

Religion and Society in Late Eighteenth Century Nova Scotia

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Reviews/Revues

Religion and Society in Late Eighteenth Century Nova Scotia

For most Canadians British North America in the late eighteenth century is at best a distant and vague reality. Few artifacts have survived from that generation; folk memory is of a wilderness inhabited by scattered groups of immigrants and refugees. For those nourished on the tradition of Canadian history as the fur trade in search of a country or the centrality of the emergence of Ontario, Nova Scotia in the revolutionary age is shrouded in a thick historical mist. Until recently, the assumption has been that there was little reason to dispel the fog and indeed that not much of importance lay behind it.

Within the last two decades, however, Canadian historians have become more sensitive to the persistence of regional differences in Canada and to the central Canadian bias of much historical writing. With this has come a greater awareness of the potentialities of the detailed study of local societies, of the significance of value systems in the development of communities, and of the fertilizing effect of comparative studies. This has been accompanied by an increasing interest in the influence of religious ideas and practices in society, which in Canada may well have been stimulated by the remarkable contrast between the enormous vitality of American historiography in this field as compared with our own.

As an outpost originally of New England, a resting place for many Loyalists, and as a province that still retains a distinctive sense of identity, Nova Scotia is a natural subject for research in regional, local and religious history. Significantly, if fortuitously, the three works to be considered here¹ have appeared within the last four years; each is concerned with the interplay between religion and society in Nova Scotia in the years immediately before and after the Loyalist migration.

In *The Neutral Yankees of Nova Scotia*, J.B. Brebner paid little attention to the religious revival that swept Nova Scotia during the American Revolution. M.W. Armstrong's *The Great Awakening in Nova Scotia* (1948) gave a full and sympathetic account of this movement, but placed it in the context of the "frontier" interpretation. It was in S.D. Clark's words: "an expression of the levelling forces of the frontier,"² but Clark emphasized as well that the awakening "represented . . . something of an adjustment in the village

1 Bumsted, J.M. *Henry Aline (1748-1784)* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1971); Stewart, G., Rawlyk, G. *A People Highly Favoured of God: The Nova Scotia Yankees and the American Revolution* (Toronto, Macmillan, 1972); Fingard, J. *The Anglican Design in Loyalist Nova Scotia, 1783-1816* (London, S.P.C.K., 1972).

2 Clark, S.D. *Movements of Political Protest in Canada 1640-1840* (Toronto, 1959), p. 73.

society of New Englanders in Nova Scotia forced on it by revolution in the homeland and the development of a trading economy in the new land.”³

Henry Alline, the driving force of the revival, remained, however, a rather shadowy figure, an impression strengthened by the brevity of his career. The more knowledgeable may have been impressed by John Wesley’s comment that Alline “is far from being a man of sound understanding; but he has been dabbling in Mystical writers, in matters which are too high for him, far above his comprehension. I dare not waste my time upon such miserable jargon.” (p.88) J.M. Bumsted’s brief biography, *Henry Alline, 1748-1784*, constitutes a serious endeavour to fill out the contours of Alline’s career and ideas and to assess the implications of his work. It benefits markedly from the author’s familiarity with the New England background and his research in the local roots of the Great Awakening in those colonies, a revival of which Alline’s movement was in many ways a direct descendant.

In his thoughtful and perceptive study, Bumsted has sought first to place Alline’s religious experience within the New England pietist tradition. Raised as he was in a society in which religion and the church were indispensable ingredients, but which because of its disoriented and disorganized condition, offered little in the way of religious or social satisfaction, Alline, a sensitive and fearful adolescent, studied “much to find out how to get in favour with the great invisible God.” (p. 38) So strong, however, was the Puritan tradition of a learned ministry that for some time Alline resisted the urge to preach. The outbreak of the Revolution sealed off Yankee Nova Scotia from its intellectual and religious roots, and drove Alline to begin the proclamation of a message derived from his own resources, and one which in part because of the times “rejected and transcended the tribulations of the secular world . . .” (p. 49)

