Smith was defeated in the provincial election in 1923. The correct date is 30 July 1922.

the first step in transforming society was to challenge the capitalist control of the public schools, churches, and the press, believing that the means of the working man's salvation lay in the working man's self-consciousness.²⁹ In short, "a revolution had to take place, not one whereby men, women and children were to be shot on the street, but by education" and political action.³⁰

The intellectual anchor of Smith's commitment to social democracy was the Social Gospel. Evident within Canadian Protestantism since the 1880s, the Social Gospel was derived from a number of modernist currents in Christianity and general European and North American intellectual life, including

the broad notion of evolutionary progress and the specific scientific arguments of Darwin, populist discontent and progressivism, industrialism and urbanization with its attendant dislocations and poverty, and the socialist critique of capitalism.³¹

Growing in influence after 1900, variations of the Social Gospel from moderate to radical advanced the cause of social justice and turned a sharp focus on social ethics and social relations. Yet, the Social Gospel had a number of limitations as a guide to social analysis or as basis for political action. First and foremost, the Social Gospel reduced the purposes of God to merely human purposes and conceived of God's purposes as purely temporal. As well, it was excessively optimistic and utopian and, among its adherents, the doctrine promoted a naive notion of the character of conflict and social change. Lastly, the Social Gospel posited an "untenable conception of linear universal human progress."³² Smith's Social Gospel incorporated the most radical aspects of this inchoate tendency in Methodism, termed by one writer "the backbone of activist Christianity."³³

Typical of most Social Gospellers, Smith was preoccupied with the temporal significance of the life of Christ. In his addresses to the People's Church, he presented Christ as a modern day political and economic revolutionary. He taught that Jesus was a great ethical teacher of fundamental truths about man and society. To illustrate the radicalism of Jesus, Smith made use of contemporary examples. William Ivens, incarcerated for his involvement in the Winnipeg General Strike, was likened to Jesus Christ. Both had been oppressed by a spiteful people. Smith asserted that officials of the churches wished "to see Ivens placed against a wall

²⁹RCMP Report, 14 June 1920, *Access/CSIS*, 122 ; 21 June 1920, 124; and, RCMP Report, 17 June 1920, *Access/CSIS*, 127.

³⁰RCMP Report, 26 April 1920, *Access/CSIS*, 107.

³¹Diane Yeager, "Focus: The Ethics of the Social Gospel," *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 18, 1 (Spring 1990), 4. On the general theme of the Social Gospel in Canada see Richard Allen, ed., *The Social Gospel* (Ottawa 1975) and Michael Gavureau, *The Evangelical Century* (Montréal 1991)

³²Diane Yeager, "Focus," 5.

³³Thompson and Seager, *Decades of Discord*, 60.

and shot.”³⁴ Smith also transformed the traditional image of Mary from the mother of Christ to that of a political revolutionary. In Smith’s view, it was

a mistake, and almost blasphemy, to consider Mary as a weak, supine creature, dressed in stately robes as she is depicted in so many religious pictures. Mary was a revolutionist, full of fire, and it is a pity that there are not more women like her to-day, who would teach revolution to their children. The one thing the Proletariat movement needed was radical minded women.³⁵

Smith believed that it was the obligation of the People’s Church and all adherents of Christ to carry on Christ’s work.

An important current of thought within Social Gospel belief placed “the location of the Christian hope in an earthly millennium rather than in the mystic City of God ...”³⁶ It followed that the approaching utopia would be a moral regeneration of man, not a physical conflagration with the actual return of Christ to earth. Smith believed in the imminent collapse of capitalism as a critical step toward such an earthy millennium. He told the congregation of the People’s Church that there were large numbers of people who expected the heavens to open and Jesus to come flying down to earth. He regarded this as a very foolish idea, believing that Jesus would never visit the earth; those who were waiting would be disappointed. Salvation on earth would come about through the creation of a new social order and all had to work to this end if anything was to be accomplished.³⁷ In this regard, Smith taught that no person could be a Christian and a follower of Christ and believe in the existing social order. Moreover, just as the existing order lacked legitimacy, so did the Christian Church. In Smith’s view, true Christianity did not exist — at least not according to the principles of Jesus. To illustrate his point Smith explained that the Lord’s Prayer was unrelated to personal salvation, but a prayer directed against the present economic system.³⁸

Smith’s description of the earthly kingdom which he believed Christ intended at the end of history had a contemporary ring. This society would be communist, a universal brotherhood of man which knew no boundaries.³⁹ Smith viewed himself and the People’s Church as agents of human progress toward such an earthly Kingdom of God. This position was not unusual for a Methodist minister of Smith’s generation. In the late 1800s, Methodist thinking about the past and the future was dominated by an orientation which “... led many Protestant scholars and clergymen

³⁴RCMP Report, 15 November 1920, *Access/CSIS*, 141.

³⁵RCMP Report, 27 December 1920, *Access/CSIS*, 146.

³⁶Michael Gauvreau, “The Taming of History: Reflections on the Canadian Methodist Encounter with Biblical Criticism, 1830-1900, *Canadian Historical Review*, LXV, 3 (1984), 316.

³⁷RCMP Report, 5 March 1922, *Access/CSIS*, 256.

³⁸RCMP Reports, 1 April 1920, *Access/CSIS*, 096.

