

Reviews

**DIVIDED HERITAGE:
The Presbyterian
Contribution to the United
Church of Canada
by John Webster Grant
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Paperback pp. 260. \$20**

In 1966, I moved to Canada two days after marrying a Canadian. He was a member of the United Church of Canada, while I was a Methodist from the United States and also a church historian struggling to write a dissertation. I was excited at the prospect of becoming a member of the United Church of Canada where I could claim as my heritage several strands of the Protestant heritage, not just one. Gradually, however, my excitement turned to dismay as it appeared to me that my newly adopted church, instead of celebrating the multiple strands of its history, was devoid of any appreciation of its roots! Needing an explanation, I theorized that the divisions caused by the union 41 years earlier had been too painful, and it seemed safer to bury the church's historical memory.

Forty-one years after my arrival in Canada and, during the year following his death, John Webster

Grant's final book was published, the one we are examining now. In this volume Grant takes a risk. He has no desire to open old wounds, but he cares deeply about both the Presbyterian and United churches, and believes that both can profit from a greater understanding, not only of the Presbyterian heritage and the church union movement, but also by the ways that the entrance into union by some, and the rejection by others, influenced the subsequent history of both.

Grant is uniquely qualified for this undertaking. Growing up in Pictou, Nova Scotia, he has been immersed in its Presbyterian heritage. His father, a Presbyterian minister, died when John was only two. His mother was one of the Pictonians who became part of the United Church at the time of union, and this was the church environment that formed her son. She also ensured, however, that he had continuing contact with his father's relatives who remained Presbyterians, so he was intimately familiar with that tradition. Grant became a minister in the United Church, where his interest in things Presbyterian seemed an anomaly to some of his colleagues.

In order to bring his readers to an understanding of Presbyterian contributions to the United Church, Grant provides an overview of that tradition, first as he himself

observed it, and then in the analysis of an historian. He acknowledges that when he would attempt to explain to his students the complex developments of Presbyterianism, their eyes quickly glazed over. But in this book, due to his personal background, his keen powers of observation, and his abundant wit, not only is Grant able to “iron out as many complexities” as he feels he “can decently get away with”, but he also puts a face on the various factions by presenting clear, even colourful illustrations of the participants’ beliefs and practices. His writing exemplifies the “sympathetic imagination” that one of my professors insisted was a requisite of superior church history. Even his briefest descriptions are often lively as well as balanced, as when he writes that the ideals of the Seceders made them “earnest, conscientious, and sometimes smug”.

In the next chapters, Grant elucidates the various aspects of Presbyterian faith and practice. He examines the importance of words, and in particular the “officially sanctioned words” of creeds and confessions. In his chapter on worship, he explains that the high value placed by Presbyterians on glorifying God led, paradoxically, to the appearance that they undervalued worship. Believing that its value made it particularly

vulnerable to corruption, they traditionally feared “self-made religion”, and tended to resist innovation.

The following chapters on worship, ministry, organization, and outreach are filled with similar analyses and insights, as Grant continues to enrich historical research with his own astute observations. While being so thoroughly immersed in the Presbyterian tradition, the reader may be somewhat disconcerted to observe the United Church of Canada crest at the head of each chapter. It serves as a silent reminder that, although the bulk of the book is about the Presbyterian tradition, both its roots and its Canadian manifestations, Grant has a further purpose in mind.

All of this has been preparation for the final chapter, “*Nec tamen consumebatur*”, the phrase describing the burning bush: “Yet was not consumed.” Here Grant first examines the process leading to church union. He maintains that much of the resistance — and the strength of that feeling — came from a distrust of the motivations of the unionists and from fear of what the United Church would be like: that it would be “careless about doctrine while insistent on conformity to a moral code”. He acknowledges that their anticipation was, to a large measure, correct, but

Grant points out that the *absence* of those who stayed out of union helped to turn their prophecy into reality.

He reports a conversation with Presbyterian minister, Wilfred Butcher, many years after the union. Among the many things on which they agreed was that “despite drawing on three churches, the United Church was then more homogeneous in outlook than the Presbyterian Church.” This, he explains, was because those entering the United Church tended to support a common programme, while the continuing Presbyterians had resisted union for a number of different reasons and found it more difficult to unify.

In looking at how the two churches have developed in the years since 1925, Grant observes the effects of the “distempers of the 1960s”. In the United Church, during those years, “tradition not only lost its cachet, but was regarded as essentially an obstacle to progress.” Thus Grant requires me to reassess my thesis about the place of tradition in the

denomination. When I came to Canada in 1966, I assumed the denomination’s ahistorical nature had been characteristic from the beginning. As an historian, I should not have made that assumption!

Grant begins his final paragraph, “To identify these two approaches, emphasizing where we come from or where we wish to go, is, I think, to recognize that we need both.” Later he states, “Such journeys require both an astrolabe to tell us where we are and a compass to tell us where we are headed.” His book provides that astrolabe for both denominations, and it deserves careful study by all who care about either church today. This final book is a significant addition to the rich legacy left by John Webster Grant. I hope my review will encourage readers to purchase it, but I need to inform those who wish to do so that it may be necessary to go directly to the publisher, Gravelbooks, rather than to the usual outlets.

— Marilyn Färdig Whiteley