Despite Alline’s inadequate education, Bumsted contends that he was “more than a simple-minded evangelical; he was British Canada’s most important and prolific intellectual voice in the 18th century . . .” (p. 77) In sermons, pamphlets, hymns, and his autobiography, Alline sought to reconcile his religious experience with his Calvinist heritage, a feat that depended largely on the teachings of Wesley’s mentor, William Law. The resulting message included several distinct emphases. Alline stressed that all men are “equally sinful and all mankind can be saved.” (p. 87) Men rather than God elect salvation or damnation for themselves. From Law’s mysticism, he derived the notion that the natural world is inferior to the spiritual, which led him in turn to advocate extreme asceticism. “Material existence was by definition an iniquity which must be overcome.” (p. 92) His belief that the world is of no account and must be forsaken, along with

3 Clark, S.D. *Church and Sect in Canada* (Toronto, 1948), pp. 38-9.

his conviction that the gospel is for all, led Alline to exalt the poor and the despicable and to cast doubt on the validity of the existing social and political order. Indeed, Alline's tenets were potentially revolutionary. His early death, the primitive condition of Nova Scotia, his single-minded concentration on preaching, and his lack of concern for institutional arrangements militated against the full absorption and development of their implications.

Between 1776 and 1784, Alline journeyed feverishly through the Nova Scotian settlements, expounding his message of the new birth and the necessity of escaping the material and social pressures of the world, destroying existing congregations and founding new ones. The enthusiasm and the opposition which he generated and the following he gathered owed something, Bumsted argues, to the "discontented rootlessness" of rural Nova Scotia which was heightened by the impact of the Revolution. More important, the New Englanders in particular had "strong religious reasons for being favourably disposed to the phenomenon." (p. 66) "To see the Great Awakening in Nova Scotia only in a political context would be a great mistake;" rather it was "principally a movement of spiritual reform much like those which had over the centuries convulsed Christianity." (p. 68) In effect, Alline's movement was not so much a product of the frontier spirit as a testimony to the authority and persistence of the religious tradition which he and his followers had inherited. In his iconoclastic and eclectic way, Alline breathed new life into that tradition and helped thereby to ensure its continuance in Nova Scotia.

As befits a biographer, Dr. Bumsted has concentrated upon the life without losing sight of the times in which his subject lived. In contrast, Professors Stewart and Rawlyk have sought in *A People Highly Favoured of God: The Nova Scotia Yankees and the American Revolution*, to reassess the reaction of the Nova Scotia Yankees to the Revolution, and the impact of Henry Alline's spiritual crusade on Nova Scotian opinion during that period. They have written in effect a two-part study in which the customary explanation of Nova Scotia's neutrality is questioned, and the Great Awakening is depicted as the means by which the Nova Scotia Yankees took the first step towards becoming Nova Scotians.

In his classic work, *The Neutral Yankees of Nova Scotia*, J.B. Brebner argued that the response of the Nova Scotia Yankees to the revolutionary war was the product of the same circumstances which led the Acadians to adopt a neutral position in the Seven Years' War. Nova Scotia's "insulation from the rest of North America" was, he believed, the "principal clue" to their reaction. On the contrary Stewart and Rawlyk contend that "neutrality was only part of their [the New England settlers'] response to events and even then it was confined to the critical opening months of the revolutionary

war. Neutrality was not a persistent characteristic of Yankee society." Opinion in the new settlements was "fluid and unstable: . . . The war precipitated an acute disorientation in the traditional loyalties and value systems of the Yankees in Nova Scotia."(p. xxi-xxii)

The confusion and hesitations which characterized the Nova Scotia settlements particularly had their origins in their realization that to share a mixed loyalty to the institutions and values of old and New England was no longer adequate or practicable. For a decade and more they had been largely isolated from New England: the outbreak of war made them aware that they were "locked into the pre-1765 conceptual framework they had left behind."(p. 75) In the circumstances they were unable to comprehend the immense changes in the New England political climate during the 1760's and hence were baffled by the acute crisis in the relations between the colonies and the imperial government. Similarly they were unaware that New England preaching had been affected by and had influenced the transformation of opinion, and in the process had acquired a distinctive political orientation. The New England settlers in Nova Scotia continued to accept as valid the traditional religious view that their settlements were agents of Providence in bringing the gospel to a region which had "been wholly a land of heathenish darkness and popish superstition."(p.27) Confronted as they were with the new currents in New England, and the weakness of their own religious institutions, their sense of mission was becoming very uncertain.