³⁹RNWMP Report, 15 November 1919, *Access/CSIS*, 067.

to abolish the separation between divine and human spheres, with God no longer a transcendent deity whose activity was manifested in specific occurrences, but immanent in the historical process itself."⁴⁰ In May 1920, Smith told the congregation of the People's Church that he believed that the work of the People's Church had received Divine Sanction.⁴¹

Smith's Social Gospel also drew vigour from his adherence to a reading of history rooted in an optimistic, naturalist teleology informed by Darwinian and positivist notions of historical change which viewed the oppressed working class as the subject, not the object, of history. As he explained to the congregation of the People's Church:

The present unrest would have come despite everything--history shows many similar movements--the democratizing of the church, education, forms of government--and now its has come to the time of the democratizing of property or economic democracy and this idea is surging through the very minds of the men today. There are two great forces pushing along for this objective today and these are the socialist movement and the Trades Unions or Labor Party -- and it is going to come, the masses of the people are going to rule."⁴²

In a debate with Marxist Henry Bartholemew in Brandon in December 1920, concerning whether the process of reform had value " ... in achieving the aims of the revolution," Smith dealt in detail with his conception of history and social change. He argued that the process of social reform had value because society was organic. He believed that

Plant and animal life grow according to laws. It is the same in the society of man, there are organic laws of social growth which cannot be suspended without destruction. There are no violent revolutions in geological history to promote development.⁴³

Smith suggested that the French Revolution was probably the best of all political upheavals. However, after the period of Utopianism had past, the movement was compelled to fit the new into the old. In Smith's view, the present order was the result of a series of concessions for the welfare of humanity. It was evident that the process of reform had value because of the organic formation of society. Revolution must not stand for violence, destruction, or war. Revolution was simply a speeding

⁴⁰Michael Gauvreau, "Taming of History," 315.

⁴¹RCMP Report, 6 May 1920, *Access/CSIS*, 109.

⁴²RNWMP Report, 30 July 1919, *Access/CSIS*, 040.

⁴³RCMP Report, 29 December 1920, *Access/CSIS*, 149. H.M. Bartholemew, who had emerged as a leading figure in the Brandon spring strikes was an advocate of the OBU, and a member of the Socialist Party of Canada. He was a frequent contributor to the *Western Clarion*. Following 1920, he moved to Winnipeg. In 1922, he joined the Worker's Party of Canada and remained an active Communist until his death in 1931. See Ivan Avakumovic, *Communist Party*, 24; Ian Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks: The Early Years of the Communist Party of Canada* (Montréal 1981), 97.

up of organic processes.⁴⁴ It followed that real, lasting change would be organic and evolutionary, building on, but reforming the institutions in place in the country. In October 1919, Smith told a Labour Church audience of 800 in Winnipeg that

the natural evolution of the working class was bound to give them supremacy in all things relative to their conditions and Government and that the term Revolution simply meant that they were not going to wait for a thousand years for these things to come to pass.⁴⁵

Smith's belief in the inevitability of progress and his adherence to a Darwinian world view made him a gradualist committed to the social transformation and reconstruction of society through conventional political means. Force would achieve nothing. The passage to proletarian power would be achieved through legal constitutional methods on the terrain of politics.⁴⁶

Smith's gradualism did not sit well with some of the more militant among Brandon's workers. In June 1919, just after his return from Winnipeg where he had witnessed the arrest of Ivens and the other Strike leaders and had been forced out of the Methodist Church, Smith told an audience of workers that "while he prayed that the Strike leaders might be found innocent and released, that nevertheless if any crime could be proved against them that they would have to take the consequences."⁴⁷ Moreover, Smith believed that there had been too much extremism on both sides, and that labour would have to realize that there was a great body of moderates in the country who would have to be considered and that Labour would have to abandon the strike and physical force as strategies and employ political action to achieve its ends.⁴⁸ Smith took a similarly moderate line in September 1919 during a discussion of political changes required in Canada. In advocating the introduction of proportional representation in Canada, Smith asserted that the Soviet system would never do for Canada. Moreover, he did not think that many of the European countries would adopt it. On both occasions, Smith's position, reported the RNWMP "was not at all relished by the 'Reds'" in attendance.⁴⁹

Smith's Social Gospel orientation made him a centrist on most issues of concern to labour and shaped a commitment to the building a coalition of progressive forces to usher in the new Jerusalem. During 1919-20, he maintained healthy links with all aspects of the labour community. He contributed to the *Confederate*, a newspaper published by the Brandon Trades and Labour Council in conjunction with the Brandon branch of the Dominion Labour Party. He attended events sponsored by the One Big Union in Brandon. In addition, he was active in the

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 147.

⁴⁵RNWMP Report, 20 October 1919, *Access/CSIS*, 065.

⁴⁶RNWMP Report, 15 August 1919, *Access/CSIS*, 051.

⁴⁷RNWMP Report, 20 June 1919, *Access/CSIS*, 39.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

⁴⁹RNWMP Report, 8 September 1919, *Access/CSIS*, 059.

Brandon Defence Committee, organized in summer 1919 to support the strike leaders on trial in Winnipeg, and created under the auspices of the People's Church.

During summer and autumn 1919, Smith generally avoided taking sides in the struggle for control of the institutions of organized labour which had followed the collapse of the Sympathetic Strike. As in Winnipeg, this contest did not prevent the cooperation of all elements of the labour community in the provincial election in the spring of 1920. In fact, cooperation was a natural extension of the solidarity of the spring strikes. The People's Church and the Brandon Defence Committee contributed to this unity. In April 1920, the Defence Committee organized a meeting of Brandon labour men to consider labour's participation in the 1920 provincial election. The meeting passed a resolution in support of the convicted Winnipeg Strike leaders and agreed that a conference of representatives from every labour organization in the city would convene on 13 April 1920 to select a candidate to run in Brandon in the provincial election. In an editorial on 16 April 1920 entitled "The Awakening Masses," the *Confederate* asserted that

The history of labour is oppression. From earliest times until the present hour the productivity of human labour has been carried on under one or another form of oppression. The central and prime problem of today is the emancipation of the working class from economic and industrial oppression ... By the nomination of a Labor Candidate the challenge is given squarely and fairly to the traditional and reactionary elements who are solidifying into the old parties.⁵⁰

At the convention held Tuesday, 27 April attended by 106 voting delegates representing 26 organizations, Smith was nominated from among ten candidates to run as a candidate of the Brandon Labour Party in the provincial election. A platform including support for the introduction of vocational training in the secondary schools, the adoption of the principle of collective bargaining, the enforcement of a national minimum standard of living, the extension of the hydroelectric power line to Brandon and the Western portion of the Province, and the socialization of industry and capital was approved by the convention. The *Confederate* celebrated Smith's nomination by announcing that "Labor has heard the challenge. The cry of the people has rang in its ears. It has shaken off its sloth and is awake."⁵¹

Predictably, Smith's opposition in the Brandon constituency came from candidates of the Liberal and Conservative parties. These parties had emerged in Brandon, complete with a partisan newspapers, during the 1880s. Gerald Friesen has concluded that the Liberal and Conservative Parties in the West

⁵⁰On the decision to call the meeting see the *Brandon Sun*, 5 April 1920 and 12 April. *Confederate*, 16 April 1920.

