

The United Church of Canada in Canadian Literature

by
Elizabeth A. Hogan

A Thesis Submitted to
Atlantic School of Theology, Halifax, Nova Scotia
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master Arts in Theology and Religious Studies

March 1, 2016

Copyright Elizabeth A. Hogan, 2016

Approved: _____
Rev. Dr. Robert Fennell

Approved: _____
Dr. Russell Perkin

Approved: _____
Rev. Dr. Hallett Llewellyn

Date: _____

The United Church of Canada in Canadian Literature

Elizabeth A. Hogan

Thesis Abstract

This thesis traces the relationship of The United Church of Canada to the development of Canadian national identity in the years prior to Church Union, and in the first forty years of the denomination's history, with particular attention to the literary witness to this relationship manifest in a number of key works of Canadian literature. Major historical events and trends are surveyed in the history of the country and denomination in each of three historical periods -- from Confederation to Church Union, the Depression and Second World War, and 1945-1965 -- followed by an analysis of the way in which references to the United Church in various novels of each period reveal and reflect the denomination's changing influence on and relationship to Canadian identity.

March 1, 2016

Submitted with Thanks

to Rev. Dr. Rob Fennell, Supervisor, for his manifestations of
diligence (in reading, commenting, and correcting footnotes),
temperance (and unshakeable calm),
trust (that this would happen),
usefulness (in offering excellent advice);
and for his commitment to education and service
(to which the existence of this thesis bears witness).

to the Congregation of St. Matthew's United Church, Halifax

and to my son Matthew
for the inspiration of his Old Blue Hymnary piano medley
"The Soundtrack of Mum's Thesis"

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Confederation and Union	8
The Frontier: From Sea to Sea	9
Pre-Union Churches on the Frontier ~ Building Canada and Canadians	12
The Literary Witness of <i>Glengarry School Days</i>	15
The Great War: Canada Comes of Age	19
Pre-Union Churches and the Great War	21
The Literary Witness of <i>Rilla of Ingleside</i>	25
The Literary Witness of <i>Barometer Rising</i>	29
Summary	31
Chapter Two: From Depression to War	34
The United Church from Depression to War ~ Building the New Jerusalem	39
The Literary Witness of <i>As For Me and My House</i>	45
The Literary Witness of <i>A Bird in the House</i>	47
Summary	50
Chapter Three: Canada at Mid-Century.....	52
The United Church at Mid-Century ~ The Establishment.....	56
The Literary Witness of Munro, Laurence, and Atwood.....	60
<i>Lives of Girls and Women ~ The Stone Angel</i>	
<i>Cat's Eye ~ A Jest of God ~ The Diviners</i>	
Summary	68
Conclusion	70
Bibliography	73

Introduction

What does it mean to be Canadian? It is perhaps understandable, if a touch self-absorbed, that in the fifty "confederating" years following the Confederation of 1867, the question of the nature of a *particularly Canadian identity* proved so fascinating to many Canadians. The new nation had been forged, after all, neither by the simple unilateral colonization which might have inspired straightforward identification with the ruling power, nor even by an identity-crystallizing ideological revolution *against* such colonization.

Instead, Canada had crept toward nationhood through a process of conscious political, ideological, and emotional *compromise*, in which the competing legacies of its two layers of imperial colonization -- notwithstanding linguistic, cultural, and religious difference -- were carefully manipulated into a semblance of union. It was not a perfect union: indeed, its lopsidedness from the beginning sowed seeds of discontent that still bear the odd fruit a century and a half later. It was, however, acceptable. It held, it thrived, and it provided sufficient firm foundation for further incorporation of the remaining territories to its west and north.¹

Unsurprisingly, what Confederation did *not* provide was the basis for an emotionally resonant sense of national identity. When a nation's birth-narrative is chiefly characterized by the temperate pleasantness of willingness to compromise, after all, the likelihood of fervent patriotic passion arising as a result is fairly slim. The notion of a *particularly Canadian identity*, therefore, remained difficult to grasp well into the

¹ Robert Bothwell, *The New Penguin History Of Canada* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2007), Kindle Edition, 210ff.

twentieth century, and tended toward an amalgam of "not quites": not quite American, not quite British, not quite French. But was it something more? Something unique? What does it mean to be *Canadian*?

This continues to be a fascinating question even today, particularly as the last fifty years have radically altered the country's cultural makeup. But it is in Canada's first hundred years, and specifically in the period spanning the First World War and the repatriation of the Constitution in 1982, that this question of Canadian identity was most overtly and self-consciously addressed both politically and culturally. Over the course of the twentieth century especially, Canada intentionally attempted to establish itself *as itself*. There is a clear effort to claim an identity distinct from that of other nations, not only in terms of global/political actions but also in terms of culture and ethos, such that the twentieth century might surely prove, as Prime Minister Wilfred Laurier hoped, "the century of Canada".²

This is the period when a self-consciously *Canadian* literature begins to emerge. It is also the period when the impulse to build a self-consciously *Canadian* church becomes a passion. It is, in other words, a period during which the Canadian imagination is not only unapologetically claiming in the world a space for Canada -- and a uniquely Canadian church -- that will be wholly its own, but is also purposefully bearing literary witness to the developing culture, ethos, and character of that space. The period offers, therefore, an opportunity to build a kind of ecclesial historiography that describes that hoped-for uniquely Canadian church -- The United Church of Canada -- in its first four decades through references to the denomination in contemporaneous Canadian literature,

² Beth Profit, "The Making of a Nation: Nationalism and World War I in the Social Gospel Literature of Ralph Connor," *Canadian Society of Church History* (1992): 128.

and this is the objective of this thesis.

But as the twentieth century began, that *Canadian* church was still a dream. Protestant church leaders, however, were optimistic. Just as Confederation itself had been deeply dependent on a willingness to compromise, it was this same willingness to compromise -- together with a strong sense of Christian mission and a not-insignificant dose of pragmatic good sense -- that had inspired and continued to inspire their early envisioning of a uniquely Canadian Church imagined as a union of the mainline dissenting Protestant denominations represented across the country. Such a "United Church of Canada," the architects of Church Union proclaimed, could not only theoretically embody Jesus' prayer "that all might be one"³ by setting aside their differences in favour of "essential agreement,"⁴ but would also literally rally the multitudes scattered in tiny individual faith communities into one vast and powerful Protestant Church capable, among other things, of at least equalling -- if not overwhelming -- the influence of the Roman Catholic Church in Canada.⁵ It could thus actively and significantly contribute to infusing the new Canadian nation with the values of diligence, temperance, charity, education, and responsibility to and for the common good, as it built with social-gospel-fuelled evangelical fervour the Kingdom of God on Canadian soil.

It was a grandiose vision. But the Church Unionists believed it was possible, and after early conversations at the turn of the twentieth century, they returned to deliberation

³ John 17:21

⁴ As would later be established as the requirement for ordination; see *The Manual of the United Church of Canada* (2013), Section 6.3.1b.

⁵ Phyllis D. Airhart, *A Church with the Soul of a Nation ~ Making and Remaking the United Church of Canada* (Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2014), 4.

in earnest following the Great War and finally achieved their great hope in 1925. The new United Church of Canada was declared by Act of Parliament, uniting all Congregationalist and Methodist congregations with two-thirds of Presbyterian congregations into one nationwide denomination. With a bottom-up governance structure that ensured diversity of representation, an impressive infrastructure stretching across the country, and a capacity to focus and make manifest the *essential* values held in common by a wondrously varied spectrum of believers, The United Church of Canada was ready to begin its life as the self-proclaimed "soul of the nation."

A grandiose vision, indeed. But was it borne out in reality? To what degree, and how exactly, did this vision correspond to the actual ensuing influence of The United Church of Canada on Canadian national identity?

There has, of course, already been significant study of this period of The United Church of Canada's history, including both consideration of its complex relationship to Canadian society and identity in its first fifty years *and* the ways in which the nature of the denomination changed and was changed by Canadian society during the same period. If Phyllis Airhart's recently published *A Church with the Soul of a Nation* attends to these latter questions with particular intent, it also builds on a foundation already soundly laid by United Church historians Keith Clifford, John Webster Grant, and Don Schweitzer, among others. Tracing the double-helix paralleled histories of the denomination and the country, therefore, is not especially original. Indeed, I am deeply indebted to these scholars for the rigour of their mining of the Reports and Records of Proceedings of The United Church of Canada, The United Church *Observer*, and other denominational sources, as they compiled and published the works which are significant sources for this

project.

If tracing the paralleled histories of denomination and country is not especially original, however, this project is further interested in *how* and *how often* mention is made of the denomination, whether in its final form or in its pre-union components, in key works of the aforementioned self-consciously Canadian literature. The United Church's putative place in Canadian society at particular times and in particular locations seems, intriguingly, to be assumed and unconsciously revealed in these fictional narratives. Again, this offers an opportunity to build an ecclesial historiography that describes the denomination in its first four decades through these references in contemporaneous Canadian literature. Might it be possible, in other words, to deepen our understanding of the complex influence of The United Church of Canada on the shaping of Canadian culture and identity *at least in part* on an historio-critical survey of these appearances in Canadian fiction? With due attention not only to the extent to which literature can be understood as history, but also to the limitations of the demographic parameters of Canadian literature in much of the twentieth century, I think the answer is *yes*.

This is, therefore, the enterprise undertaken in this thesis: to trace the denomination's changing place in and influence on Canadian culture and ethos during three key periods of the twentieth century -- before and during the First World War, the Depression years and the Second World War, and 1945-1965 -- through an examination of mentions of the denomination (including its precursors) in a survey of contemporaneous works of Canadian literature. I intend to show in this thesis that references to the denomination (and its precursors) in the cultural record manifest in Canadian literature not only bears witness to the crucial part played by The United

Church of Canada in the shaping of Canadian identity in the last century, but also makes possible a deeper understanding of the breadth of the denomination's contribution to Canadian socio-cultural history and the changing nature of the denomination itself in its first forty years.

Each chapter of this thesis, therefore, will concentrate on one of the three above-mentioned periods of the twentieth century. In each chapter, I will begin with a survey of the Canadian history of the relevant period, depending largely on two recently published works: historian Robert Bothwell's *The New Penguin History of Canada*, and the rather unfortunately titled but nonetheless excellent and complete *Canadian History for Dummies*, written by journalist Will Ferguson.⁶ This will be followed by a survey of United Church history of the same period, depending largely as noted above on two major works recently published by United Church scholars: *A Church with the Soul of a Nation*, by Phyllis Airhart, and *The United Church of Canada: A History*, edited by Don Schweitzer.⁷ Finally, each chapter will examine the literary witness in the relevant period to the place of The United Church of Canada in Canadian society by examining references to the denomination in Canadian novels written during or about that period. Analysis of this literary witness will reflect the patterns of Source Criticism as developed in the area of Biblical hermeneutics by Julius Wellhausen in the late nineteenth century, recognizing the importance of awareness of the background, bias, and purpose of the author to the assessment of the historicity of the work.⁸

The list of novels that appear in this thesis, in which reference is made to The

⁶ Will Ferguson, *Canadian History for Dummies, Second Edition* (Toronto: Wiley and Sons, 2005).

⁷ Don Schweitzer, editor, *The United Church of Canada: A History* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier Press, 2012), Kindle Edition.

⁸ Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 81-83.

United Church of Canada, in fact *itself* bears witness to the way in which the denomination's scope of *religious* influence (if not social influence) remained largely circumscribed by the nature of Canada when their histories first intertwined: the novels are *all* written by authors of British and Scottish descent for whom the United Church (or its precursors) was fundamental in childhood if not also adulthood. One is written by a clergyman -- *Glengarry School Days*, by C. W. Gordon as Ralph Connor -- and one by a clergyman's wife -- *Rilla of Ingleside*, by Lucy Maud Montgomery. One is written by a man whose affiliation with the United Church was firmly abandoned in adulthood -- *Barometer Rising*, by Hugh MacLennan -- and another by a man whose affiliation became nebulous though he worked in adulthood as a church musician -- *As For Me and My House*, by Sinclair Ross. Finally, a number are written by three women with strong backgrounds in the United Church, all of whom maintained that connection into adulthood: Margaret Laurence (*A Bird in the House*, *A Jest of God*, *The Stone Angel*, *The Diviners*), Margaret Atwood (*Cat's Eye*), and Alice Munro (*Lives of Girls and Women*).

This is, of course, not a complete list of Canadian novels that refer in some way to the United Church. I hope, however, that in listening even to the partial witness of these novels as the expressions of particular people writing about the United Church in particular places and at particular times in Canada's history, we may glimpse in a new and deeper way the intentional interrelationship of the country and denomination in the first sixty-five years of the twentieth century.

Chapter One Confederation and Union

In which the wisdom of strength in numbers meets the confidence of the Enlightenment, the spirit of Romanticism, and the values of the late-Victorian Protestant Social Gospel Movement, to inspire the building of Canada and a Canadian church.

If the construction of Canada as a nation occurred neither simply via unilateral colonization by one ruling power, nor even via ideological revolution *against* a ruling power, it *was* nevertheless obliquely provoked by war. The American Civil War, though on the ground a conflict between northern and southern states, was not played out in a vacuum: British assistance to the Confederate states had made the Canadian colonies vulnerable to Union retaliation, both military and economic. Anxious, therefore, about the threat of American invasion on the one hand and a repeal of crucial free-trade agreements on the other, Canadian leaders began serious discussions about uniting the colonies of British North America in 1864.⁹

The task demanded much compromise. Official loyalty to the British crown notwithstanding, Canadian politicians wished to preserve the relative legislative autonomy already in place and were furthermore quite aware that *no* union of the colonies could be achieved without regard for the francophones of Canada East or for the Roman Catholic population. Opting, therefore, for a federal model of governance rather like that of the United States -- though mitigated by the decisive leadership of the British parliamentary system so as to avoid the instability that had provoked the Civil War -- the Fathers of Confederation neatly divided jurisdictional authorities between federal and provincial governments in order to allow for provincial flexibility particularly in relation to education. If many of them might have been pleased to enforce unilateral anglophone

⁹ Bothwell, *Penguin History*, 209-210.