Stewart and Rawlyk's thesis is that the Great Awakening in Nova Scotia must be explained and assessed in the framework of their more complex analysis of Nova Scotian attitudes in the war years. "Religious enthusiasm then in this context . . . was symptomatic of a collective identity crisis as well as a searching for an acceptable and meaningful ideology. Resolution of this crisis came not only when people were converted, but also when they accepted Alline's analysis of contemporary events."(p. xxii) Their account of Alline's mission differs subtly and significantly from Bumsted's, but is not necessarily at variance with it.

"By 1783," the authors stress, "Alline had achieved an unprecedented popularity in nearly all of the outsettlements and was the undisputed leader of a major religious revival. He established himself as a charismatic leader and as such he became an agent for initiating a change in some of the cultural values of Nova Scotia society."(p. 140) Alline possessed charisma in that "he regarded himself as divinely sanctioned," and his followers agreed that "his powers were of divine origin."(p. 141) In common with most, if not all, evangelical leaders he spoke of his divinely appointed mission. "The Lord" is "come with a stammering tongue to seek you."(p. 142) His assurance was confirmed by his success, his own confidence in himself, his seeming security from human and physical perils and his good fortune in not being

tied to any institution or location. In response his followers came to insist that his authority "derived from his direct communication with the Almighty." (p. 153)

The task which Providence had laid on Alline was not only to save the unconverted as individuals, but to impart a new direction to the fragile and confused communities of rural Nova Scotia. They were reminded in the most awesome terms that the unconverted would perish, that salvation was available to all and that the converted must gather into new and purified congregations. Beyond that, Alline in common with other prophets such as Jonathan Edwards, assumed that his was "a dying world:" "The Day of Grace is over and the World undone." (p. 155) The war was an infallible sign of the coming catastrophe, an inevitable result of human sin; in no way could it be interpreted, as it was in New England, as a righteous cause on whose success a new society would rest. In these desperate circumstances, the awakening in Nova Scotia was to be understood as a sign that God had given its people a special task. They were to be "as cities on Hills," (p. 177) a destiny easily comprehended, for it had always been a powerful element in the New England value system. But, "at the very moment they revealed their New England background by appropriating New England's traditional 'sense of mission' they had declared their independence of New England." (p. 178)

Among social groups as in individuals, the undermining of traditional loyalties and certainties produces what social psychologists have defined as identity crises. In such circumstances persons are readily persuaded to adopt a new perspective. Stewart and Rawlyk believe, as has been noted, that the revolutionary war destroyed the collective identity of the Nova Scotia Yankees. Alline's teaching, with its familiar overtones, served as an integrating element among a cross-section of the people in the hitherto scattered and unrelated settlements. As such it gave them a new sense of identity and "helped to transform . . . traditional New England religious values into an ideological commitment that cut off the Yankees from the new republic." (p. 191) They could now "regard themselves as a people with a unique history . . . and special destiny." In effect, "by creating a religious ideology that was specifically geared to conditions in the northern colony, the Great Awakening began to turn the Yankees into Nova Scotians." (p. 192) It was not simply as Armstrong contended "a retreat from the grim realities of the world . . ." (p. xx)

If the revival provided more than a measure of comfort and security in a cheerless world, it does not follow that its role was as distinctive and influential as Stewart and Rawlyk assert. Indeed, one could almost say that they have written two books, the first of which constitutes a more discriminating and balanced explanation of Nova Scotia's neutrality than Brebner gave. The second is important in that it is one of the few Canadian works in

which sociological and psychological concepts are used to throw new light on the function of religious movements in the formation of regional societies. They have depicted the Nova Scotia revival in a different way and have made it more difficult simply to classify it as the refuge of the disinherited or the disorganized.