⁵¹*Confederate*, 30 April 1920.

were parties with eastern Canadian roots and British intellectual forbears; they may have expressed significant differences in those communities, but in translation to the prairie west they came to represent two versions of the same class and cultural loyalties.⁵²

In Brandon, old-line parties had dominated the city's politics, successfully exercising hegemony over agrarian voluntarists during the 1880s and 1890s and an increasingly militant working class in the years after the turn of the century. In the 1920 provincial election, it was increasingly evident that the city's politics had been transformed in the crucible of World War I. In the weeks before the election the prospect of running one strong candidate against Smith vanished when the incumbent, Smith's adversary from First Church, Stephen Clement, who had been discredited by one term in the Legislature, insisted on running in the election.

In an editorial assessment of the candidates two weeks before the election, the *Brandon Sun* condemned Clement for having failed completely to defend and advance the interests of the city. Smith fared no better. The *Sun* asserted that given a position of influence and prominence, he would "sow bitter seeds of dissension and distrust regarding fundamental and sacred things. He will set forth views ... that will set class against class and cause endless bitterness and jealousy."⁵³ Of the three candidates, the *Sun* believed that Brigadier General Kirkcaldy, a man who insisted on campaigning in full military uniform, had the most to commend him for Kirkcaldy "had served the city and the Empire faithfully and well. He supplied leadership in many cris[e]s abroad and can do so here at home were forces of unrest are taking advantages of injustices to provoke a greater crisis than any yet faced."⁵⁴

On June 18, 1920 the *Sun* reduced the contest to Smith versus Kirkcaldy. After condemning Clement for not withdrawing so that the contest could be between "the Reds and a candidate favouring constitutional methods," the *Sun* signalled the growing support for the Labour campaign, by asserting that the central issue of the campaign was not the questionable record of Premier T.C. Norris' liberal regime, but whether Brandon should be represented "by a Red," for Smith had "proven himself an apostle of unrest." His election would only provide him a "'grub stake' to enable him to continue to set class against class and spread the doctrine of revolution."⁵⁵

The *Sun* sought to mobilize the traditional authority of the church against Smith. It advised its readers that there was "reason to believe that not one of the ministers of the Christian Church in Brandon endorses the candidature of A.E. Smith or the revolution he has ceased to work for openly during the election campaign."⁵⁶ Two days before the election, the *Sun* printed an open letter from Rev. James Savage, who had resigned from St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in

⁵²Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: a History* (Toronto 1984), 342.

⁵³*The Brandon Daily Sun*, 15 June 1920.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 18 June 1920.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 26 June 1920.

Brandon's East End working-class district because of a dispute with his congregation over Smith. This letter, published on the front page, asserted that

For months past our city has harboured A.E. Smith and countenanced his anti-Christian and pagan teachings. He is undermining our Christian institutions, stirring up a constant agitation, ill-will and class strife." Did the citizens of Brandon "want to give this arch-perverter of faith and morals an indemnity from the funds of this province to keep him preaching Bolshevism, Sovietism, and 'proletarian dictatorship'?"⁵⁷

In the election, Smith prevailed. He won ten of 21 polls and 1,912 votes compared to 1,511 for Clement and 1,232 for Kirkcaldy. A large procession headed by a band paraded the main streets of the city finally ending at the residence of the new member where Smith triumphantly asserted that the election marked the "dawn of a great day when the emancipation of the workers will be complete."⁵⁸

In the wake of the 1920 provincial election four groups including the Liberal party, the Conservative party, the Independent Farmers, and Labour vied for power in the provincial Legislature. In mid-March of 1922, after two years in office dependent on the votes of opposition groups for survival, the provincial government of T.C. Norris was defeated. In late April a convention of the Brandon Labour Party was held to nominate a candidate for the provincial election. Three hundred people attended, including 75 delegates from various labour organizations in the city. The RCMP estimated that 20 per cent of those in attendance were "foreigners" while three per cent were women. Smith's nomination was unanimous and a platform was approved by the convention. A committee was elected to support Smith in the campaign.⁵⁹

Smith's victory in the 1920 provincial election had come at a time when the hegemony of the city's business elite was under attack. The factionalism of the civic elite in not countering Smith with one business candidate had opened the door to Smith's victory in a three-cornered contest. By 1922 there was an appreciation that the times called for special initiative unprecedented in Brandon politics. A change in the personnel, organization, and policy of the business party was required. Though it was hardly required, the drive to defeat Smith was given greater impetus by the fact that planning for the 1922 provincial election went on in the midst of a bitter schools controversy in which Smith was involved which had divided the city and devastated the community's schools.⁶⁰ In the election of 1922,

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 28 June 1920.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 30 June 1920.

⁵⁹RCMP Report, 21 April 1922, *Access*. The Platform of the Brandon Labour Party was published in the *Winnipeg Evening Tribune*, 6 May 1922. It never appeared in the *Brandon Daily Sun*.

⁶⁰Tom Mitchell, "'We Must Stand Fast for the Sake of Our Profession': Teachers, Collective Bargaining, and the Brandon Schools Controversy of 1922," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 26, 1 (Spring 1991).

the combined forces of the Liberal and Conservative parties and dissident elements in the labour community waged a ferocious campaign against Smith on behalf of a "fusionist" candidate in a drive to discredit labour radicalism in the city.