Protestantism across the new country, they were far too wise to risk the more critical goal of political and economic unity. With Canada East thus appeased by linguistic and religious protections and a significant federal voice, the two Canadas along with Nova Scotia and New Brunswick confederated in 1867 to begin what "Father of Confederation" Thomas D'Arcy McGee hoped would eventually be a glorious nation stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific.¹⁰

The Frontier: From Sea to Sea

It took four decades of railway-building, negotiations with the Hudson's Bay Company, and suppression of indigenous and Métis populations, but by 1905 Canada did indeed stretch from one ocean to the other: a vast country, though still relatively sparsely populated.¹¹ If the careful linguistic and religious compromise of Confederation had been tested by Fenian incursions from the United States,¹² education battles in Manitoba,¹³ and parades of Orangemen through Ontario's small towns every July 12th,¹⁴ it had nevertheless held sufficiently fast to carry Canada into the twentieth century with relative stability and -- particularly thanks to an enormous influx of Eastern-European immigrants farming the new and spectacularly hardy Marquis wheat across the Prairies¹⁵ -- relative prosperity. Had Thomas D'Arcy McGee himself not fallen victim to an especially focussed Fenian incursion in 1868,¹⁶ he might well have considered his best hopes for the

¹⁰ Will Ferguson, *Canadian History for Dummies, Second Edition* (Toronto: Wiley and Sons, 2005), 211-217.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Bothwell, *Penguin History*, 210.

¹³ Ferguson, *Canadian History*, 245.

¹⁴ Bothwell, *Penguin History*, 241.

¹⁵ Ibid, 259.

¹⁶ Ferguson, *Canadian History*, 221

young country to be unfolding reasonably smoothly, though with a collective identity still more predicated on not being American than on any particular emotionally resonant national narrative.

That said, however, Canadian church historian Keith Clifford argues in his 1969 article "Religion and the Development of Canadian Society" that it is precisely *in* this difference between the American and Canadian impulses toward westward expansion that a sense of a uniquely Canadian identity can begin to be perceived. Noting the American "frontier thesis," in which the American frontier beckoned the simmering energy of an oppressed coastal labour force to the liberty of the west, Clifford claims that the Canadian frontier was instead approached as "the place at which civilization tames the wilderness": an emotional reversal, in effect, that suggests a distinct Canadian orientation toward sober and productive order rather than a yearning for freedom.¹⁷ His colleague H.H. Walsh echoes this theme in his contribution to John Webster Grant's *The Churches and the Canadian Experience*, suggesting that the Canadian spirit inclined toward the Romantic Movement rather than the Enlightenment, making the dream of the frontier for Canadians one of plenty and opportunity -- the result, of course, of patient persistence -- rather than one of liberty itself understood as gift and goal, as had driven so many Americans westward.¹⁸

It is a striking suggestion, and one that presumably reflects -- in part, at least -- the fact that those who crossed the Atlantic from Europe to travel past the eastern urban centres and settle westward in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries could *choose*

¹⁷ N. Keith Clifford, "Religion and the Development of Canadian Society: An Historiographical Analysis." *Church History* 38, No. 4 (1969): 508.

¹⁸ H. H. Walsh, "A Canadian Christian Tradition," in *The Churches and the Canadian Experience*, ed. John Webster Grant (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1963), 146-147.

whether to do so below the forty-ninth parallel, or instead set themselves against the brutality of the Canadian climate. Confederation itself, after all, had in no small measure been initially achieved thanks to the promise of a railroad that would slice through the punishing landscape and afford access to its opportunity. That new provinces were added and populated by new settlers in response to the railroad's incremental conquering of the dense forest, prairies, and coastal ranges, therefore, does suggest a correlation in the Canadian imagination particularly between settlement of the frontier and the subjugation-to-good-purpose of an unruly hinterland. If *all* North American settlers-west were to some extent in search of liberty, plenty, and opportunity, in other words, those for whom simple liberty was paramount might reasonably be expected to self-select out of having to eke it out of a Canadian winter. Those who remained, on the other hand, might reasonably be assumed to have somehow derived emotional satisfaction from wresting a living out of a wilderness that first had to be "tamed." If the Canadian perspective on the frontier begins to reveal something unique about the Canadian spirit, as Clifford suggests, therefore, it seems fair to note that it was the nature of that frontier *itself* -- the demands it placed on settlers and the fact that those who faced it had intentionally opted in -- that was critically both responsible for and reinforcing of any effect on Canadian identity.

Nonetheless, it is a point well-taken, particularly in view of high rates of continued migration southward into the United States during these same four decades following Confederation. Just as any collective sense of Canadianness must necessarily have been shaped by the cultural assumptions and attitudes of the Loyalists who streamed northward in the 1770s, so too was the Canada of a century and more later also the manifestation of those who by sheer stubbornness had decided to stay, and by sheer

determination had managed to survive. It is impossible, in short, to contemplate Canadian identity at the turn of the twentieth century without reference to the character necessary to have made being Canadian one's *choice*.

Pre-Union Churches on the Frontier ~ Building Canada and Canadians

As these new settlers moved up the Ottawa River Valley, over the Canadian Shield, and westward through the Prairies, their taming of the wilderness was materially supported by "home missions": not only Roman Catholic priests but also Church of England priests and Protestant clergy of various dissenting denominations were duly dispatched to remote locations to attend to the pastoral and sacramental support of their flocks as well as to the evangelizing of indigenous peoples and any wayward and unchurched settlers. Supported by the generosity of the established congregations of the eastern provinces, Canadian home missions consciously assumed not only a place in the task of nation-building but also a crucial role in shaping the ethos and culture of the young nation, ensuring the continued Christian "civilization" of the frontier settlers as they in turn "civilized" the land.

The motivating force behind the home missions, of course, was only partly pastoral and evangelical. Official willingness to peacefully coexist within a Confederation built on compromise notwithstanding, both Roman Catholics and Protestants recognized the opportunity provided by the settling of the Canadian west to expand their respective cultural, political, and religious influence on the nation as it developed. As Catholic priests encouraged the large families that would mitigate growing Protestant numbers outside Quebec and ensure a strong Catholic presence across the country, Protestant

leaders noted with alarm the "presumed political influence of the Catholic Church in Quebec"¹⁹ and raised strongly worded concerns that an expanded Catholic presence would require intentional mitigation "to preserve the cultural dominance that the English Protestant tradition had historically enjoyed in the nation."²⁰ Girding themselves, therefore, for what Methodist leader S. D. Chown referred to as "the battle which is going on now so definitively for the religious control of our country,"²¹ Protestant leaders set themselves the task of providing, in the words of Methodist layman Newton Rowell, "a chance for social and moral renewal" for the western settlers, who would "provide the raw material out of which we may make good citizens if we but do our duty."²² Presbyterian clergyman C. W. Gordon heartily agreed with his Methodist brethren, describing that duty succinctly as "do anything to make them good Christians and good Canadians, which is the same thing."²³

In fact, and on the Prairies in particular, the sense of urgency for the Protestant churches as the century turned was keenest in relation to building "good Canadians" out of the massive influx of East European immigrants who were significantly altering Canada's population demographic. If this required less preaching of the *actual* gospel -- the new Canadians were, after all, already Christian, though of a form charmingly described at the time by Presbyterian clergyman W. D. Reid as "a mere caricature of religion"²⁴ -- it *did* require the energetic preaching of what historian William Magney

¹⁹ Phyllis D. Airhart, *A Church with the Soul of a Nation ~ Making and Remaking the United Church of Canada* (Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2014), 4.

²⁰ Profit, "Making," 129.

²¹ Chown, cited in Airhart, *Church*, 4.

²² Rowell, cited in *Ibid.*, 12.

²³ Gordon, cited in *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁴ Reid, cited in *Ibid.*, 13.

calls a particularly Canadian "National Gospel."²⁵

But the Protestant churches were ready, buoyed up by the optimistic fervour of the liberal social gospel theology that emerged in late-Victorian Protestantism in response to and shaped by both the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. Grounded in "a belief in the innate goodness of human beings, and a faith in progress,"²⁶ and affirming education as crucial to social transformation, the social gospel movement proclaimed an "active, practical Christianity"²⁷ that would translate the "social teachings of Jesus... into social and political action,"²⁸ crush the scourges of poverty, alienation, and ignorance, and bring about the New Jerusalem on earth. Unsurprisingly, its powerful and missional Christian message found fertile ground in Canada and fuelled Canadian Protestant churches with unabashed enthusiasm. Canadian Protestants were, after all, as prominent Methodist Nellie McClung noted, *literally* participating in building a new country "where the pages of life are all white, ready to be written upon; where precedents are being made every day, and history written."²⁹ Small wonder, then, that they seized the opportunity presented in the Canadian frontier "for the good of mankind, and for the glory of Almighty God,"³⁰ in the words of Presbyterian C. W. Gordon, and intentionally infused the social gospel with Canadian nationalist passion. The late-Victorian liberal values of education, social responsibility, temperance, diligence, integrity, and trust in God: all were conflated with Canadian national identity and offered up by Protestant preachers on the frontier as a divinely inspired cultural infrastructure on which the nation would be

²⁵ Magney, cited in Airhart, *Church*, 21.

²⁶ Profit, "Making," 128.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 129.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ McClung, cited in *Ibid.*, 129.

³⁰ Gordon, cited in *Ibid.*, 130.

built. New immigrants were expected to respond by tidily assimilating. As the vast Canadian wilderness was tamed into providing plenty and opportunity, in short, so too must its people be tamed into worthy citizens of a particularly Canadian imagining of a peaceful, orderly, and well-governed Kingdom of God.

Pre-Union Churches on the Frontier
The Literary Witness of *Glengarry School Days*

In the lending libraries of one-room schoolhouses scattered over the frontier, and in children's bookshelves across the country, the novels of Ralph Connor -- pen-name of the above-mentioned Presbyterian clergyman C. W. Gordon -- featured prominently in the decades before and after the turn of the century.³¹ Often referred to as Canada's Horatio Alger,³² Connor's novels were in fact closer in spirit and purpose to the children's literature earlier produced by American Louisa May Alcott: stories in which the most cherished values and virtues of the author are embodied in characters, manifest in narrative-plot, and delivered to the reader with heartfelt sincerity and all good hope of moral strengthening. While Alcott purposefully sought to shape a generation of American children with the common-sense, self-sacrifice, and New England Unitarianism of an upbringing steeped in the teachings of Emerson and Thoreau, Connor instead poured into his novels an unapologetically romantic vision of Canada and the late-Victorian Protestant social gospel values noted above that would be necessary to bring this vision to life across the country.

Himself a child of the manse, son of a Presbyterian clergyman, Connor was raised

³¹ Robert Kelly, "The Social Gospel and the Doctrine of Success in the Novels of Charles W. Gordon (Ralph Connor)," *Canadian Society of Church History* (1998): 6.

³² *Ibid.*, 5.

in the forested homesteading Ottawa Valley in Ontario, educated at the University of Toronto, and ministered in the Canadian west and north before settling into a ministry of forty years in Winnipeg. Fervently committed to the vision of Church Union as crucial to the building of a Christian Canada that would stretch from sea to sea, Connor lent his prominence as a writer and a preacher to the cause, pausing only to serve as a chaplain in the trenches of France. As the last Moderator of the Presbyterian Church prior to Union, he offered the Benediction at the Inaugural Service of the United Church of Canada in 1925.³³

It is in his fiction, however, that the fullness of Ralph Connor's romantic vision of Canada's possibility truly flourishes. Canada, in the *Glengarry* novels especially, is cold, harsh, and unyielding -- but it is this very reality that inspires and arouses in the already-hardy Scots-Irish stock bent on settling in its vast snowbound forests a level of steadfastness, courage, and physical and moral fortitude surely unparalleled anywhere else in the world. The *Glengarry* novels bring to life a particularly *Canadian* muscular Christianity, in which surviving and thriving requires not only trust in God, but also self-discipline, a strong sense of mutual responsibility and shared purpose, and the comfort and care of a warm hearth and home, and it is precisely this Canadian muscular Christianity which must -- and will -- build the new nation into the New Jerusalem. If Ralph Connor is often described as Canada's Horatio Alger, it is telling indeed how differently he characterizes "success" than does his American counterpart.³⁴

Glengarry School Days is the second of the *Glengarry* novels, and centres upon this small and tight-knit community carved out of the Canadian Shield and bound

³³ Kelly, "Social Gospel," 6-7.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

together by church and school, in which "people simple of heart and manners, but sturdy, clean-living, and clear-thinking"³⁵ have triumphed over "nature's grimmest of terrors"³⁶ and "toughened [their Highland courage] to endurance by their long fight with the forest".³⁷ The antics of the schoolboys themselves, including Hughie the son of the minister, are related at once with relish at their wholesome youthful energy -- "What larks they had! What chasing of rabbits... what fierce and happy snowball fights!"³⁸ -- while also invariably resulting in a minor catastrophe or breakdown in good humour that requires the timely offering of a helpful homily that will turn these mischievous boys into Good, Useful, and Godly Men: "self-controlled, brave, and gentle."³⁹ The boys are encouraged to compete with one another, both in school and in play, to work toward high purpose and high achievement, especially in education, but always and especially to be temperate, truthful, faithful, honourable, and "brave enough to stand up for the weak against a brute bully."⁴⁰ If as Presbyterians their chief end is "to glorify God and enjoy Him forever,"⁴¹ their progress in this regard is measured by the pride and pleasure of their dearest mothers, sources of goodness and grace and many of the aforementioned homilies, whose sorrow when they falter (or are tempted into the "wilder and more reckless"⁴² frontier-possibility of strong drink) sets them afresh upon the path of righteousness more quickly "than a cold bath."⁴³ By the end of the book, however, no doubt in part thanks to the occasional falterings and subsequent homilies, all the

³⁵ Ralph Connor, *Glengarry School Days* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1902), 25-26.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁴¹ Westminster Catechism, Question One.