Nonetheless, if one tries to visualize the way in which Alline perceived himself and was seen by his followers one is likely to be somewhat sceptical of these authors' conclusions. Certainly Alline believed that he had a divine mission, but his primary objective was to prevent souls from slipping into perdition: the opportunity had to be offered to as many as he could reach in the limited time left to him. His hearers may well have been searching for an explanation of events, for a vital community they might join, for status in a society which had few effective means of achieving social distinction; above all one suspects that, difficult as it is for our generation to grasp, they genuinely believed in the reality of salvation and damnation, and in the immanence of that God who so visibly preserved Henry Alline from diverse perils on land and sea. Hence they urgently sought individual salvation and the formation of new groups in which their religious awareness might flourish uncontaminated by the world. In this way the stage was set for the exclusiveness and intense fervour of the congregations that perpetuated some parts of Alline's legacy.

Alline's untimely death prevented him from building the kind of flexible religious movement he evidently favoured. It coincided almost exactly with the inception of another and very different religious experiment which was also destined to fail — The Anglican Design in Loyalist Nova Scotia.

Charles Inglis, a prominent Loyalist clergyman, was consecrated in 1787 as the bishop of Nova Scotia, the first diocese established in the Empire. He continued in office until his death in 1816, a period which marked "the zenith of colonial church establishment." (p.133) Bishop Inglis recognized, however, that he had laboured largely in vain; it was not without significance that his later years were spent largely in the Annapolis Valley in the heart of the community which for a time Henry Alline had claimed as his own.

The broad outlines of imperial ecclesiastical policy and of Charles Inglis' career are well known. Dr. Fingard has sought in her scholarly and thoughtful study to examine this question in detail as an illustration of "the transfer to the colonies of the institutions and traditions of the mother country, their adaptation to local circumstances, and their influence over the developing' character of colonial societies." Specifically, after 1783, "the British government encouraged the growth of what can most appropriately be described as a limited Anglican establishment in its remaining North American colonies as an important facet of a wider plan to assimilate the institutions of the colonial societies to those of Britain." In this context Nova Scotia is especial-

ly worthy of examination because it was the “most susceptible of the British North American colonies to cultural influences from the mother country. (p. vii)

Although by 1816 the Anglican Church had a solid footing as the second largest denomination in Nova Scotia, it was still a minority communion “fearful for its privileges, jealous of its rivals’ success, exclusive, conservative, and unimaginative.”(p. 198) Its pretensions had alienated the Presbyterians with whom Anglicans had the greatest potential affinity and had convinced many that its privileged position was beneficial neither to Nova Scotia nor the Empire. The sources of this failure to achieve the high hopes of 1787 were, Dr. Fingard argues, the conservative and hesitant response of Inglis and his colleagues to the challenge of a heterogeneous and impoverished society impatient with traditional religious practices, and the belief that the church should be an instrument of political policy.

Charles Inglis had lived many years in the old colonies, long enough in fact to understand the ways of their people, but he was unwilling to adapt his practices to theirs, an attitude that was reinforced by his experience in the Revolution. For him the British constitution “represented absolute perfection.”(p. 28) “Government and Religion are therefore the pillars as it were on which society rests, and by which it is upheld; remove these and the fabric sinks into ruin . . .”(p. 29) Dissent and disloyalty were, he believed, generally synonymous. Evangelical religion militated “against order both in Church and State” and would, he feared, lead to their subversion as “in the time of Charles I.”(p. 31) Age and infirmity and the natural complacency of the Hanoverian age fortunately predisposed him to exercise his authority temperately, but his convictions led him to lean on government and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and blinded him to the realities of Nova Scotian society.