Smith was aware that members of Brandon's business elite were determined to defeat him and had forsworn their traditional factionalism in a determined effort to do so. He believed that there was

only one basis of union in which the two parties can unite in the city of Brandon and that is the basis of hate and prejudice against the Labor party which represents the true interests of the people.⁶¹

In fact, this joint initiative to field a candidate had originated with the Brandon Liberal Party which decided in mid-May to seek the support of the Conservatives to oppose A.E. Smith. By 25 May 1922, agreement had been reached between these traditional adversaries to convene the next evening and select a joint candidate. Each party was to send four delegates for each of the 21 polls in the constituency.⁶²

During the meeting of the delegates on May 26, attention turned to consideration of Norris' agriculture minister, G.H. Malcolm, as a possible independent candidate for Brandon. To allow time to determine whether Malcolm would be interested in running in Brandon, the meeting was adjourned until 30 May.⁶³ At this meeting, 168 accredited delegates unanimously selected Dr. J.H. Edminson as a fusion candidate to contest the Brandon constituency against Smith. Edminson had not surfaced until the morning of May 30. Clearly he was a compromise candidate, described in the *Winnipeg Tribune* as "known to all citizens as a man of the highest integrity and ... popular among all classes."⁶⁴ Electability seemed to be the principal concern in the selection of Edminson for, as the *Tribune* explained, "Nobody seemed to know to what political faith Edminson belonged and no one seemed to care."⁶⁵ In announcing Edminson's victory, Dr. J.S. Matheson, who chaired the meeting, announced triumphantly that "There are no Grits or Tories now, are there?" For his part, Edminson allowed that he was new to the political game. However, if he was elected he would "forget all party politics and act as an independent." Moreover, he would vote in the interests of the city of Brandon and of the electors of the province.⁶⁶

Well before the election call, Smith had told an audience of 130 at the People's Church that he expected the United Farmers of Manitoba to sweep the province

⁶¹RCMP Report, 18 May 1922, *Access/CSIS*, 270.

⁶²*The Winnipeg Evening Tribune*, 20 May 1922; *Ibid.*, 26 May 1922.

⁶³Press reports indicate that Malcolm, the Minister of Agriculture in the Norris government, was viewed as a potential Premier in the event that the United Farmers of Manitoba won the provincial election. See the *Winnipeg Evening Tribune*, 2 May 1922 and *ibid.*, 27 May 1922.

⁶⁴*Winnipeg Evening Tribune*, 31 May 1922.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*

⁶⁶*Ibid.* For Brandon reports see the *Brandon Daily Sun*, 31 May 1922.

and carry about 35 seats. Moreover, Smith expected Labour to do well and to line up in the House with the agrarians. Though the UFA had decided during its 1921 convention to enter provincial politics as an organized force, in 1922, no UFA candidate was nominated for the Brandon constituency. Yet Smith did not benefit from this. The executive of the UFM did not view labour sympathetically. In fact, no provision was made for an exchange of views between labour and farmers at the 1921 convention except for a luncheon address by Smith.⁶⁷ Arguably, the United Farmers did not nominate a candidate in Brandon because they understood that both Smith and Edminson were prepared to associate themselves with the farmers in the Legislature.

In the election campaign of June and July, Beatrice Brigden recalled being "dumbfounded by the bitterness, hostility and hatred displayed by the *Sun* against Smith and everyone in the congregation whom they accused of every evil there was."⁶⁸ Following one meeting as Brigden left a meeting room E.C. Whitehead, the publisher of the *Brandon Sun* and an ardent opponent of Smith, gave her such a shove she was barely able to save herself from a serious fall.⁶⁹ The *Brandon Sun* largely ignored the Smith campaign. When it did report on Smith campaign activities its bias was evident. For example, on June 23 the *Sun* reported that

The red 'labor' meeting held in the city Hall Thursday night was attended only by the chosen and elect few, and the addresses both of W. Baily, communist candidate in Assiniboia, and A.E. Smith, concentrated mainly on references to the *Brandon Sun* and ... a specious setting forth of the 'righteous' demands of the 'labor' group.⁷⁰

Edminson's campaign received regular and favourable coverage. For his part, Edminson sought support from the city's workers. During a rally 23 June, Edminson stated that he stood for "constitutional Government." He declared he had always been sympathetic to labour and that if elected, he could do as much for labour in the legislature as his opponent. Moreover, Edminson claimed that he was not tied to either the Conservative or Liberal Party.⁷¹

The labour unity which had characterized the 1920 provincial election campaign was not evident in 1922. In autumn 1920, divisions among unionized workers undermined the unity of Manitoba's labour political movement. A split between international unions and the legislative "labour" group, which emerged as the Independent Labour Party by the end of 1920, worsened. The Norris government's defeat in mid-March 1922 on a censure motion supported by the entire labour group

⁶⁷*Western Labour News*, 21 January 1922.

⁶⁸Eugene Pirie, "A.E. Smith," 67.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*

⁷⁰*The Brandon Daily Sun*, 23 June 1922.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 24 June 1922.

“brought cries of anguish and condemnation” from members of the Winnipeg Trades and Labour Council.⁷²

Although Smith sought to avoid identification with any one camp, he did not maintain the support of all elements of the Brandon labour movement. Edminson’s campaign benefited by some notable defections from Smith’s previous supporters. For example, at an organizational meeting associated with Edminson’s campaign, R.T. Smith, a leading figure in the city labour movement and an erstwhile supporter of Smith and the People’s Church, asserted that Smith did not represent him.⁷³ Another prominent local labour figure, Robert Crawford, told an election rally that he supported the stand taken by the international unions, as well as a Winnipeg Trades and Labour resolution opposing the labour group in the Legislature. Crawford could support neither Smith nor the labour group headed by F.J. Dixon because of their “socialistic tendencies.” Crawford also recalled Smith’s criticism of him for keeping the railway running trades at work during spring 1919 Brandon sympathetic strike. As Crawford explained, he would not

forget what happened in 1919 when the attitude of Mr. Smith was against me personally because of the stand taken by R.T. Smith and myself in being instrumental in saving the international unions from disaster. As long as he continues to wage red propaganda he can count on it that I will continue to be a thorn in his side.⁷⁴