⁴² Connor, *Glengarry*, 278.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 279.

schoolboys have been well-prepared educationally and morally for "the struggle into which their lives would thrust them,"⁴⁴ and the minister -- or perhaps more properly, the minister's wife, dearest of all the dearest mothers -- can further celebrate that a *full dozen* young men from Glengarry have themselves felt a call to serve God's church in ministry. Thus will the Godly civilization of the Canadian frontier continue to progress toward the establishment of the Kingdom of God on Canadian soil!

Glengarry School Days is, in short, as representative an example of the Novel as Edification as Canadian literature can provide. It is a highly romanticized imagining of frontier-Ontario at the turn of the last century: Connor wrote it, after all, from the relative comfort of a pleasant Winnipeg manse. At the same time, however, it does speak to at least the intent and the hope, if not the unvarnished reality, of the Presbyterian ministry he both recalled and himself had offered in a comparable context earlier in his life. The small frontier churches *were* at the centres of communities carved out of the Canadian wilderness, and the bulk of their social mission *was* the encouragement of both education and temperance as crucial to the building of Canada. The country was vast, harsh, and "uncivilized", but full of promise: if its "civilization" could be accomplished only through the education of its citizens, the chief stumbling-block to this "civilization" was the risk of its citizens' turning to alcohol to escape, however briefly, the difficulty of surviving its vastness and harshness. Writing from a Winnipeg in which the same particularly Canadian "National" social gospel was still being preached with unwavering fervour in service of social progress and the transmission of Canadian values to an increasingly immigrant population, Connor mined his own past experience to reinforce the essential

⁴⁴ Connor, *Glengarry*, 66.

Canadianness of these values. His *Glengarry* church, while romanticized, is a not-unreasonable approximation of any of the hundreds of tiny and isolated precursors to The United Church of Canada that helped to shape the pre-war generation on the Canadian frontier. More to the point, however, the enormous popularity of the novels across the country ensured that the *Glengarry* church came to represent for that generation a collective imagining of their collective Protestant roots.

The Great War: Canada Comes of Age

If Canada at the turn of the century was the energetic, somewhat unruly, but basically good-hearted youth of Ralph Connor's imagining, the Great War was certainly the crucible in which the nation was forged into maturity. Invariably introduced in historical dramas and novels via a character's throwaway line about the only thing in the news being that "some Archduke Ferdinand or other had been assassinated at a place bearing the weird name of Sarajevo,"⁴⁵ the war's eruption and catastrophic spread around the globe ensnared Canadians as it did so many others into a complex four-year battle between pan-global empires. The expectation of Prime Minister Borden and Opposition Leader Sir Wilfred Laurier was that Canadians would stand "shoulder to shoulder with Britain"⁴⁶ and declare "Ready, Aye, Ready!"⁴⁷ when the call to arms came, and even French-Canadian leader Henri Bourassa urged Quebeckers to join the rest of Canada in support of their allied "mother countries"⁴⁸ of Britain and France. While Quebeckers for the most part proved less than keen to fight "for King and Country," young Canadian men

⁴⁵ Lucy Maud Montgomery, *Rilla of Ingleside* (Philadelphia: Lippincott Press, 1921), 1.

⁴⁶ Ferguson, *Canadian History*, 258.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 259.

outside Quebec enlisted in droves. The war would be a fine adventure, they were eager to prove their courage in battle, soldiering was work at a time of economic downturn, and it was unlikely to last over-long at any rate. No Canadian imagined, it appeared, that the collective might of the British Empire would not crush the Kaiser and his army of "Huns" within a matter of mere months.⁴⁹ On the home front, women sent off their sons, brothers, and sweethearts with pride in their bravery, and settled down to knit socks and roll bandages for the Red Cross.

The war lasted more than four long years. On the battlefields of France and Belgium, the Canadian Expeditionary Force joined those of other British colonies in providing the British army with the sheer numbers it needed to wage a war of attrition against Germany,⁵⁰ and Canadian losses were staggering as they were sent "over the top" in Ypres, in Beaumont-Hamel on the Somme, at Vimy Ridge, and at Passchendaele. Urged by Britain to send still more Canadian soldiers, Borden fought an election in 1917 asking for conscription via the Military Service Act, and won it -- at least in part -- by allowing women related to men already serving to vote. Quebeckers, however, including Laurier by that time, rebelled against conscription and entrenched themselves even more firmly against a fight "for King and Country" that they perceived by then to be so obviously simply a British Imperialist bloodbath.⁵¹ By the time the Germans finally surrendered, on November 11, 1918, those soldiers who had managed to survive wearily returned home, disabused of any romantic notions about the glory of the Empire. If they had contributed to what they were told was a victory of good over evil -- and they had,

⁴⁹ Ferguson, *Canadian History*, 259.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 264-265.

and crucially -- they had done so as *Canadians*.⁵² Just over a year later, Canada would become a founding member of the League of Nations: a global partner come of age.⁵³

Pre-Union Churches and The Great War

Well before the Great War began, leaders of various Protestant denominations across the country had begun to discuss the possibility of unifying into one Canadian Protestant church. Inspired in part by the Broad Church Movement in Victorian England, and further fuelled by the unwavering enthusiasm of Presbyterian clergyman George Monro Grant, a vision began to take shape of "a new church that would capture the best qualities of the major Protestant denominations"⁵⁴ and so be well-placed in strength and unity-of-voice to bring to birth the Kingdom of God on Canadian soil. What had been accomplished on a smaller scale elsewhere in the world⁵⁵ could perhaps be brought to full fruition in a *new* nation as it unfolded from sea to sea. In many of the hamlets, villages, and small towns scattered across the country, after all, tiny congregations representing various Protestant denominations had already begun to effectively unite across denominational lines considered less relevant in the circumstances than simple viability (at worst) or capacity for significant contribution to building a Christian nation.⁵⁶

Attending, therefore, to the negotiations that would be necessary for an *official* union seemed not only wise but even divinely inspired. With Christ's prayer "that all may be

⁵² Ferguson, *Canadian History*, 269.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 268.

⁵⁴ Airhart, *Church*, 16.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 4; note 2, 305; cf C. T. McIntire, "Unity Among Many: The Formation of the United Church of Canada" in *The United Church of Canada: A History*, ed. Don Schweitzer (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012), Kindle Edition, 13-14. Both Airhart and McIntire are correct: Canada's was not the first union accomplished between Protestant churches, but it was the first of such broad scope.

⁵⁶ Airhart, *Church*, 27.

one" beckoning them forward, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregationalist leaders began preparing a Basis of Union in 1904, invited the Anglicans and Baptists to join them in 1906 -- both declined -- and finally sent a completed Basis of Union to their respective denominations for discussion and approval in 1908.⁵⁷

It was not a radical document: its aim, in fact, was to "minimize change and avoid offence."⁵⁸ Reflecting, in other words, the same spirit of compromise that had enabled the achievement of Confederation despite linguistic and religious differences, the Joint Union Committee had simply sought to "[keep] what it deemed the best of each tradition, [eliminate] items the traditions did not already have in common,"⁵⁹ and otherwise blend the polity and administration of the three traditions into a reasonably balanced whole that would allow for as smooth a transition as possible into Union. The point, after all, was for the actual Christian life and service of individual congregations to flourish at least unimpeded,⁶⁰ though hopefully even more faithfully and effectively. In the Basis of Union they had constructed, therefore, the Joint Union Committee felt confident they had successfully laid a foundation at once sufficiently inoffensive and sufficiently solid that their three denominations could set aside the finer points of their respective identities and agree to become one united church.

Was it possible? Reflecting upon Reinhold Niebuhr's theory associating the "maturing" process of religious entrenchment in a community -- the transition from sect to church -- with the accommodation of the wider culture, Canadian church historian Keith Clifford notes the quintessentially *Canadian* dilemma in the early twentieth century

⁵⁷ McIntire, "Unity," 16

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 17.

of swimming in a wider culture so thoroughly dominated by Britain and the United States. In Canada, therefore, Clifford suggests, the "maturing" process of religious entrenchment tended to cope with the wider culture by favouring the preservation of Canadian identity over insisting on lesser differences. With Canadians less and less inclined to think of themselves strictly denominationally, in other words, and more inclined to think of themselves as simply Protestant or Catholic, the notion of a trans-denominational Protestant church could thus become a live possibility.⁶¹

Indeed, by the time the Joint Union Committee had produced their draft Basis of Union in 1908, as noted above, trans-denominational independent union churches were already a feature in the Canadian west in particular, and the trend only picked up speed when the Basis of Union was released for comment.⁶² Inspired by the notion of union and impatient as Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregationalist negotiations continued, in fact, many congregations simply turned to one another across the country -- in some cases serenely unconcerned by any theoretically "official" parameters of union -- and formed union churches still multi-affiliated with their parent denominations.⁶³ Church Unionists, of course, rejoiced: their great hope in theory was already manifesting itself in reality. All that was left was official ratification by the three uniting denominations, and The United Church of Canada -- the name proposed in the Basis of Union⁶⁴ -- could be born.

The response was swift and positive from Congregationalists and Methodists, who agreed to Church Union in 1910 and 1912 respectively. As the Great War began, however, a significant dissenting movement in the Presbyterian Church forestalled

⁶¹ Clifford, "Religion," 513.

⁶² McIntire, "Unity," 18.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

official approval by demanding a re-vote by the presbyteries across the country. When in 1916 the re-vote *again* provided the Presbyterian General Assembly with a mandate to agree to Church Union, all three denominations, together with the independent and the affiliated union churches, were finally ready to proceed -- at least, officially.⁶⁵

But Canada was at war, and *one* war -- particularly one in which "the scale of destructive effects... was becoming catastrophic"⁶⁶ -- was quite enough. The dissenting Presbyterian Church Association therefore called a truce until the Great War was over, only returning to its nationwide campaign against union in 1921. When the United Church Act was passed by Parliament in 1924 and returned to the uniting bodies for a final vote, however, the dissenting Presbyterians remained a minority. Their battle had been lost. The Presbyterian Church of Canada proceeded into Church Union in 1925, and non-concurring Presbyterians were left behind to contend with the devastating repercussions of what they considered "The Disruption,"⁶⁷ including the loss of 90% of their clergymen and 83% of their congregations, though only approximately 70% of their members.⁶⁸

It was the beginning of a new battle for non-concurring Presbyterians, and one that continued for decades thereafter. But on June 10, 1925, eight thousand people gathered in the Mutual Street Arena in Toronto to watch "the commissioners to the First General Council [enter]... choreographed to represent four streams flowing into each other to become the river of The United Church"⁶⁹ of Canada, from the Presbyterian,

⁶⁵ McIntire, "Unity," 17.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 27.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 8.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 6.

Methodist, Congregationalist, and Local Union Churches.⁷⁰ The new denomination committed itself, in the words of the Preamble to the Agenda of the First General Council, to "exercis[ing] 'far-reaching influence upon the future life and character of the people of this Dominion'... [as] 'a great Canadian Church'... [and] instrument 'in the hands of God'"⁷¹ that would provide, as the 1926 Report on Home Missions later put it, a "friendly service to the nation."⁷²

It was a formidable achievement, fuelled by the evangelical fervour of late-Victorian Protestant conviction that the Kingdom of God could manifest itself on earth in a nation shaped by a gospel of peace and justice proclaimed in word and embodied in deed. As Canadians contended after the Great War with increased urbanization, increased immigration (especially in the West),⁷³ and the return of a generation of young men vastly depleted in numbers and battered in spirit, the new denomination began its life buoyed not only by hopeful energy but also by an impressive cross-country infrastructure. The New Jerusalem must surely be at hand.

Pre-Union Churches and the Great War
The Literary Witness of *Rilla of Ingleside*

Twenty years after the publication of *Glengarry School Days*, while her Presbyterian clergyman husband was serving one such small and relatively isolated precursor of The United Church of Canada in Leaskdale, Ontario, Lucy Maud Montgomery combed through her own wartime journals to write *Rilla of Ingleside*, which

⁷⁰ McIntire, "Unity," 6.

⁷¹ Ibid, 23.

⁷² Airhart, *Church*, 5, quoting from *Report of Home Missions and Social Service*, The United Church of Canada Yearbook (1926), 330.

⁷³ Airhart, *Church*, 74ff.

would be the last (though not the last-written) of her *Anne of Green Gables* books. An otherwise traditional coming-of-age story, *Rilla* is the only contemporaneous Canadian novel about the Great War written by a woman, and traces the war years in the fictional Prince Edward Island village of Glen St. Mary through the life of various of its inhabitants -- including, of course, Rilla Blythe, who at fifteen is the youngest of Anne's six children.

Montgomery began *Rilla* shortly after the armistice, and her incorporation of her own real-time journal reflections during the war years into its narrative lends a certain journalistic immediacy to its descriptions of the various -- and sometimes conflicting -- waves of patriotism, pride, dread, grief, and despair that are unleashed on Glen St. Mary and on Rilla herself by a faraway war that is nevertheless immediately and wholeheartedly considered Canada's war too. "We are part of the British Empire," Rilla's sweetheart Kenneth chides her when she wonders why the war should matter to Canada. "It's a family affair. We've got to stand by each other."⁷⁴ As every young man in Glen St. Mary enlists, whether fired up by this patriotic allegiance to "the old grey mother of the northern sea"⁷⁵ or simply excited at the possibility of adventure, those left behind honour their bravery and self-sacrifice in the name of duty with their own home-front commitment to "doing their bit" for the war effort. "We have just got to grapple with whatever we have to do," the family housekeeper Susan declares on returning from seeing the first recruits off by train to Valcartier. "I shall grapple. Those blessed boys have gone

⁷⁴ Montgomery, *Rilla*, 35.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 19. Rilla's brother Jem quotes this line as though it a well-known phrase, perhaps from Kipling; if it is, I was unable to find its original source. Perhaps Montgomery merely accessed her inner pseudo-Kipling.

to war; and *we women* ... must keep a stiff upper lip."⁷⁶ If Susan proves heroic, embodying "the self-same spirit that captured Vimy Ridge and held the German legions back from Verdun,"⁷⁷ Rilla learns to be equally so: the years of her youth that might otherwise have been frivolous and self-absorbed instead teach her patience, suffering, self-sacrifice, and faith. *Rilla* is not a novel without nuance -- Montgomery was devastated by the profound waste of life in the trenches -- but it certainly reflects the prevailing Christian Canadian patriotic rhetoric of its time.