Throughout the years of his episcopate, Inglis seemingly believed that if he could secure more support from the state, and a large supply of well qualified missionaries from the S.P.G., the lukewarmness of the people could be overcome. He failed to recognize that they were in many cases too poor to support an expensive institution and reluctant to help themselves if others would. Their indifference was a function of their diverse backgrounds and their desire for evangelical forms of worship and teaching. In contrast, the Anglican missionaries generally did not venture far from their parishes and rarely showed any evidence of zeal or flexibility. Those who did were constrained not to innovate by their few wealthy parishioners and the resolute opposition of the Bishop whose attitude was succinctly summarized by the S.P.G. Secretary: “If New Lights and Methodists are only to be brought round by adapting the Church Service to their ideas, it is not worth the sacrifice.” (p. 69) If the S.P.G. had provided an unlimited supply of clergy who shared Inglis’ convictions, it is unlikely that the Church would have fared better

than it did.

Against this background, Dr. Fingard has analysed carefully and systematically the way in which the Church grew under Bishop Inglis. She has produced a comprehensive explanation of the way in which establishment functioned in Nova Scotia, a detailed account of ecclesiastical recruitment and administration and a clear outline of the Church's role in education. She stresses in particular that "the bad feeling between the Church of England and dissenters in educational matters was initiated during Inglis' episcopate and a large proportion of the responsibility for this hostility and its divisive effects must be placed on him By the time the last religious tests were abolished at King's College in 1829, it was too late to promote the more economical non-sectarian education."(p. 158) The stage was set in fact for the intermittent battles of the next several decades.

Although one may note justly that Bishop Inglis and his brethren failed in their larger endeavour and helped to sow religious antagonism in Nova Scotia, their efforts were not without significance. In a hostile environment the Church of England had been kept in being and had grown in numbers. As such it would be a visible link between Nova Scotia and Britain and would reinforce the imperial orientation of that province. This was effected more subtly and less divisively in Nova Scotia than in Upper Canada because the Church learned earlier and under less zealous leadership the limitations inherent in a rigid stance in a pluralist society.

Altogether the three volumes under consideration here shed new light on their respective subjects and thus on the crucial formative stage in the development of the Nova Scotia community. On this new frontier, there was some willingness to respond positively to any form of religious teaching, but in the end, denominational affiliation appears to have been determined largely by past associations and traditions. Henry Alline secured few converts among those who were not New Englanders; significantly those who inherited his legacy rejected his ingenious adaptation of Calvinism and reverted to the kind of orthodoxy they had brought with them. The Calvinist Scots continued in the Presbyterian fold; the Methodists of English or Loyalist background, whose political outlook was akin to that of the Anglicans, could have been brought into the Church had they not been repelled by its emotional sterility and complacency. One suspects that the Church retained most of those who had been its adherents outside Nova Scotia. The difficulties and confusion attendant upon the formation of new settlements and the supposed egalitarianism of these new social groupings seemingly had little bearing on religious interests and affiliations.

If, at present, such a generalization seems appropriate, one hopes that it will not be allowed to stand without qualification. The detailed studies of specific areas that have been carried out in New England, and by Dr. Stewart

on Yarmouth (*Acadiensis*, Vol. II, No. 2, pp. 18-36) provide models of what can be learned about the religious affiliations of the people in particular localities and the factors that may have influenced their choice of denomination. A number of such test cases would illuminate the way in which the various churches developed and make possible more precise assessments of the relationship in Nova Scotia and elsewhere between denominational recruitment, the quality of religious leadership, social conditions, and inherited cultural traditions.