Throughout the campaign, Smith’s character and patriotism were attacked. In a speech in Brandon, Premier Norris announced that he did not think that Smith was “a labor man at all, but that he is a socialist of the extreme kind; he is opposed to the present system of constitutional government and therefore cannot be considered a good citizen of Manitoba.”⁷⁵ On 30 June 1922, the *Sun* editorially attacked Smith for portraying the city as a place that was

overlorded by brutal men who employed down trodden browbeaten workers whom they rob and are otherwise unjust. This old nonsense is the stock-in-trade of all labor extremists, socialists of the red kind and the more oily spokesmen of the cause of the proletariat. Nevertheless that is the whole substance of the long winded diatribes of the apostle of menace opposing Citizen Dr. Edminson.⁷⁶

On 18 July, Edminson prevailed, winning 14 of 22 polls and 3249 votes to Smith’s 2026. The *Sun* reported that the campaign was one of the best organized in any election in the city. Edminson’s campaign had benefited in particular from

⁷²Martin Robin, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour, 1880-1930* (Kingston 1968), 215.

⁷³*The Brandon Daily Sun*, 14 June 1922.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 29 June 1922.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 22 June 1922.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 30 June 1922.

the recruitment of women to his organization. This was likely in response to the continued importance of the People's Church in Smith's campaign.⁷⁷

Smith's prospects in Brandon after his 1922 defeat was increasingly unattractive. As early as spring 1920, he had told the People's Church congregation that his income from the Church was inadequate. With the loss of Smith's MLA stipend, his personal financial situation worsened. In October 1922, Smith told the congregation that he had started a class in Brandon for the study of working-class problems in which he had enrolled 27 people, charging \$2.00 a head for 12 lectures.⁷⁸ By March 1923, Smith was searching farther afield for alternatives. He announced a plan to tour Ontario with a view to organizing People's Forums in various communities. These would be linked with the People's Church movement in the West. He required \$1,200 for the tour. He planned to contribute \$200 himself; he hoped to get support from the Labour MLAs and MPs. He asked the congregation for \$400.⁷⁹

In April 1923, Smith was in Toronto attempting to form a labour church. On April 8, he addressed an audience at the Toronto Labour Temple and secured a promise of support for such a venture. Describing his church to those who attended the meeting, Smith said it laid emphasis upon sociology, economics, and history. He explained that although the term "church" was capitalized, there was no attempt to convert sinners, and that the idea was "to get people to come [in] our direction."⁸⁰ By June 1923 Smith had decided to move to Toronto. On June 25th the RCMP assistant commissioner sent his commanding officer in Toronto Smith's "personal history file."⁸¹

Smith arrived in Toronto in August 1923. On 10 September 1923 he addressed the Toronto People's Church for the first time. He outlined the objectives of the Church as summarized in its "Declaration of Precepts." Typical of the Social Gospel, the Precepts were concerned uniformly with the kind of social ethics appropriate to the "New Social Order" which would arise following the demise of capitalist society. This order would rest "on the great principles of Love, Justice and Truth."⁸² In October 1923 the executive committee of the People's Church merged with the Forum Committee of the Labour Temple, a branch of the Canadian Labor Party. With this merger, Smith added the responsibilities of Labour Forum Secretary to his activities.

Smith's arrival in Toronto was not ignored by the Communists. Members of the English Branch of the Workers' Party of Canada (WPC) viewed Smith as a

⁷⁷ *Winnipeg Free Press*, 8 June 1922. For detailed results of the election see the *Winnipeg Free Press*, 19 July 1922.

⁷⁸ RCMP Report, 16 October 1922, *Access/CSIS*, 272.

⁷⁹ RCMP Report, 20 March 1923, *Access/CSIS*, 273.

⁸⁰ RCMP Report, 9 April 1923, *Access/CSIS*, 275. See attached the copy of the *Toronto Globe* report of Smith's speech.

⁸¹ RCMP Report, 25 June 1923, *Access/CSIS*, 280.

⁸² RCMP Report, 10 September 1923, *Access/CSIS*, 286-92.

“religious crank” or as a socialist of the J.S. Woodsworth-type. His views were considered dangerously misleading and it was suggested to the Party’s Central Executive Committee that Smith’s views be counteracted by questions asked by Communists at his meetings and in debate.⁸³ In *All My Life*, Smith explains that, in his early days in Toronto, the relative merits of Communism and Social Reformism was the central issue of debate in the Labour Forum and in the Labor Representation Political Association, which was the local federated body of the Canadian Labor Party. It appears that this debate was intentionally joined by the Communists as a way of countering the as yet-unconverted Smith. Smith defended social democratic gradualism while supporting a united front with the Communist Party. Communists Tim Buck, Jack MacDonald, William Moriarty, and Smith’s son Stewart advanced the Communist view at the Labour Forum. Stewart Smith argued in defence of Marxism and the Communist International.⁸⁴

A.E. Smith brought to these debates on Canadian and international developments an epistemology grounded in notions of evolutionary progress and metaphysical naturalism similar to the basic moorings of the Marxism which dominated Russian and social democratic circles in the 1920s, and which Smith encountered through his engagement with Buck, McDonald, Moriarty, and others.⁸⁵ Smith’s turn to Communism required no profound epistemological change. Moreover, little adaptation of Smith’s Social Gospel critique of capitalism was required for him to come to general agreement with members of the Communist movement on economic, social, and political questions. Yet because Smith’s practical politics tended toward the creation of a common front on the left rather than sectarianism, he would decide formally to join the Communist Party, rather than work within a broad social democratic alliance, only after it was evident to him that he had to choose between the Communist Party or the democratic left.

In the meantime, Smith demonstrated a growing tendency to replace the vocabulary of the Social Gospel with that of a secular Marxism. For example, in a speech to the Labour Forum in late November 1923, Smith explained that in the classes he had initiated in the Labour Temple children would not be treated “as wicked sinners, but as vital forces in the social order making for a better day.” He intended to develop a study program for the children which would involve “class-conscious working class teachers as an essential feature of the program.” Here Smith supported the educational views of Soviet theorist Bukharin who recommended, among other things, “the teaching of military science because men and women must be ready when the time came to take their place.”⁸⁶ Lenin’s death in

⁸³RCMP Report, 14 September 1923, *Access/CSIS*, 277.