As a lifelong Presbyterian, and a clergyman's wife, Montgomery centres *Rilla*, unsurprisingly, upon the Presbyterian Church through which virtually all her main characters derive both their steadfast faith in God and God's purpose and their strength and courage to cope with the tragedy of the war as it unfolds. Indeed, as the schoolteacher notes, "I believe in Him now -- *I have to*. There's nothing else to fall back on but God -- humbly, starkly, unconditionally."⁷⁸ The war, and its "torrents of blood,"⁷⁹ is early described by the Presbyterian clergyman Mr. Meredith in as "the price humanity must pay for some blessing, some advance great enough to be worth the price,"⁸⁰ and throughout the war -- and even when his younger son is blinded in battle -- he never wavers in his conviction "that a country whose sons are ready to lay down their lives in her defence will win a new vision because of their sacrifice."⁸¹ In the Presbyterian world of Glen St. Mary, in short, the war is understood in essentially apocalyptic terms: it is the necessary catastrophic battle in which good *will* -- good *must* -- triumph over evil in order that a

⁷⁶ Montgomery, *Rilla*, 58.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

New Age might dawn. God weeps with the suffering over those who are lost, but their lives are the purchase price for the ushering-in of the Kingdom.

If the Sunday preaching and theology otherwise transmitted by Mr. Meredith throughout *Rilla* is likely precisely that which Montgomery heard in her own Presbyterian church throughout the war, *Rilla* (like the earlier *Ingleside* books) also betrays in the character of Miss Cornelia the sort of muttering she might have done in the parking lot after services: Miss Cornelia has nothing but scornful disdain for those lesser beings who are unfortunate enough to be Methodist. Methodism, for Miss Cornelia, is a blight upon the landscape, overly enthusiastic to the point of unseemly in relation to the Almighty, and clearly misguided in its notion that salvation might not in fact be firmly predestined. Though Montgomery's pokes at Methodism through the character of Miss Cornelia are largely tongue-in-cheek, Miss Cornelia does nevertheless draw attention to the subtle class, ethos, and tonal differences between the denominations even in the smallest provincial villages. Church Union, in other words, will not just depend on bridging theological differences: it challenges also the shadowy social hierarchies of village and town life.

Montgomery herself was actively opposed to Church Union, though notably because she felt the Union discussions had failed to seize the opportunity to modernize the church.⁸² Miss Cornelia, on the other hand, having expressed irritation with Church Union talk for over a decade (in the earlier *Ingleside* novels) finds herself by 1917 setting foot in a Methodist Church for the first time in her life, when Mr. Arnold the Methodist minister invites the Presbyterians to a Union prayer-meeting. "I used to hate Methodists,"

⁸² Airhart, *Church*, 1.

she concedes when those around her express their shock, "but I don't hate them now. There is no sense in hating Methodists when there is a Kaiser or a Hindenburg in the world."⁸³ In Glen St. Mary, in other words, Church Union shows every sign of succeeding in the wake of wartime as the Glen folks do their best to rebuild their lives, and their country, in a way that will honour the sacrifices of those who were lost.

Pre-Union Churches and the Great War
The Literary Witness of *Barometer Rising*

Unlike *Rilla of Ingleside*, which Lucy Maud Montgomery wrote -- as noted above -- shortly after the Armistice and with extensive reference to her own wartime journals, Hugh MacLennan's *Barometer Rising* was written two decades later as Canada found itself plunged afresh into a *second* World War. As such, its historical witness is seriously tempered by hindsight: MacLennan was only a child when he experienced the Halifax Explosion and so his recreation of a remembered Halifax in the novel is significantly shaped by much-later perspective and reflection. More to the point, however, the novel is essentially allegorical. In imagining Halifax in 1917 as a symbolic representation of a once-Canada quite literally exploded into dust and ashes by the Great War, in other words, MacLennan has chosen a literary form for his novel that further compromises its value as useful historical witness. Halifax in 1917 may well have been precisely as he describes it in *Barometer Rising*, but wisdom would recommend suspicion in this regard. Allegory, after all, rarely admits of nuance.

That having been said, *Barometer Rising* does make reference to a pre-Union church, and it does so in a way that is rather interesting in relation to the shift in this

⁸³ Montgomery, *Rilla*, 173.

thesis from the first to the second chapter. If Montgomery's Glen St. Mary churches clearly recognize that change is unavoidable but that they will also have an important role to play in building a changed Canada, the churches in MacLennan's Halifax are uniformly representative of an establishment and a past in need of exploding. In a city "with a genius for looking old and for acting as though nothing could possibly happen to surprise it,"⁸⁴ as returned-soldier Neil MacRae observes, "the inhabitants did not alter. All of them still went to church regularly; he had seen them that morning. And he was certain they still drank tea with all their meals."⁸⁵ While MacRae's cousin and erstwhile sweetheart Penelope Wain and her high-ranking military family are presumably Anglican -- certainly they are presented throughout as committed churchgoers -- MacRae himself preserves a cynical distance from church in MacLennan's telling. The establishment, and that which needs exploding, in Halifax/Canada is certainly not limited to the overtly anglophilic. When MacRae finds himself on a Sunday evening at the corner of Barrington Street and Spring Garden Road, in fact, lonely and frustrated and waiting for a tram, it's the Evening Service underway at St. Matthew's Presbyterian Church that catches his attention and provokes irritation. Inside, the congregation drones its way through "O God of Bethel," finally ending with the words "God of our Fathers, be the God of their succeeding race" before sitting down "with a muffled sigh." Outside the "closed Gothic doors,"⁸⁶ meanwhile, MacRae notes the irony of idle soldiers picking up passing girls beneath the huge monument to the Crimean War: the church is clearly no more relevant to the soldiers of the current war, in his view, than it is prepared to acknowledge its complicity

⁸⁴ Hugh MacLennan, *Barometer Rising* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1941), 8.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 11

in previous wars, or indeed in the current catastrophe, as part of the infrastructure of colonial obeisance.⁸⁷

To some extent, MacLennan's use of St. Matthew's Church as symbolic of precisely that establishment "churchness" about to be exploded is unduly harsh: St. Matthew's had provided, after all, the preaching pulpit of fervent Unionist George Monro Grant within its living memory and was quite as imbued with the late-Victorian Christian vision of social transformation as many pre-Union churches were across the country. At the same time, however, MacLennan does point in *Barometer Rising* to a reality that pre-Union congregations like that of St. Matthew's might not have immediately appreciated in the years after the Great War, in the midst of the optimistic rhetoric of Church Union, but that MacLennan in writing two decades later could lay bare: namely, that in the eastern provinces especially, the urban pre-Union churches *have* represented the establishment, if with somewhat less refinement than their Anglican counterparts. Inherent -- if perhaps subconsciously -- in their gospel-fuelled drive toward building the New Jerusalem on Canadian soil, therefore, may well be somewhat too much allegiance to the world "of [their] Fathers" to allow them to fully embrace any real social transformation for "their succeeding race."⁸⁸ The years following Church Union, in other words, will put them to the test -- if they are truly committed "to see[ing] a great country move into its destiny."⁸⁹

Pre-Union Churches in Canadian Literature: From Confederation to Union Summary

In the decades after Confederation, the expedient but also Romantic-spirited and

⁸⁷ MacLennan, *Barometer*, 11

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, quoting the hymn "O God of Bethel".

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 218

Enlightenment-optimistic building of Canada into a nation stretching from sea to sea inspired a similar desire in many Canadian Protestant church leaders to seize the opportunity to create a new church for the new country: one that would firmly ground Canada in Christian values such that it might embody the Kingdom of God on earth.

Each of the three novels explored in this chapter has revealed something of the nature, spirit, and mission of the United Church's precursors during these years leading to Church Union. The Presbyterian Church of Ralph Connor's Glengarry, for example, knows its crucial role on the frontier: to shape the moral character of those who are taming the wilderness into a nation, to emphasize education and provide strong central support to an isolated community, and especially to conflate the values crucial to simple survival in Canada into a particularly Canadian expression of muscular Christianity. The Glengarry congregation is, in other words, determined and courageous, realistic but optimistic. With God, they trust absolutely, all things truly are possible⁹⁰ -- even, perhaps, one day, Church Union.

But first there will be the Great War, and in Lucy Maud Montgomery's rural Glen St. Mary, both the Presbyterian and Methodist congregations understand their faith in and duty to God to be indistinguishable from their duty to "King and Country." In the face of the appalling loss of the war, of course, their confidence in God falters, needs supporting, grasps for meaning -- but still it does not fail. Somehow, good will prevail and God will prevail. Though the war continues, in fact, they finally begin to navigate the inter-denominational waters that have kept them neighbours-but-strangers for so long, recognizing that whatever pettiness once seemed insurmountable clearly needs now to

⁹⁰ Matthew 19:26.

simply get out of God's way. If the good future into which God will lead them involves Church Union, then into Church Union they will, ever dutiful, proceed.

Perhaps inside the Presbyterian Church of Hugh MacLennan's Halifax, similar conversations are also happening; if they are, however, it is not quite as obvious outside the closed Gothic doors as perhaps it ought to be. If the congregation fails to recognize the ways in which the faith of the past has no future, however, there will be an explosion even more near at hand than that of the War itself. They would do well to be attentive. As this portion of our ecclesial historiographical glimpsing in Canadian literature into the nature, spirit, and mission of United Church precursors before Church Union comes to a close, therefore, it is perhaps worth noting that the very first place of worship to rise out of the ashes of Richmond -- just one hundred days after that community had been totally destroyed in the 1917 Halifax Explosion that is central to the narrative of *Barometer Rising* -- was the Kaye-Grove Church: a Union church of former Presbyterians and Methodists, bowed but unbroken, and attending with faith and determination to the rebuilding of their city.⁹¹

⁹¹ "Tar-Paper Church", United Memorial Church, accessed February 26, 2016, <http://www.unitedmemorialchurch.com/#!/history/-c1hs8>

Chapter Two

From Depression to War

In which the hope for social progress after the Great War meets the desperation of drought and Depression, and the United Church's pastoral care, outreach programs, and advocacy offer significant support to Canadians in need and begin to shape Canadian social policy.

Having established itself as a sovereign nation -- albeit still with a sovereign -- in the trenches of France and Belgium,⁹² Canada welcomed its Great War soldiers home in 1919 to begin the task of rebuilding their lives. The country they had left, however, was no more. In its place was a Canada increasingly urban, industrializing its economy, simmering with labour unrest, and generally unsettled. That the addition of the half-million men now pouring themselves back into its job market did rather more to exacerbate this unsettledness than otherwise is hardly surprising.⁹³

But the discontent was not merely fuelled by the instability of the shift toward urbanization and industrialization. The Great War to which Canadians had initially committed themselves in order to protect the British Empire had for many devolved by its conclusion into a battle not only against one opposing Kaiser but additionally against the oppressive systems and assumptions of imperialism itself. While some Canadians and returning veterans, to be sure, wanted nothing more after the war than a return to the tranquillity of "knowing their place" in the grand scheme of things, others were determined "to see something good come out of World War I":⁹⁴ namely, a *new* socio-political order in which workers would be empowered, their voices heard, their labour properly valued, and their rights assured. Inspired even before the war's end by the same

⁹² Ferguson, *Canadian History*, 272.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 273.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 274.

rhetoric that had driven the revolution in Russia and was fuelling workers' movements in Europe and the United States, therefore, Canadian workers too began rising up against poor working conditions, mass layoffs, and inadequate wages by unionizing their trades and workplaces.⁹⁵ With strength in numbers boosted by solidarity across trade and labour unions, workers called strikes that shut down industries, towns, and cities across the country, marching through streets and loudly demanding justice in the form of working conditions and wages that would reflect their collective value and allow for a decent life. The response from government officials and industrial owners, however, was equally passionate and often violent: though the labour movement had secured many of its demands and established itself as an undismissable force in Canada by the early 1920s, the terrifying spectre of Bolshevism could always be raised -- and was -- by the labour movement's enemies to shore up anti-union opposition and provoke anti-union retaliation.⁹⁶

Strike-breaking violence and anti-Bolshevik rhetoric notwithstanding, however, Canadians were nevertheless reminded through the labour-organizing years of both the power *and the necessity* of operating collectively and with the solidarity of shared responsibility in a vast and inhospitable land with a small population. If previous generations had learned to depend on one another for sheer survival in the Canadian wilderness, Canadian workers recognized afresh in the 1920s that "every man for himself" was quite as untenable a personal philosophy in the modern industrial Canadian towns and cities in which wealthy owners held sway over comparatively few workers. Securing a livelihood that would allow for thriving rather than merely surviving in

⁹⁵ Ferguson, *Canadian History*, 273.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 275-276.

Canada required cooperation between workforces and shared attention to one another's needs. If the communist ideology of the One Big Union proved more radical than the majority of workers felt was necessary,⁹⁷ interdependence was nevertheless firmly recognized as crucial to their well-being. When the export market on which the Canadian economy depended dried up as a result of the 1929 Stock Market Crash in the United States,⁹⁸ the Depression that ensued would drive that lesson home.