Conversely, implicit in these works is a significant statement about the contribution of Henry Alline, Charles Inglis, and their respective adherents to the shaping of Nova Scotia's climate of opinion. Both Nova Scotia and Ontario have been essentially conservative societies, but if anything Ontario conservatism has been more rigid and intolerant than Nova Scotia's, a distinction perhaps best epitomized by the relative importance of anti-Americanism in the history of the two provinces. Doubtless many influences have been at work in this area, but it is surely not unimportant that Alline helped, possibly unwittingly, to break gently the link between American and Nova Scotian Puritanism, and by stressing "pietistic ways of viewing the world and evangelical means of spreading the Gospel" (Bumsted, p. 101) focussed attention upon an otherworldly and in that sense conservative objective. To the degree that adherence to his movement cut across class and geographical divisions it did bring stability and a sense of belonging to a substantial number of Nova Scotians. Similarly, the uninspired but tenacious efforts of the Anglican clergy to uphold order in church and state and to preserve the imperial tie rather than to insulate Nova Scotia from the United States helped to sustain a strand of unemotional conservatism among their members. Although Alline's Baptist successors and Charles Inglis' Church had little sympathy for each other, they were alike in being confidently Nova Scotian, and in their determination to conserve their respective traditions. Believing as they did, but for different reasons in each case, that the United States offered no real threat to their position, they could afford to pursue their objectives in a positive spirit, and in so doing to soften somewhat the political and social atmosphere of the province.

As Dr. Bumsted has noted: "Alline devoted his life to goals with which our modern secular society is distinctly out of sympathy," (p. 96) a statement equally applicable to Bishop Inglis. We may be grateful that he, along with Dr. Stewart and Dr. Rawlyk, have sought to rescue Alline from obscurity, and that Dr. Fingard has provided us with a perceptive assessment of the career and the design of Inglis and his associates. Their carefully crafted volumes have added much to our understanding of the early history of Nova Scotia and should give us a deeper insight into the quality and complexity of our social heritage. One hopes that the light they have thrown on the re-

ligious development of Nova Scotia in the revolutionary era will cast into relief the kinds of questions which should be asked about the subsequent growth of the Baptist, Anglican, and other churches in Nova Scotia.

G.S. FRENCH

Recent Island History

Since the ground-breaking scholarly works of Frank MacKinnon¹ and Andrew Hill Clark² in the 1950s there have been few serious published contributions to the historiography of Prince Edward Island. The 100th anniversary of entry into Confederation provided the occasion for the appearance of several publications, some of which merit close examination. The most ambitious of these is *Canada's Smallest Province*, a volume sponsored by the "Prince Edward Island 1973 Centennial Commission" and edited by Francis W.P. Bolger. It consists of 13 chapters: nine concerning the period ending in 1873 which are divided chronologically, and four on the Island's Canadian century, organized thematically.

The editor himself has contributed seven of the chronological chapters³ and it is in the first three that he presents new material. They cover the years from 1767 and the division of the colony into 67 townships of approximately 20,000 acres each, to 1842 and the electoral defeat of the Escheat movement which advocated forfeiture of estates for non-fulfillment of the granting terms. Bolger has provided the most detailed scholarly account thus far of the politics of these 75 years: the characters of the lieutenant-governors are deftly portrayed, and their achievements and failures are estimated; the repetitious and complicated colonial legislation and imperial policies on the land question are clearly delineated; the agrarian radical William Cooper is at least partially rescued from undeserved obscurity; and light is shed upon several other dark corners of Island history. Yet serious shortcomings remain. Without exception the focus is upon relations between the governors and their superiors in London. The Islanders themselves scarcely intrude. We are occasionally informed of their numbers, but little else. Virtually nothing is revealed about their ethnic origins, their reasons for immigrating to the Island, their locations, their occupations, their religions, their

1 *The Government of Prince Edward Island* (Toronto, 1951).

2 *Three Centuries and the Island: A Historical Geography of Settlement and Agriculture in Prince Edward Island, Canada* (Toronto, 1959).

3 See Bolger, ed., *Canada's Smallest Province: A History of P.E.I.* (Charlottetown, 1973): Ch. 2, "The Beginnings of Independence, 1767-1787"; ch. 3, "Land and Politics, 1787-1824"; ch. 4, "The Demise of Quit Rents and Escheat, 1824-1842"; ch. 6, "Nation Building at Charlottetown, 1864"; ch. 7, "Prince Edward Island Rejects Confederation, 1864-1867"; ch. 8, "The Coy Maiden Resists, 1867-1872"; ch. 9, "The Long Courted, Won at Last".