⁸⁴A.E. Smith, *All My Life*, 73-4. For biographical detail on Macdonald, Buck, Moriarty, and Smith, see Rodney, *Soldiers*, 161-9.

⁸⁵Joseph V. Femia, *Gramsci’s Political Thought* (Oxford 1987), 66-9.

⁸⁶RCMP Report, 14 November 1923, *Access/CSIS*, 294-5. Bukharin, who espoused a fatalistic, determinist Marxism has been described as “the foremost Soviet systematizer of Marxism in the 1920s.” See Joseph V. Femia, *Gramsci’s Political Thought*, 67.

January 1924 also preoccupied Smith. In a address to the Canadian Labor Party in February of 1924 Smith celebrated the Soviet leader's revolutionary exploits.

While Smith's commitments were increasingly secular in orientation, he still sought a spiritual dimension in his work. He was not disappointed. On 18 February 1924, in an address to the Toronto Methodist Ministerial Association, Smith explained, in relation to his growing involvement in the ranks of labour, that he found "deeper spiritual and religious satisfaction in this most vital and penetrating movement than I have had anywhere in my life before."⁸⁷

In June 1924 Smith returned to the West on a speaking tour. On 15 June he addressed the Regina Central Council of the Canadian Labor Party. Reflecting a strong Marxist perspective, Smith explained to the meeting of approximately 200 that the Canadian Labor Party was in reality an economic organization because all political movements, in the last analysis, were an expression or reflex of economic conditions and struggles. His speech dealt almost exclusively with a secular Marxist analysis of history. His comments were divided into four sections: the origin of capitalist exploitation; the epoch of revolution; the fall of the bourgeoisie; and the road to the dictatorship of the proletariat. Though Smith continued to speak on behalf of the Canadian Labor Party it was evident that he was moving from a general commitment to social democracy grounded in the social gospel to a commitment to Marxism.⁸⁸

Smith visited Brandon on 12 June 1924 to address the People's Church. Following Smith's departure in 1923 the leadership of the People's Church had fallen to Beatrice Bridgen. It operated a Sunday School for 40-50 children, held a Sunday service, Children's Expression and Men's Public Speaking Classes, and had an active Women's Group. Several Communist families had become more active in the Church after Smith's departure. Bridgen had the impression that they thought that they could take it over. However she explained that "they caused no trouble, ... the fact was that most people were not particularly fond of them."⁸⁹ This explanation also explains RCMP reports that following Smith's departure, the Church had become more sympathetic to Communism.

In a report based on an interview with Bridgen, one writer has reported that "in 1924 the Communists attempted to gain control of the Church and, rather than have that happen, Bridgen closed it down."⁹⁰ Further, that the People's Church was replaced by the Brandon Labour Forum. This explanation is contradicted by a

⁸⁷RCMP Report, 20 February 1924, 117-92-049, 302-3. This file consists of approximately two hundred pages of Royal Canadian Mounted Police reports for the years 1923-1930 dealing principally with Smith's entry into the Communist Party of Canada and his public activities on behalf of the Party and allied organizations.

⁸⁸RCMP Report, 17 June 1924, *Access/CSIS*, 309-10.

⁸⁹Beatrice Bridgen, "One Woman's Crusade for Social Reform and Social Purity," *Bridgen Papers* (PAM), MG 14 C19.

⁹⁰K.O. Wormsbecker, "The Rise and Fall of the Labour Political Movement in Manitoba, 1919-1927," MA thesis, Queen's University, 1977, 167.

report of Smith's address to the Church in June 1924. This report explains that Smith told his audience that the People's Church had been created in Brandon in 1919 as the New People's Church but should be known as the Labour Forum to correspond to the name used by organizations of the same nature all over the country. Such a report is consistent with Smith's efforts to establish Labour Forums in Toronto and other locations in Ontario and with the change in the name of the People's Church to the Brandon Labour Forum in late 1924.⁹¹

Indeed, Bridgen was also interested in creating affiliated organizations throughout the West. In November 1922 she organized the Labour Women's Social and Economic Conference, a two-day conference that was held annually for a number of years. Beginning in 1923 she undertook the task of booking speakers who would be available for meetings across the West. The "Forum Speakers Bureau" operated for several years, arranging for about six speakers from October to March for meetings from the Lakehead to Victoria. From Toronto, Smith cooperated with Bridgen in securing speakers for this circuit.⁹²

In summer and autumn 1924, Smith's estrangement from the Toronto social democratic movement became increasingly evident. Following his return to Toronto from the West, Smith tried to establish a summer camp at Scarboro Bluffs under the auspices of the Toronto and Birch Cliff Canadian Labor Party locals. It was to commence 24 July 1920. As its educational director, Smith was responsible for the camp program. Smith's program included the examination of various "problems of the social order," along with sports and entertainment activities. The camp was to be an extension of the educational work undertaken by the Labour Temple during winter 1924. As part of the educational program Smith recruited J.S. Woodsworth and Lucy Woodsworth, and Communists Jack MacDonald, Maurice Spector, and William Moriarty to address camp clients. But the camp folded within two weeks of its opening. The principal reason for its failure were objections from members of the Birch Cliff Labor Party to some of Smith's teachings and his invitation to Communists to speak at the camp.⁹³

In autumn 1924 Smith continued with classes for the Labour Temple. Trouble lay on this horizon, however, too. In November 1924 he resigned from the Forum Committee as

some members of the executive committee felt that I was too much disposed to bring Communist teachings into my lectures and working arrangements. They alleged that I was trying to make "Communists" out of them. The fact that my son Stewart had become National Secretary of the Young Communist League was raised by them.⁹⁴

⁹¹RCMP Report, 9 June 1924, *Access/CSIS*, 316-7.

⁹²RCMP Report, 22 June 1925, *Access/CSIS*, 389-90.