In Canada, as in the United States, the devastation of the Depression was exacerbated by a five-year drought on the Prairies, but unemployment, foreclosures, and starvation were pervasive across the entire country.⁹⁹ Prime Minister R. B. Bennett, whose Conservatives had taken on the unenviable task of governing as the Depression deepened, after the 1930 ouster of William Lyon MacKenzie King's Liberals, scrambled to find ways to mitigate the financial collapse and deal with an increasingly desperate and bitter population.¹⁰⁰ He was largely unsuccessful. Despite increased financial aid to the provinces, the opening of government work camps, and the deportation of thousands of out-of-work immigrants,¹⁰¹ the situation only grew worse. By the time Bennett attempted to secure re-election by promising a Canadian version of Franklin Roosevelt's American "New Deal", Canadian voters were unwilling to risk a further five years of his government. King and the Liberals were restored to power in 1935 to contend not only with the continued Depression -- which they did with equally limited success -- but additionally with reactionary political movements gaining traction across the country as

⁹⁷ Ferguson, *Canadian History*, 273-274.

⁹⁸ Bothwell, *Penguin History*, 328

⁹⁹ Eleanor J. Stebnor, "The 1930s," in *The United Church of Canada: A History*, ed. Don Schweitzer (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012), Kindle Edition, 41-42.

¹⁰⁰ Ferguson, *Canadian History*, 289-291.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 291.

provincial governments attempted local solutions to the crisis.¹⁰² While both Social Credit in Alberta and the Union Nationale in Quebec were vehemently anti-communist and tended toward more conservative reforms, Prairie radicalism instead crystallized itself into democratic socialism and built the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) into a political voice from the left. Calling in its "Regina Manifesto" of 1933 for a "new social order,"¹⁰³ the CCF's first leader was once-Methodist-clergyman turned Member of Parliament J. S. Woodsworth,¹⁰⁴ a longtime activist whose politics were rooted in the passionate Christian social-reform convictions of the Protestant Social Gospel's call to build God's Kingdom on earth.¹⁰⁵ By the late 1930s, of course, *all* Canadians -- regardless of political affinity -- might quietly have been hoping just as fervently for some sort of divine intervention. It certainly didn't appear that the Depression would ever end without it.

End it did, however, though unfortunately in large measure due to the outbreak of a second war pitting Britain and its allies against Germany. Once again, unemployed Canadian men enlisted in droves: this time less naively than had the previous generation but at least with a clearer sense of precisely what they were being summoned to defeat. While Hitler's armies smashed through Europe, Canadian industries revived to produce goods necessary to the war effort, Prairie farms were restored to solvency thanks to the rising price of grain, and the widespread destitution of the Depression passed into memory.

It had laid bare, however, not only the essential vulnerability of Canadians,

¹⁰² Ferguson, *Canadian History*, 292-293.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 294.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 273, 294.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 294.

dependent on a largely resource-based economy, but also the depth of lingering identification of "Canadian" with British or French ancestry, notwithstanding expressions of pride in Canada's being *itself*: a new nation matured beyond its colonial past and playing a role on the world stage. If rising unemployment had literally provoked R. B. Bennett to unceremoniously deport nearly 30,000 immigrants back to Europe and a dearth of federal funds had caused MacKenzie King to abandon First Nations to their own resources on reserves,¹⁰⁶ deepening poverty across the country fuelled anger that found an even easier target in those "outsiders" whose race or religion precluded their full assimilation into a Canada clearly understood by the majority as essentially white and Christian. Chinese immigration, long subject to a punishing head-tax, had effectively been curtailed by the Immigration Act of 1923.¹⁰⁷ Pre-war propaganda connecting Jews at once with Bolshevism and with hoarding wealth simmered into a suspicion that barred Jewish refugees from Nazism from safely resettling in Canada,¹⁰⁸ and the relative ease with which Japanese immigrants could be identified allowed for anti-Japanese sentiment once the war had begun to spiral into an internment/deportation policy that stripped Japanese-Canadians of their rights and possessions.¹⁰⁹ Notably, relatively few Canadians of German and Italian ancestry, also theoretically potential enemies-within, received the same treatment.

There was, in other words, a significant shadowy undertone to "Canadianness" that was revealed even as Canadians were emerging from the trials of the Depression and solidifying their nationhood via the tragedy of Dieppe and the liberation of Holland. As

¹⁰⁶ Ferguson, *Canadian History*, 293.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 310.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 309.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

the Second World War's end promised the possibility of a strong and affluent future for Canada, however, the CCF in particular was unwilling to allow the Depression experiences of vulnerability both to poverty and to racism to simply be forgotten. Security and plenty for all Canadians would not simply arise unassisted and unassailable by default after the war: both would demand attention, protection, and change.

The United Church from Depression to War ~ Building the New Jerusalem

Having joyously celebrated the achievement of Church Union in 1925, leaders of The United Church of Canada immediately began the enormous task of consolidating the complex nationwide infrastructure that had itself been hailed as a benefit of Union: its reach was wondrous indeed, particularly as it allowed for a concerted Protestant response to the Roman Catholic church's national influence, but efficient and useful ministry to the nation would demand careful and balanced streamlining of administrative, mission, and educational bodies.¹¹⁰ Within its first five years, however, apart from the legal battles with non-concurring Presbyterians that would continue for a further decade, the new denomination had achieved remarkable stability as "a fully ministering, well supported, and spiritually driven national body" serving virtually all "the cities, towns, and hamlets of English Canada."¹¹¹ If its presence in Quebec was sadly unimpressive by comparison, it had at least managed to establish United Theological College on the campus of McGill University, though again not without a legal battle with non-concurring Presbyterians.¹¹² The end result, at any rate, by the time the Depression had descended with the 1930s, was

¹¹⁰ McIntire, "Unity", 27.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 31.

¹¹² Ibid., 27.

a denomination as *administratively* prepared to serve a Canadian population facing economic collapse, poverty, and starvation as it was spiritually committed to same. As prominent churchman S. D. Chown noted for his readers in *Christian Union Quarterly*, the United Church would prove, he believed, "well built and strong in every part, all its machinery being adapted... to the purposes we desire to fulfill."¹¹³

Certainly the denomination's capacity to harness the collective charitable goodwill of its congregations was formidable. Desperately needed food, clothing, coal, and aid was delivered both locally to neighbours in dire straits and by rail to devastated communities across the country, with an estimated "17,500 bales of clothing and almost 900 railway carloads of fruit and vegetables" sent to the Prairies alone.¹¹⁴ But the denomination's "friendly service to the nation"¹¹⁵ during the Depression went far beyond the distribution of aid. While foreign missions continued "evangelistic, educational, and medical work abroad,"¹¹⁶ home missions -- and particularly those overseen by the Women's Missionary Society -- served "the well-being of their own country"¹¹⁷ with equal passion in both urban and rural communities in Canada through hospitals, settlement houses for destitute women, community programs for the unemployed, schools for immigrant children, and food assistance programs. Christian faith, in other words, was clearly not to be divorced from the "compassion toward people experiencing economic and social displacement"¹¹⁸ for which Vancouver clergyman Andrew Roddan pleaded in his 1932 book *God of the Jungles*. The homeless, unemployed, and destitute were, after

¹¹³ Chown, cited by Airhart, *Church*, 73.

¹¹⁴ Stebner, "1930s", 42.

¹¹⁵ Airhart, *Church*, 5.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ Roddan, cited by Stebner, "1930s," 44.

all, "experiencing sorrow... just as Jesus himself was a 'man of sorrows'."¹¹⁹

Alongside such Christian social service there was advocacy: the denomination continued to take seriously its commitment to bringing its Christian social gospel to bear on the shaping of Canadian values and Canadian society as a whole. Still convinced, in other words, of the capacity of humanity -- if inspired by Christian faith into diligence, temperance, service, and trust in God -- to build the New Jerusalem on earth, United Church leaders not only preached but also advocated politically in favour of social reform. The heartfelt and vigorous -- but ultimately unsuccessful -- campaign for Prohibition, however, was deeply discouraging and provoked much hand-wringing.¹²⁰ Had the denomination less clout politically than had been counted upon? Ought it rather to confine itself to "[seeking] to improve and humanize... society from the base of... church institutions and not from direct political participation"?¹²¹ Certainly Prime Minister Bennett had been entirely unmoved by United Church pleas for clemency for government camp workers protesting their appalling work conditions: his only reply was to note rather viciously that the denomination's message would be sure to "give succour and support to those whose declared purpose is the destruction of our present society".¹²² For some in the United Church of the 1930s, of course, "the destruction of our present society" seemed in fact an entirely rational *Christian* purpose as well, in view of the Depression's revealing of capitalism's utter incapacity to ensure people's well-being. While many joined the democratic socialist CCF, therefore, precisely in order to press for the systemic reform necessary to a "Christianized" social order reflecting the values of the

¹¹⁹ Roddan, cited by Stebner, "1930s," 44.

¹²⁰ Airhart, *Church*, 88.

¹²¹ Stebner, "1930s," 45.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 46.

social gospel,¹²³ still others campaigned more specifically for the introduction of welfare and unemployment benefits, for access to contraception, for better medical care in First Nations communities, against anti-immigrant and anti-Semitic government policies, and in favour of civil rights generally and women's eligibility to run for public office in particular.¹²⁴ The gospel in the United Church, in other words, was still fuelling significant social activism by its members alongside social service, even if with varying degrees of success.

But the basic optimism of the Social Gospel Movement was difficult to maintain in the face of the Depression. Despite all heartfelt and fervently faithful efforts, not only did the hoped-for Kingdom of God remain elusive, and not only were people actually suffering *more*, but their suffering, crucially, was the result of factors apparently quite beyond anyone's control. It was difficult, year after year, to undertake the task of "put[ting] heart into discouraged people," as was reported to General Council in 1932 by one Saskatchewan clergyman,¹²⁵ when no amount of diligence, temperance, or otherwise could wrest grain out of the Prairie or a job out of the economy, and when the only relief clearly on the horizon was a rail-car from the east bringing enough food to survive. It was difficult, year after year, for many Canadians to keep the faith. If the trials of the 1930s did lead some -- as had the Great War -- to redouble their trust in God essentially in the absence of any other viable option, in other words, the pervasive hopelessness of the Depression nevertheless severely tested early-twentieth-century Social Gospel convictions about God's nearness to, participation in, and even concern for people's lives

¹²³ Stebner, "1930s," 44.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

in the world.

For United Church leaders, that testing demanded a response. These were, after all, the precise theological convictions that had fuelled Church Union, inspired United Church preaching, action, and advocacy, and undergirded the Canadian Christian value-infrastructure on which the United Church sought to assist Canadians in constructing God's Kingdom on earth. At the same time, moreover, the Depression's apparent betrayal of the limits of the Social Gospel had inspired new theological movements and constructs abroad that were also challenging United Church leaders' deeply held convictions about the preaching and purpose of the gospel in Canada. At issue, thanks in particular to the provocative inner-purification emphasis of the neo-Methodist Oxford Group¹²⁶ -- though also to some degree to Karl Barth's neo-orthodox recovery of radical human incapacity for redemption without God¹²⁷ -- was the extent to which social reform, social progress, and the Christianizing of society depended on each individual's *personal* experience of salvation. Was it enough, in short, to seek to manifest Godly values *generally* in service of collective social good, or was any social transformation entirely contingent on -- and only possible through -- the incremental accrual of one-by-one conversions?¹²⁸

The United Church response, perhaps predictably, was to attempt the compromise of a middle-ground, holding in tension the more orthodox assumptions inherent in having a "Board of Evangelism *and* Social Service" -- the two considered inseparable, in other words, and evidence of "the communion's wisdom,"¹²⁹ at least according to leading churchman James Mutchmor -- with the more collectivist orientation of the 1934 Report

¹²⁶ Airhart, *Church*, 121-122.

¹²⁷ Stebnor, "1930s," 59.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 48-50.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

on Christianizing the Social Order.¹³⁰ While United Church scholar Phyllis Airhart correctly notes that the Statement of Faith produced by the denomination in 1940 reflects a distinctly Barthian understanding of both God and humanity,¹³¹ and while it may well be that United Church clergy in the 1930s encouraged their congregations toward a deepening of *individual* moral and spiritual development,¹³² the denomination nevertheless, therefore, retained sufficient of its formative collectivist roots to maintain its affinity for social reforms based on shared responsibility.

The reaffirmation of the United Church's commitment to the latter, however, even as the influence of the Social Gospel Movement was waning in theological circles, need not merely be understood as reflective of United Church -- and Canadian -- appreciation for compromise. Instead, as Canadian church historian Keith Clifford argues persuasively with reference to Arthur M. Lower's work on the relationship of religious development to Max Weber's theory of the Protestant roots of capitalism, religious development in Canada was shaped by the uniquely creative dynamism of Protestant and Catholic interaction in Canadian society. The two churches were numerically comparable in Canada and carefully co-existed with Confederation-shaped accord. As a result, Clifford suggests, each church actually experienced a softening of the edges -- even a mixing -- of the theoretically distinct ethos of each in Weberian terms.¹³³ The two religious solitudes in Canada were, in other words, quietly speaking to one another in a way that was peculiarly Canadian. That the United Church not only arose with but also *maintained* a definite collectivist cast to its own brand of Protestant individualism, therefore, ought

¹³⁰ Stebner, "1930s," 50.

¹³¹ Airhart, *Church*, 121.

¹³² Stebner, "1930s," 59.

¹³³ Clifford, "Religion," pp 514ff.

properly to be understood as both reflecting and reinforcing its essential Canadianness, rather than merely an attempt to balance competing voices.

Clifford's conclusion in this regard is both striking *and* consistent with the essential Canadian understanding noted above that cooperation, strength in numbers, and mutual responsibility were all as crucial to well-being in an industrialized Canada as they had been to simple survival on the frontier. If fond hopes for a Kingdom of God built on diligence, temperance, integrity, and education faltered in the face of a Depression against which none of these values was powerful enough to enable Canadians to eke out a living, the twinned remaining values of trust in God and social responsibility did nevertheless continue fundamental to the United Church's proclamation of the gospel in Canada: not merely as expedient compromise, in other words, but rather as both expression and reinforcement of Canadianness.