⁹³RCMP Reports, 11 July, 14 July, 21 August 1924, *Access/CSIS*, 319-24.

⁹⁴A.E. Smith, *All My Life*, 75.

Then, in December he broke with the Toronto People's Church after again being accused of being inclined too much to Communism.

As Smith's career was now rooted in his labour political activities, his political isolation also spelled professional isolation. With few options to hand, Smith approached the Communist Party with a view to the creation of Labour Forums throughout Ontario. Jack MacDonald approached the District Executive Committee on Smith's behalf in December 1924. Smith had advised MacDonald that if he joined the party, a number of younger men in the Labor Party would follow suit. Smith believed that he could be of assistance as an educator. The outcome was that the Communist Party engaged Smith to establish Independent Open Labour Forums throughout Ontario. His remuneration was set at \$15 a week. It was agreed that the Communist role in the creation of these forums would not be publicized. However, the Party would provide Smith with contacts in towns throughout the province and these individuals would be asked to provide Smith with all the help he required. Smith would be directly, but not publicly, governed by a Party committee, including Jack MacDonald representing the Central Executive Committee and William Moriarty representing the District Executive Committee. The intention was to create Party branches through the formation of these Forums. Smith was encouraged to create a Forum Committee involving James Simpson and other members of the Canadian Labor Party and the Independent Labour Party as well as one or two members of the Communist Party as a front organization for the Forum movement. The creation of such a body would obscure Smith's connection with the Communist Party.⁹⁵

Though Smith had undertaken the work for the Communist Party, he was not yet a member. Yet it was clear from his break with the Labour Temple and the People's Church and his overtures to the Communist Party that he once again was at a crossroads. He was also short of money. His sole earnings derived from a little work done writing for papers and magazines. Though Smith had been offered an opportunity to return to the mainstream church and had been invited to lecture for the newly created Sociological Institute of Canada, he declined, explaining that his ideas had changed because of his activities in the labour movement since 1919.⁹⁶

In early January 1925, Smith was elected President of the Toronto Unemployed Association. The organization's prior leadership had been weak. An RCMP report at the time noted that "There is no doubt that A.E. Smith may build this up into a powerful organization. He has the education, the organization ability, and he can control the mass mob ... associated with this movement." At a 28 January meeting of the Toronto Branch of what was now termed the Unemployed Association of Canada, Smith was elected editor of the *Unemployment Review*. He was to receive \$15 a week for this work. Smith sent several thousand copies of the *Review* to Western Canada and sought the involvement of J.S. Woodsworth to speak

⁹⁵ RCMP Report, 1 December 1924, *Access/CSIS*, 328-9.

⁹⁶ RCMP Report, 1 December 1924, *Access/CSIS*, 328-9.

publicly on the Association's behalf in the West. Smith was also active in preparing a draft Unemployment Insurance bill to be submitted to the House of Commons.⁹⁷

Aside from professional and political considerations, Smith's future commitments likely were influenced by the career of his son Stewart. In 1923, shortly after the family's arrival in Toronto from Brandon, Stewart Smith had joined the Young Workers' League. On 24 October 1924, at age 16, he became the National Secretary for the Young Communist League. His early activities involved organizational work with the League, editing *The Young Worker*, and speaking at Forum meetings and rallies. Norman Penner has explained that in 1924, Smith "was elected to the Party's top political committee at the age of 16 ..." By 1925 the younger Smith was a growing power within the Communist Party. His father hardly could have ignored Stewart's activities. It seems evident that he encouraged his son's radicalism and increasingly came to agree with his political perspective.⁹⁸

Any doubt about A.E. Smith's future was resolved 12 February 1925, when Smith and his wife joined the English Branch of the Communist Party of Canada in Toronto.⁹⁹ Smith's decision to become a Communist seems more a strategic political and professional decision than one based in any profound intellectual transformation. While his increasingly secular and Marxist orientation reflected the influence of his contact with members of the Communist movement, Smith's basic epistemological orientation remained positivist, Darwinian, and naturalistic. His ability to graft the ideology of the Communist International onto the epistemology which had been the basis of his radical Social Gospel was evident when he explained his commitment to Communism to a *Toronto Star Weekly* reporter in April 1925:

My convictions for years have been very strongly developing towards a more and more radical viewpoint. ... Communism [was] a social innovation, which according to natural scientific interpretation of an innovation in nature varies the species and heightens the life. Human society [was] now in the period of what might be called social invention; the inventive processes of man [were] ... being devoted to devising means of improving social structures. All social structures have come out of experience and human experience [was] continuous and ever expanding and ever deepening in intelligence and understanding. Consequently Communism, from this point of view, [was] not an accident or incident arising out of the whim or caprice of somebody or some principle, but it [was] a development of human experience, and it [would] continue on that basis.¹⁰⁰

Smith noted that the "gist of my teaching is from this biological standpoint."¹⁰¹ Smith added that the process of change and progress was most evident socially in

⁹⁷RCMP Reports, 15 January, 22 January, 29 January, and 25 February 1925, *Access to Information File*, 330-5 and 337.

⁹⁸RCMP Report, 12 February 1925, *Access/CSIS*, 336.