With the beginning of the Second World War, the pervasive desperation of the Depression faded and United Churches across the country responded to wartime -- as had their precursors to the Great War -- by shifting into a role of spiritual support to a nation again called upon to do its duty in service of a righteous cause. The denomination's first fifteen years, however, had laid a foundation of "friendly service to the nation" solid enough that it could be depended upon for gathering, sustaining, improving -- and demanding better for -- the people of Canada. The main challenge ahead would be increasing multiculturalism.

The United Church from Depression to War
The Literary Witness of *As for Me and My House*

Few Canadian novels evoke the suffocating bleakness of the Depression as

exhaustingly as *As for Me and My House*, written in the early 1930s in small-town, drought-ridden Saskatchewan by young bank employee and church musician Sinclair Ross. Constructed as the diary entries of bitter and frustrated clergyman's wife Mrs. Bentley, the novel traces the final year of her husband's ill-advised and joyless twelve years in ministry as together they move to his fifth small-town Prairie Protestant church, this time in a town called "Horizon," at the depth of the Depression. Philip Bentley has become a clergyman in exchange for a university education -- his longing for escape has in effect tied him faster to the indistinguishable "Main Streets" of arid and colourless Prairie towns -- and although he can produce, when necessary, "a stalwart, four-square, Christian sermon,"¹³⁴ he at once believes none of what he preaches and is bowed down by shame because he feels he ought to.

"The Church" to which Philip has yoked himself and Mrs. Bentley is in fact never specifically identified beyond the capital letters that render it Important, Institution, Inescapable. That it seems a suspiciously accurate reflection of The United Church of Canada is mere conjecture, but not unreasonable. The Bentleys live in a manse and not a rectory, and are therefore not Anglican, and the congregation clearly understands itself as "establishment," its clergyman as a "community leader," and its building as central to the spiritual and social life of the community in precisely the same way that United Churches occupied Main Streets in the small towns of the Canadian Prairies so familiar to Sinclair Ross. While the unrelenting bleakness of the novel is due primarily to the unrelenting bleakness of the Bentleys' disintegrating marriage, it also owes a certain debt to the dust-swept Prairie itself and to the weary hopelessness of its people as the Depression deepens.

¹³⁴ Sinclair Ross, *As for Me and My House* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock Press, 1941), 7

At the same time, however, the grim determination of the Ladies Aid to do its duty "to an almost sacrificial degree"¹³⁵ and indeed of Philip himself to fulfill a ministry for which he has neither passion nor faith is -- in its own tragic way -- reflective of the Canadian Protestant values embodied in United Churchness. His ministry is *itself* a manifestation of United Church emphasis on education as the means of self-improvement, and if he is unhappy he is nonetheless diligent in undertaking its duties and preaching the requisite "stalwart, four-square, Christians sermons" to a congregation who depend on their foundation underfoot in shaky times and who remain entirely unaware of his inner turmoil.¹³⁶ *As for Me and My House* was not popular when it was published in 1941, and was probably wisely set aside as unhelpful by any clergymen who hoped to encourage young men in their congregations to pursue their own calls to ministry, but it does reflect the steadfastness with which the United Church held suffering communities on the Prairies together, however brittle they were, in desperate times.

The United Church from Depression to War
The Literary Witness of *A Bird in the House*

Another small Prairie town: Margaret Laurence's iconic Manawaka, brought to life in four of her novels, and in the semi-autobiographical stories of her childhood during the Depression that are collected together in *A Bird in the House*. Published in 1970 when Laurence was already a well-established Canadian author working at the University of Toronto, *A Bird in the House* offers a glimpse of the place of the United Church in Prairie town life in the 1930s not contemporaneously, as does Sinclair Ross in *As For Me and*

¹³⁵ Ross, *As for Me*, *Ibid.*, 9.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 215.

My House, but rather from the perspective of decades later, and after years Laurence spent living overseas and in Canadian cities. At the same time, however, the work is not wholly fictional: its stories of Vanessa MacLeod's childhood spent living with her parents and brother in her grandparents' home strongly parallel Laurence's memories of her own childhood in Neepawa, Manitoba, where her grandfather's solid brick house -- and the United Church down the street -- still stand. *A Bird in the House* is, therefore, stories remembered: coloured, to be sure, by the passage of time, but still revealing something of the essence of the original experience. If Laurence's observations about the United Church of her childhood are gently sardonic, it is to some degree with the indulgence of a nevertheless-loving parent: she remained an active member of the United Church throughout her life, quite aware of its aspirations and its flaws but inextricably connected to it despite -- or perhaps because of -- both.¹³⁷

The Depression in mid-1930s Manawaka is real: Vanessa's father is a physician but his patients' inability to pay him beyond eggs and the occasional scrawny chicken¹³⁸ eventually forces the family to move into town to the Brick House ruled by Grandfather Connor. Vanessa's people are United Church, with the exception of her Grandmother Connor who is -- fortunately -- a Mitigated Baptist rather than the untidier and unreasonably enthusiastic Unmitigated sort of Baptist who are given to such theatrics as being "plunged into the muddy Wachakwa River."¹³⁹ At home, the Sabbath is strictly observed,¹⁴⁰ and "religious observances also included grace at meals," though

¹³⁷ S. E. Read, "The Maze of Life: The Work of Margaret Laurence," *Canadian Literature: A Quarterly of Criticism and Review*, 27(4: Winter, 1966), 5-6.

¹³⁸ Margaret Laurence, *A Bird in the House* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), 39.

¹³⁹ Laurence, *Bird*, 13-14.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

"mumbled... running the words together as though they were one long word."¹⁴¹ Vanessa is "made to go"¹⁴² each week to Sunday School in the United Church basement, where she sits in a small red chair that "humiliatingly resembled kindergarten furniture"¹⁴³ and tunes out the kindly but boring teacher by contemplating the pictures of Jesus stuck up on the walls. Jesus, it transpires, for the children of dusty Manawaka, is incongruously "wearing a white sheet and surrounded by a whole lot of well-dressed kids whose mothers obviously had not suffered them to come unto Him until every face and ear was properly scrubbed."¹⁴⁴ Nothing less is expected of the Upright of the United Church of Manawaka, and others are coolly regarded as Downright: downright lazy, downright worthless, their untidiness itself an indication of the moral failure against which Grandfather Connor sets himself as a bastion of righteousness,¹⁴⁵ though Vanessa recognizes him for a bullying tyrant. Her mother, however, "approved of these rituals, which seemed decent and moderate to her"; she is "profoundly shocked" in fact, by any Unmitigated Baptist's propensity to "voluntarily mak[e] a public spectacle of themselves."¹⁴⁶

By the time Grandfather Connor dies and is with solemn hymns "sent to his Maker by the United Church minister" -- "what kind of funeral could my grandfather have been given," Vanessa muses, "other than the one he got?"¹⁴⁷ -- the Depression has finally ended and the Second World War has revitalized Manawaka and its United Church with an influx of airmen from a nearby RCAF training camp.¹⁴⁸ At the same time,

¹⁴¹ Laurence, *Bird*, 83.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 167.

however, the United Church's place in the community is essentially unchanged. It was and continues to be the spiritual and social embodiment of Grandfather Connor's Brick House: a bastion of solid, sober, dependable seemliness and indistinct but Bible-based Christian Virtue, in which good churchmen and faithful churchwomen -- good Canadian citizens raising good Canadian citizens -- hold the community together with quiet firmness.

The United Church of Canada in Canadian Literature ~ From Depression to War Summary

Sometimes, timing really is everything. The five years between Church Union and the beginning of the Great Depression had granted the new denomination just enough time to be sufficiently structurally reorganized and confidently prepared to respond swiftly, efficiently, and with selfless generosity to provide emergency outreach and care to those in need, both in Canada's cities and across the drought-ridden prairies. Undoubtedly still learning "essential agreement" with one another, members of newly-minted United Churches nevertheless professed a common-enough faith that was still strongly shaped by the Social Gospel call to follow Jesus' example of care for the vulnerable: Canada's climate *itself* demanded responsibility for one another's well-being, and the deepening Depression only entrenched this missional faith more firmly.

Each of the two novels explored in this chapter, however, reveals something of the nature and spirit of the United Church during the Depression years from the perspective not of the town and city churches -- those manifesting faith in action in outreach programs and political advocacy -- but instead of the desperate Prairies. Both Sinclair Ross and Margaret Laurence write of congregations clinging to rituals of faithfulness as

signs that all is not lost -- when all seems lost -- and as fragile evidence of normality -- when nothing is as it should be. These are the congregations of discouraged people who need heartening. Their belief in God's actual presence and care is being severely tested: if for some that belief has been swallowed up by despair, for others it has become brittle but necessary to preserving sufficient of past dignity to survive. As this second portion of our ecclesial historiographical glimpsing in Canadian literature into the nature, spirit, and mission of The United Church of Canada from the Great Depression to the Second World War comes to a close, in other words, those United Church people for whom the desperation of the 1930s was not compelling them in faith to significant charity, outreach, and political advocacy were simply struggling to keep any faith in God at all. In the meantime, they could at least find rest in the dependability of their church.

Chapter Three **Canada at Mid-Century**

In which a time of great prosperity ushers in a golden age for Canada and for the United Church, and many United Church values are institutionalized in Canadian social policy while Canada itself begins to secularize.

When the Second World War finally ended in 1945, the prudent restraint with which Canadians and their government had managed the increased prosperity of the war years had paid off: there would be no dreaded post-war return to the devastating poverty of the Great Depression. Instead, despite returning soldiers and a workforce that now included women, unemployment levels continued to be low, industries swiftly reoriented to peace-time manufacturing, and Canadians could optimistically look forward to a time of well-being and plenty.¹⁴⁹

They would not be disappointed. In the mid-century decades following the war, Canadians married, had children, attended university, bought cars, bought homes, and furnished those homes with shiny new appliances, all in record numbers. Entire suburbs were planned and built on the outskirts of major cities so that children could be raised in leafy wholesome neighbourhoods while fathers worked downtown, commuting home by automobile each evening to suppers not scraped together by sheer force of will, but instead produced after unanxious trips to the local supermarket. While some mothers returned to the workforce as their children grew, many others contributed hours and energy to the volunteer infrastructures that supported their communities, schools, youth groups, and local sport associations. The generation of children born after the war would *not* experience, their elders vowed, any of the uncertainty, fear, struggle, compromise, or simple poverty and hunger with which they themselves had been marked by the

¹⁴⁹ Bothwell, *Penguin History*, 365.

Depression.¹⁵⁰

For many Canadians, of course, the leafy suburbs and the security of abundance were, at best, the stuff of daydreams. Thousands of European refugees had flooded into Canada after the war, most to be herded into Displaced Persons camps and required to provide two years' manual labour for the privilege, before eventually settling in "ethnic" clutches in towns and cities to attempt to rebuild their lives.¹⁵¹ Many of the interned Japanese remained so until released in the late 1940s without compensation,¹⁵² while life for First Nations peoples on reserve continued blighted by the extreme poverty, removal of children to residential schools, and utter lack of opportunity still carefully ensured by government policy.¹⁵³ Rural Canadians generally, also suffering from the lack of opportunity inherent in an industrialized economy, either relocated to cities in hope of better or struggled along in their ever-smaller and more isolated communities, enjoying little of mid-century comfort of their urban neighbours.

The general and increasing prosperity of the country after the war, however, did result in social policy reforms that benefited the population as a whole, as the social safety net for which the CCF in particular had long lobbied was expanded beyond Unemployment Insurance (1940) and Family Allowance (1944) to eventually include the Canada Pension Plan (1965) and Medicare (1966).¹⁵⁴ Meanwhile in Quebec, with the reign of Maurice Duplessis finally giving way to the new government of Jean Lesage in 1960, the Quiet Revolution that would shift Quebec's social policy firmly leftward --

¹⁵⁰ Bothwell, *Penguin History*, 365-368.

¹⁵¹ Ferguson, *Canadian History*, 315.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 310.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 320.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 316, 335.

protecting a collective seeking sufficient prosperity to be "maîtres chez nous" -- permanently extricated the province from Roman Catholic Church control and ushered in a new era of nationalist optimism.¹⁵⁵ Until 1970, of course, most Canadians were quite unaware of the import of the qualifier: Quebeckers, it appeared, were merely joining most of their Canadian neighbours in pleasant anticipation of continued plenty, protected by the worthy benefits ensured by a collective sense of shared responsibility for one another.

Canada at mid-century was, in other words, tremendously self-satisfied, at least as long as it carefully averted its eyes from evidence of entrenched racism and of an assumed social-normativity still soundly white, Christian, and of British descent. The mid-century decades of plenty seemed to many Canadians, in fact, the entirely reasonable -- if nevertheless still to be celebrated -- reward clearly due them for their years of stiffened spines, determined rectitude, and stoic sacrifice: all values, as a result, it seemed equally reasonable to continue to both embody and expect from one another and their children, in service of preserving the prosperous status quo. Canadian self-satisfaction at mid-century, in short, felt well-earned and seemed to pleasingly vindicate Canadian values. That Canadians could additionally take pride in Canada's increased influence on the international stage as a peace-building member of the United Nations and a moderating voice during the Cold War was a delightful bonus.¹⁵⁶

The Cold War, however, was not unilaterally cold, and -- moderating voice notwithstanding -- Canada's trade and defence alliances placed it firmly in the shadow of its imposing American neighbour. Caught between wanting autonomy and needing protection, Canadian governments struggled to achieve a balance in the 1950s, sending

¹⁵⁵ Ferguson, *Canadian History*, 332.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 317.

troops to assist anti-communist forces in Korea as requested by the United States, and conceding some -- though not all -- American defence-related incursions into Canadian territory.¹⁵⁷ Canadian vulnerability in case of nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union, after all, would be extreme. The post-war generation of children could not, it transpired, be shielded by their watchful parents from *all* reasons for fear.

Nor, after the spread of television in the late 1950s, would they be raised without a significant dose of American popular culture.¹⁵⁸ As the post-war generation of children reached their teens, in fact, the lingering cultural association of Canada with Britain and Britishness was fading precipitously -- for them, at least, if not for their elders -- swept away by the massive flood over the airwaves and over the border of American music and television. Their sheer numbers relative to older generations, moreover, gave them significant socio-cultural power. If every generation of teenagers rebels to some degree against the values of the generation prior, the resistance of young people at Canada's mid-century was particularly shaped, in other words, by a parallel resistance to lingering Britishness. The Canadian values of diligence, integrity, and sensible moderation, overlaid as they were by a stoicism and stiff propriety easily dismissed as hypocritical and British, were not only "uncool" in comparison with American expansiveness but also stifling and suffocating in a world imagined -- beyond Canada's borders, at least -- as entrancingly sophisticated and urbane. If in the early 1960s, as historian Robert Bothwell notes wryly, "it was hard to imagine [Prime Minister John] Diefenbaker waltzing, let alone gyrating Elvis-fashion,"¹⁵⁹ Canadians would close that decade with a decisive shift

¹⁵⁷ Ferguson, *Canadian History*, 320-321.

¹⁵⁸ Bothwell, *Penguin History*, 393.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

in their chosen representation of Canadianness to themselves and the world:

Trudeaumania was at hand.

The United Church at Mid-Century ~ The Establishment

At the United Church's General Council meeting in 1946, wartime chaplains presented a report which seriously alarmed those present and thus significantly shaped the mid-century mission of the denomination. Noting with regret that the vast majority of Protestant soldiers under their pastoral care during the war had been woefully ignorant of the Bible and uninformed about their faith, the chaplains further commented pointedly that those who were United Church members had been the *most* ignorant in this regard. "One is forced to admit," the chaplains concluded, "that the Protestant churches are producing men whose moral lives are admirable, but whose morality is not grounded in the Christian Faith. How long will such a morality endure?"¹⁶⁰

How long, indeed? United Church leaders were unwilling to test that proposition. Instead, they turned in the post-war period to major efforts to promote educational resources not only for the children of their congregations but also for the adults. With the 1940 Statement of Faith already proving a useful and effective foundation for theological conversation and study through its associated Catechism, congregations, clergy, and seminarians were also urged to make use of the Statement-inspired meditations in *Highways of the Heart*, and of the Statement-based doctrinal study-guide *This is our*

¹⁶⁰ John H. Young, "The Golden Age: The United Church of Canada, 1946-1960," in *The United Church of Canada: A History*, ed. Don Schweitzer (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012), Kindle Edition, 85; Young cites the chaplains' report printed in The United Church of Canada, *Proceedings* (General Council 12: 1946), 240.

Faith, and all these resources enjoyed excellent sales into the 1950s.¹⁶¹ As four new education centres opened across the country in order to offer theological and leadership training to United Church laypeople, hopes were high that the post-war years would inspire United Church growth not only in numbers but also in thoughtful and informed faithfulness.¹⁶²

In many ways, the mid-century really was a "Golden Age" for The United Church of Canada, as church historian John Young's chosen title for his chapter spanning 1946-1960 in *The United Church of Canada: A History* indicates. At the same time, however, I suspect the title was not chosen without a certain sense of wry irony, though whether mixed with regret or resignation or both, I'd not wish to presume. The prosperity of the country at mid-century, the suburban expansion, and the post-war baby boom all contributed to a rise in United Church involvement across the country that was indeed breath-taking. New United Churches emerged so swiftly in new suburban communities that there was a serious shortage of ministry personnel available to serve them, while Sunday Schools outgrew church halls and thrilled congregations scrambled to build ever-larger extensions to cope with expanding youth programs. Inner-city mission work with the displaced and destitute likewise flourished, with continued and excellent support from the Women's Missionary Society and the Board of Home Missions. In rural parts of Canada, however, and in the once-affluent downtown city churches, membership was beginning to falter and denominational emphasis on suburban outreach was taking a significant toll on congregational vitality. The rural churches had long been a major source of new candidates for ministry, but a weakened rural mission and depopulation

¹⁶¹ Young, *Golden*, 85.

¹⁶² *Ibid*, 86.

meant that the number of candidates was falling at precisely the moment when suburban expansion demanded new clergy. The downtown churches, meanwhile, might reasonably have been well-placed to welcome the new immigrants who were largely settling in the downtown cores of the major cities, but a weakened city mission meant that this opportunity was lost.¹⁶³ While the suburban expansion was extraordinary, in other words, and its possibility understandably inspiring to a denomination fervently redoubling its efforts to offer the "friendly service" to Canada of making its solid Christian values normative in Canadian society, United Church focus on the suburbs in the post-war period resulted in some serious missteps that had lasting consequences, particularly as the Canadian population became increasingly multicultural. Most significantly, perhaps, the focus on suburban expansion at the expense of rural and city congregations in the mid-century period would connect the United Church in the popular imagination -- soundly and irrevocably -- with those Canadians who in the 1950s and 1960s were prosperous enough to live in the suburbs: white, middle-class, educated professionals.¹⁶⁴

It would be far too simple, however, to focus on such missteps and presume that any invocation of the mid-century as the United Church's "Golden Age" must therefore be tinged solely with regret at opportunities lost or days not seized. The denomination did undertake, at mid-century, significant efforts toward the kind of overt evangelization most notably embodied in the ministry of Rev. Billy Graham that was gaining currency at the time particularly in the United States but also in Canada. Fuelled by the passion of J. R. Mutchmor, first as secretary of the Board of Evangelism and Social Service and later as Moderator, the church promoted national missions with such uplifting themes as

¹⁶³ Young, *Golden*, 90-91.

¹⁶⁴ Airhart, *Church*, 160.

"Crusade for Christ and His Kingdom" and "Calling Canada to Christ" and supported the evangelical Templeton Missions in cross-country campaigns.¹⁶⁵

But the message of the latter, as church historian Phyllis Airhart explores in some detail, to some degree reveals what would prove the inherent fragility of the United Church's evangelical capacity at mid-century. Notwithstanding the continued Barthian and Niebuhrian neo-orthodox themes of United Church theology at the time, United Church preaching -- including that of Charles Templeton in his evangelical campaigns -- maintained enough of its social gospel subtext that it could not easily be distilled into the Graham-style evangelism that promoted personal salvation. That United Church people generally found the emotional enthusiasm -- and the music -- of Graham's evangelical campaigns slightly alarming probably did not help matters much, but more importantly they continued predisposed to a preaching of the gospel that overtly connected personal faith with social service and action. The point, as it were, of being moved to make a Profession of Faith for United Church people was not so much to align themselves with Jesus as Saviour as it was to follow Jesus as a Model for Living, with due attention, therefore, to the charitable work and social advocacy his teachings compelled.

In earlier decades, of course, as Airhart notes, it was this very predisposition in United Church people that had made the gospel vital and energized their faith. They had, in fact, and to no small extent, built the country in their own image, making manifest in its social ethos and social infrastructure precisely the Christian values of collective responsibility and care for the vulnerable that remained central to their own faithfulness. Having done so with such admirable effectiveness, however, that most United Church

¹⁶⁵ Airhart, *Church*, 163-164.

social concerns were eventually nicely entrenched in the secular mandate of government, the denomination found itself at mid-century essentially attempting to evangelize people to a faith that had no apparent purpose aside from offering the vaguely articulated goodness of being in Christian community.¹⁶⁶

Could that be enough? By the 1960s, Canada was already becoming more broadly multicultural and dismantling the legacies of Christendom in its education system in particular and in its national life generally. As a denomination formed with the expressed desire to *serve* the country by being the source of its civic values,¹⁶⁷ the United Church ended its fourth decade, therefore, in the odd position of increasingly being ignored when its statements and actions were timely and relevant -- because its voice merely paralleled progressive secular voices -- and dismissed when its statements and actions were more obviously rooted in traditional "churchy" concerns such as marriage and divorce -- because fewer and fewer people were interested in church pronouncements that were sure to be stodgy and old-fashioned.¹⁶⁸ Nevertheless, it would have been impossible in the United Church of the mid-century "Golden Age," even as the 1960s approached their end, not to feel hopeful and optimistic about the denomination's future. The Sunday Schools were literally overflowing. The faith of the next generation of Canadian adults *at least* was obviously -- undoubtedly -- assured.

The United Church at Mid-Century
The Literary Witness of Laurence, Munro, and Atwood

If no survey of twentieth century Canadian literature would be complete without

¹⁶⁶ Airhart, *Church*, 204ff.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 202.

¹⁶⁸ Young, *Golden*, 92.

separate chapters attending to the significant contributions of each of these three Canadian authors, the place in their fiction of The United Church of Canada and the witness borne by mentions of the United Church in their novels is sufficiently comparable, one to the other, that it is best surveyed in relation to several of their novels at once. All three authors grew up in the United Church: Margaret Laurence, as noted above, remained an active member her entire life, while both Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood have retained their United Church connections. For all three, furthermore, the United Church was so fundamental to the towns in which they grew up that their later writings about fictional versions of those towns -- in Laurence's *Manawaka* novels, Munro's small-town Ontario Gothic stories, and Atwood's semi-autobiographical *Cat's Eye* -- would have been impossible without reference to the United Church.

In Manawaka on the Prairies, in Jubilee in southern Ontario, and in the suburbs of Toronto, the United Church at mid-century is more than simply a *church*, in which Bible stories are taught, hymns stolidly sung, and babies baptized. It is the hub of each community and both source and gathering place of each community's pillars. It can be counted on to neither alarm nor offend, it is a safe choice for Armistice Day services or blessings of volunteer fire departments, its women cater tastefully and support worthy missions, and its men are unlikely to take to drink on the weekends, at least in public. It is, in short, dependable, dutiful, *Canadian*. Inclined to do good, wary of calling *too* much attention to itself, but secure in the satisfaction of both its essential rectitude and its rightful central place in each community's public life.

In *Lives of Girls and Women*, Alice Munro's heroine Del Jordan's family is nominally United Church, she and her brother having duly been baptized as infants, but

she imagines this as evidence of a "surprising weakness or generosity on [her] mother's part; perhaps childbirth muddled or confused her."¹⁶⁹ She and her family actually "went to church seldom... her father in his unaccustomed suit... deferential but self-contained... [and her] mother, on the other hand... cautious... skeptically chewing at her lipstick."¹⁷⁰ When Del is twelve, however, and finds herself considering God, wanting "to settle the question of God," and "attracted more and more to the idea of faith," she begins to accompany the family's boarder, Fern, to the United Church each Sunday morning.

The United Church "was the most modern, the largest, the most prosperous church in Jubilee... the church the Legion attended, uniformed, on a certain Sunday; also the Lion's Club, carrying their purple tasselled hats. Doctors, lawyers, merchants, passed the plate."¹⁷¹ There are, of course, other churches in Jubilee, but all four "by United Church standards, went to extremes." In the United Church, on the other hand, with its "pews of glossy golden oak placed in a democratic fan-shaped sort of arrangement,"¹⁷² the congregation seem held together during services by "a kind of cohesive tact,"¹⁷³ listening to sermons about "Peace. And the United Nations. Et cetera. Et cetera"¹⁷⁴ before greeting one another after the Benediction in "a pleased, relieved, congratulatory way."¹⁷⁵ On Communion Sundays, which happen rarely, the wine -- no, Del corrects herself, "not even wine but grape juice" -- "went round on trays in little thick glass cups... like everybody having refreshments."¹⁷⁶ Del ultimately fails to feel what she assumes must be God's awe-

¹⁶⁹ Alice Munro, *Lives of Girls and Women* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill-Ryerson, 1971), 60.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

inspiring presence in the United Church, eventually locating "His old times of power, real power, not what He enjoyed in the United Church today"¹⁷⁷ down the street in the "theatrical"¹⁷⁸ religion of the Anglican church. To be sure, the United Church in Jubilee is at least brightened by stained glass windows. These, Del notes, "[show] Christ performing useful miracles, though not," she adds pointedly, "water into wine."¹⁷⁹

Indeed not. Though not even God, in the United Church, is inclined to go to extremes, He still has standards. When Elaine, heroine of Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, arrives at her classmate Grace's door on a Sunday morning to accompany her family to church -- Elaine's own family, like Del's, is nominally United Church but rarely attends -- Grace is concerned. "'She doesn't have a hat,' she says."¹⁸⁰ Grace's mother "considers [Elaine] as if [she were] an orphan, landed on her doorstep. 'We don't go into our church with our heads uncovered,' she says. She emphasizes *our*, as if there are other, inferior, bareheaded churches."¹⁸¹ No doubt there are, but it is to the United Church properly-hatted that Elaine begins to go each Sunday, joining in Sunday School in "a large room with grey wooden benches in it,"¹⁸² in which "girls recite things they are supposed to have memorized,"¹⁸³ she "puts her nickel on the collection-plate, ...[and] there is something called the Doxology."¹⁸⁴ Unlike Del, Elaine *does* feel the presence of God in the United Church. "When we bend our heads to pray, I feel suffused with goodness," she says. "I

¹⁷⁷ Munro, *Lives*, 64.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁸⁰ Margaret Atwood, *Cat's Eye* (Toronto: McClelland-Bantam, 1988), 101

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

feel included, taken in. God loves me, whoever he is."¹⁸⁵ At the same time, however, although God is not a new idea for her -- "they have him at school during the morning prayers and even God Save the King"¹⁸⁶ -- going to church has added some anxiety. "It seems there is more to it, more things to be memorized, more songs to be sung, more nickels to be donated, before He can be truly appeased." For the present, this seems entirely reasonable; it will not be very long, however, before God must be excised from church, and Elaine from her hometown, in order for their relationship, such as it is, to survive.