⁹⁹*Toronto Star Weekly*, Saturday, 25 April 1925.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*

the class struggle. From Smith's perspective, the principal question for society concerned working-class emancipation from economic oppression. This question implicated all the problems of society, the state, and the economic system.¹⁰²

Smith's commitment to Communist Party activism was immediately evident in his busy schedule of addresses to various labour bodies. In early May 1925, Smith addressed the Party's Hamilton Branch. Smith opened by alluding to the persecution and slaughter of Communist comrades all over Europe. While Canada retained some democratic freedoms, Smith believed that once the capitalist class realized how powerful the Party was they would attempt to crush it. Still, Smith believed that the day will come "when the wage earners will drive out the Capitalists in rivers of blood if need be, and take hold of the industries and of the Dominion of Canada ..."¹⁰³

Touring the West under the auspices of the Brandon People's Forum Speakers Bureau, on 1 June 1925 he told that city's Labour Forum that he "walked the street as a revolutionist and that he was out to spread revolution far and wide." In the final contest for power "both men and women would have to be prepared to sacrifice their lives, for it was going to be a hard fight and the better class would win." In Regina on 9 June 1925, he urged the need to educate the working class about class struggle. On 22 June he addressed Edmonton Communists. He spoke about the Canadian Labor Party, emphasizing the power of the Communists in that organization. In reference to the People's Form Speakers Bureau of Brandon, Smith noted that the Canadian Labor Party had contributed a number of speakers. He hoped in the near future to have a number of international Communist and other revolutionary speakers from Europe and the United States tour the West. Smith told the audience that Communism was "the spearhead of the Proletarian movement, forcing in the thin edge of the wedge that will overthrow the present ruling class. Communism is the crystallized action of the revolutionary forces of the world."¹⁰⁴

Addressing the Edmonton Labour Church on 23 June 1925, Smith related his experience in Brandon and how he had been defeated by combined forces of the old-line parties. However, he had not been defeated in his purpose, for he had gone to Toronto to become Canadian Labor Party president and had taken up work as a labour educator. He had started out his work for the Toronto Labor Temple with mild views, but had advanced "step by step until he reached Marxism, and finally the plain bread of Leninism."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰²For information of Stewart Smith's early years in the Communist Party see Norman Penner, *The Canadian Left -- A Critical Analysis* (Toronto 1977), 89-90; Lita-Rose Betcherman, *The Little Band* (Ottawa nd), 8-9; and Rodney. *Soldiers*, 168-9.

¹⁰³RCMP Report, 5 May 1925, *Access/CSIS*, 349-50.

¹⁰⁴RCMP Reports, 1 June, 9 June, 22 and June 1925, *Access/CSIS*, 319-24.

¹⁰⁵RCMP Report, 23 June 1925, *Access/CSIS*, 391-6. On 14 April 1925 Smith was elected President of the Canadian Labor Party.

Smith's 1947 autobiographical account of his decision to join the Party is consistent with the explanation given his Edmonton audience in the late spring of 1925. In *All My Life*, Smith acknowledged his early commitment to gradualism and evolution against revolution. Experience had changed his views. He also noted the influence of the Russian Revolution. While the Soviet government had succeeded,

elsewhere the social-democratic parties of labor had produced retreat and defeat. In Italy fascism had come to power. The Labor government in England had been a great disappointment to me.¹⁰⁶

Though his conversion to Communism had been gradual, in the end there was no hesitation for Communism "challenged my mind and spirit." In short, his decision

was based upon firm and deep and studied conviction that in communism we had found the basic movement which would steadily grow into the agency by which the workers would achieve the release of mankind from economic and political bondage, from ignorance and disease - the broad movement which would eventually bring forth the true nature and spirit of man in a classless society of firm, conscious Brotherhood over all the earth."¹⁰⁷

Smith quickly emerged and remained a central figure in the Communist Party. His entry into the Party and his commitment to work within the organization for the remainder of his life cannot be accounted for as an overnight transformation or as the product of an almost-inevitable transition from Biblical liberalism to Marxism. It is clear that Smith remained dedicated to the radical Social Gospel until at least 1923. It is equally evident that after his arrival in Toronto, Smith's contact with leading Canadian Communists, the growing prestige of the Soviet state, and his disillusionment with the social democratic movement in Canada and abroad, helped shift Smith's perspective from the optimistic verities of the Social Gospel to the Communist International's apocalyptic vision. Increasingly, his attraction to Communism was evident in his public declarations and in his association with Party members. While Smith's political views were increasingly radical, he was not inclined to sectarian politics. Accordingly, his entry into the Communist Party was not so much a product of intellectual or political conversion as it was the result of his growing political and professional estrangement from the democratic left. By 1925, his erstwhile supporters in the Toronto Labour Temple simply found Smith's views and his Communist associations insupportable. Smith was left with few options; ultimately, he chose to join the Communist Party. One other factor should be noted. While difficult to assess, Stewart Smith's growing involvement in the Communist Party and his unusual prominence in Communist circles cannot be ignored in explaining his father's entry into the Party. Underlying all of this was Smith's continuing personal engagement in ushering in the New Jerusalem.

¹⁰⁶ A.E. Smith, *All My Life*, 75-6.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

The author would like to acknowledge the valuable suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper of Errol Black, Gerhard Ens, and the anonymous readers of Labour/Le Travail.

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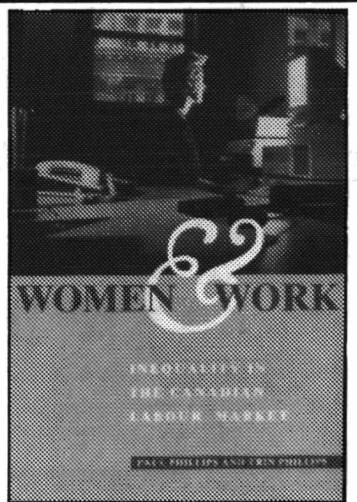
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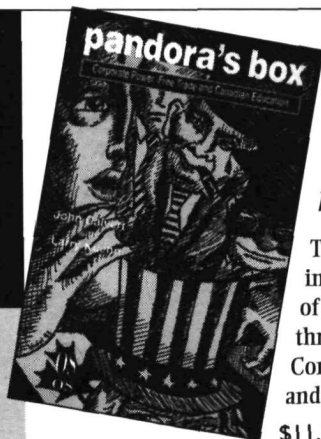
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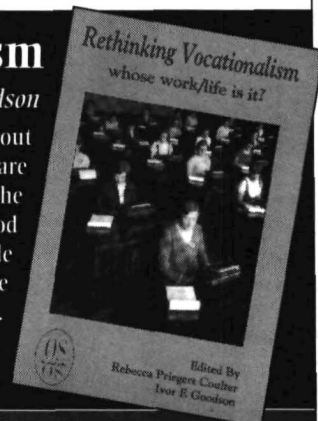
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