The same is true for various of Margaret Laurence's heroines in the *Manawaka* novels, though Hagar Shipley -- who was born a Currie, of the best United Church stock,¹⁸⁷ and married 'down' -- does not manage *literal* escape, but nevertheless early warns the young and newly-minted clergyman (summoned by her daughter-in-law to pray with her in her dotage) that she "never was much of a one for church."¹⁸⁸ Daughter-in-law Doris apparently believes that "age increases natural piety,"¹⁸⁹ but Hagar needs to battle her demons in the wilderness.¹⁹⁰ She has, in short, neither reason nor desire to return to the family pew of her childhood with its "long cushions of brown and beige velour, so our few favoured bottoms would not be bothered by hard oak and a lengthy sermon."¹⁹¹

Rachel Cameron in Laurence's *A Jest of God* also has no desire to return to the family pew, but she does have a reason: she is back in Manawaka, having once escaped, and is living again with her mother. "Going to church is a social occasion for her," Rachel

¹⁸⁵ Atwood, *Cat's Eye*, 104.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 106

¹⁸⁷ Margaret Laurence, *The Stone Angel* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964), 16.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁹⁰ Read, *Margaret Laurence*, 12.

¹⁹¹ Laurence, *Stone Angel*, 16.

knows, "She hasn't many. It's mean of me not to want to go."¹⁹² So go she does, to the United Church where the wood is "beautifully finished... nothing ornate, heaven forbid... the congregation has good taste."¹⁹³ While her mother "flicks through the hymnal to look up the hymns in advance,"¹⁹⁴ Rachel wonders what, if anything, her mother believes. "She's never said..." Rachel muses to herself.

She loves coming to church because she sees everyone... I suppose she takes it for granted that she believes. Yet if the Rev. MacElfrish should suddenly lose his mind and speak of God with anguish or joy, or out of some need should pray with fierce humility as though God *had* to be there, Mother would be shocked to the core. Luckily it will never happen.¹⁹⁵

Emotion, for Rachel, is difficult enough. Emotion associated with *religion*, on the other hand, is inconceivable -- if also treacherously alluring. In the United Church, however, Rachel is safe from "display," from people "mak[ing] a public spectacle of themselves."¹⁹⁶ In the United Church's stained glass window, "a pretty and clean-cut Jesus expir[es] gently and with absolutely no inconvenience, no gore, no pain... holding his arms languidly up to something which might in other circumstances have been a cross."¹⁹⁷ In the United Church, Rachel is secure. She is comfortable. She is trapped.¹⁹⁸

Morag Gunn's childhood experience of the United Church in Manawaka, on the other hand, in Laurence's *The Diviners*, is quite different from Rachel's: her home-life and her adoptive parents Prin and Christie, unlike Rachel's, are patently not up to United

¹⁹² Margaret Laurence, *A Jest of God* (Toronto: McClelland-Bantam, 1966), 49.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁹⁸ Elizabeth Potvin, "A Mystery at the Core of Life: Margaret Laurence and Women's Spirituality", *Canadian Literature: A Quarterly of Criticism and Review*, 128(Spring, 1991): 31.

Church standards. To the United Church they go each week regardless, Prin and Morag -- Christie opting out "although a believer"¹⁹⁹ -- and Morag hugs both her embarrassment and her fury around her, knowing that "when church is over and they're all filing out... no one will say *Good Morning* to [them]... Might soil their precious mouths."²⁰⁰ In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, Morag in her childhood "loves Jesus. And how. He is friendly and not stuck-up is why."²⁰¹ She is deeply unimpressed with God, on the other hand, who "gets to decide which people have got to die, and when... and who is mean and gets mad at people for no reason at all... and [she] wouldn't trust Him as far as she could spit."²⁰² Who was it, after all, "who decided Jesus had to die like that? Who indeed? Three guesses. Jesus had a rough time. But when alive, He was okay to everybody, even sinners and hard-up people and like that."²⁰³

In the United Church in Manawaka, however, Jesus is the only one who's "okay to everybody." Morag loathes the hypocrisy of those around her, even as she outwardly conforms to their standards, recognizing that her escape will depend on being deemed acceptable, educable, worth the effort. Years later, however, finally returning to Manawaka to arrange Christie's funeral, Morag wants him buried from the United Church, with the old words spoken over him, just as both of them had requested for Prin.²⁰⁴

Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro: all three authors write from their own remembered experiences growing up in the United Church of the mid-century.

¹⁹⁹ Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), 77.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 108-109.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 401-403.

Their characters' small-town mid-century experiences and memories of the United Church virtually embody -- indeed, *literally* embody, in the church buildings and decor -- all the suffocating, rigid, and emotionally stifling limitations of small-town life that either cause each character to flee her small-town as soon as she can, or weary her desperately when she returns or remembers as an adult. The references to the United Church in the works of these three authors, in other words, reflect a complicated relationship to the churches in which they were brought up that is comparable to the complicated relationship they have with their hometowns. The United Church is not only representative of the Establishment, and its hypocrisy, against which they rebel, but also emblematic of the mores of a small town Canada that is increasingly not the *real* or the *whole* Canada. The characters, like their authors, are at once repelled by its brittle self-satisfied veneer of propriety, and at the same time strangely comforted by its predictability.

These are the reflections of insiders looking back and looking around them at the point at which virtually all the United Church's dreams have come true. Its churches are large and important, its Sunday Schools are full, and its programs have built sensible, charitable, engaged citizens with social-conscience enough to support welfare, medicare, pensions, and unions -- even if they prefer those in their immediate vicinity to be properly hatted and decently behaved. If the United Church in mid-century is self-satisfied, it is self-satisfied with good reason. Canada *itself* is self-satisfied. That there is, however, a simmering sense of disconnect, of *more*, of *otherness*, of hypocrisy lurking beneath the surface is uncomfortably clear in the United Church references in these mid-century novels. That self-satisfaction may be a mite premature.

The United Church in Canadian Literature at Mid-Century
Summary

Canada's suburban expansion following the Second World War must have seemed to United Church leaders who still recalled the heady days of Church Union to be a second opportunity at nation-building and ushering in the New Jerusalem. New churches were built in new neighbourhoods to provide the huge new generation of children with the solid Christian foundation of faith in God and the moral, active, and socially-useful discipleship it would inspire. Programs multiplied for all ages, to support continued learning and development as good Christians and thoughtful, socially aware Canadian citizens, while meanwhile the social programs for which the United Church had long politically advocated were adopted into government policy.

Each of the novels explored in this chapter reveals something of the nature, spirit, and mission of the United Church during this "golden age." The churches attended by the characters in these novels are prosperous and self-satisfied: the congregations know themselves to be upright, good citizens, decent, moderate, and dependable, and they imagine God to be roughly similar.

But for each of the main characters in these novels, something is not quite right. God should inspire awe, or joy, or love -- but any of these might suddenly become alarming or somehow cause one to forget the words of the Doxology. Jesus should inspire people to be kind and not stuck-up -- but since he tends to dress strangely it's a wonder he's allowed in the building in the first place. Of course not all United Church people were rigid and hypocritical -- and in fact all of these characters reveal also that not only have they thoroughly absorbed the essential United Church principle of *thinking about* one's faith, but furthermore they recognize, for others and sometimes for themselves, the

gift and the comfort of its rituals, its place in the community, and above all its best self. As this final portion of our ecclesial historiography (glimpsing in Canadian literature the nature, place, and mission of the United Church at mid-century) comes to a close, therefore, the self-satisfied golden age United Churches *have* built the good Christians and good Canadians that C. W. Gordon reckoned at the turn of the century were "the same thing."²⁰⁵ The difficulty going forward, however, would be that despite the United Church's best efforts at mid-century to shape a discernably *Christian* expression of citizenship in God's world -- and in Canada -- they had so thoroughly *become* the same thing.

²⁰⁵ Airhart, *Church*, 14.

Conclusion

Originally conceived as the Christian expression of the same combination of wise expediency, Romantic vision, and Enlightenment confidence in human capacity that had made Confederation possible and stretched Canada from sea to sea, The United Church of Canada created itself with the declared intent of being a national church for the young nation. Its particularly Canadian conflation of late-Victorian Protestant Social Gospel values with those necessary for survival in a punishing climate allowed it to imbue the impressive national infrastructure it gained at Church Union with a spiritual infrastructure on which Canadians could build together the Kingdom of God on earth. With diligence, temperance, integrity, trust in God, and a sense of responsibility for one another's well-being, the United Church proclaimed, Canadians could not only carve their own national identity into the space between American swagger and British loftiness, but could shape a nation that would be peaceable and godly and just: a New Jerusalem.

With big dreams come big responsibility, but the Great Depression proved both the United Church's capacity for and commitment to its promise to provide "a friendly service to the nation." In villages, towns, and cities across the country, United Churches provided pastoral care and charity to those struggling and became central to the social and spiritual life of communities, while at the same time advocating in solidarity with those in need for social policies that would embody Jesus' call to love of neighbour and care for the vulnerable. By the time peace was restored after the Second World War, the United Church's continued association with the essentially Canadian values of solid, dependable, decent moderation in both faith and living made it the firm foundation at mid-century on which the new strong suburban Canadian middle-class would establish itself. By 1965, in

short, both Canada and The United Church of Canada were enjoying, with no small amount of satisfaction, a golden age.

The two had, in effect, grown up together: the United Church operating as both Canada's soul and Canada's conscience, depending upon whether it was embodying or shaping Canadian life and identity at any given time. But just as siblings often mirror one another's characteristics and can know and challenge one another to the core, they can also unconsciously fall into and reinforce familiar patterns from childhood. For Canada and the United Church both, the familiar patterns of White Anglo-Saxon Protestant normativity, a discomfort with 'otherness', and the conviction that cultural assimilation ought to be grasped as gift and opportunity would prove difficult to shake; though not so much officially as unofficially, as the twentieth century progressed.

In addition, the depth of United Church influence on the development of Canadian social policy in the early part of the twentieth century meant that the faith it remained associated with, despite forays into moderate neo-orthodoxy -- namely, a faith centred on Jesus as Teacher and Model of charitable action and social responsibility -- had built Canadian society in its own image to such a degree by mid-century that the denomination began to founder as though without clear purpose.

The ecclesial historiography built in this thesis through examinations of references to the United Church in contemporaneous Canadian literature from the turn of the century to the mid-1960s reveals, in short, a denomination (and precursors) bringing to bear social values and a social ethos upon the country so thoroughly that its passionate faith in the Christ of the late-Victorian Social Gospel Movement has eventually devolved in the Canadian imagination into a passionate faith in the late-Victorian moderate moral

rectitude of diligence, temperance, honour, and a mildly smug commitment to the common good: all still strong Canadian values, manifest in Canadian life and social policy, but increasingly pleasingly preserved in the United Church as though in a museum.

It is telling indeed that the last significant references to The United Church of Canada in Canadian literature appear in the novels of this mid-century period. As Canada shifted into intentional secularism and embraced a multiculturalism that largely left the United Church behind, the denomination's inherent -- virtually assumed -- place in Canadian society was lost. Novels telling stories of Canadian life would no longer automatically include reference to the denomination, even as part of the narrative landscape. Nevertheless, the body of Canadian literature as a whole does bear witness to a United Church faith that strengthened and inspired Canadians in building their country, in surviving the Depression, and in shaping a social policy that would protect the most vulnerable. If somehow the denomination didn't quite manage to ensure that "the God of our Fathers" would be "the God of their succeeding race,"²⁰⁶ it had at least raised its voice to good purpose while it was heard.

²⁰⁶ Hymn "O God of Bethel".

Bibliography

Airhart, Phyllis D. *A Church with the Soul of a Nation ~ Making and Remaking the United Church of Canada*. Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2014.

Atwood, Margaret. *Cat's Eye*. Toronto: McClelland-Bantam Press, 1988.

Boadt, Lawrence. *Reading the Old Testament*. New York: Paulist Press, 1984.

Bothwell, Robert. *The New Penguin History of Canada*. Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2006. Kindle Edition.

Clifford, N. Keith. "Religion and the Development of Canadian Society: An Historiographical Analysis." *Church History* 38, No. 4 (1969): 506-523.

Connor, Ralph. *Glengarry School Days*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1902.

_____. *The Man from Glengarry*. New York: Revell Press, 1900.

Ferguson, Will. *Canadian History for Dummies, Second Edition*. Toronto: Wiley and Sons, 2005.

Kelly, Robert. "The Social Gospel and the Doctrine of Success in the Novels of Charles W. Gordon (Ralph Connor)." *Canadian Society of Church History* (1998): 5-15.

Laurence, Margaret. *A Bird in the House*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970.

_____. *A Jest of God*. Toronto: McClelland-Bantam, 1966.

_____. *The Diviners*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974.

_____. *The Stone Angel*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964.

MacLennan, Hugh. *Barometer Rising*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1941.

Montgomery, Lucy Maud. *Rilla of Ingleside*. Philadelphia: Lippincott Press, 1921.

Munro, Alice. *Lives of Girls and Women*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill-Ryerson Press, 1971.

Potvin, Elizabeth, "A Mystery at the Core of Life: Margaret Laurence and Women's Spirituality", *Canadian Literature: A Quarterly of Criticism and Review*, 128, No. 1 (Spring, 1991): 25-38.

Profit, Beth. "'The Making of a Nation': Nationalism and World War I in the Social Gospel Literature of Ralph Connor." *Canadian Society of Church History* (1992): 127-140.

Read, S. E., "The Maze of Life: The Work of Margaret Laurence," *Canadian Literature: A Quarterly of Criticism and Review*, 27 (Winter, 1966): 5-14.

Ross, Sinclair. *As for Me and My House*. New York: Reynal and Hitchcock Press, 1941.

Schweitzer, Don, ed. *The United Church of Canada: A History*. Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier Press, 2012. Kindle Edition.

United Church of Canada. *The Manual*. Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2013.

Walsh, H.H. "A Canadian Christian Tradition," in *The Churches and the Canadian Experience*, ed. John Webster Grant. (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1963), 145ff.