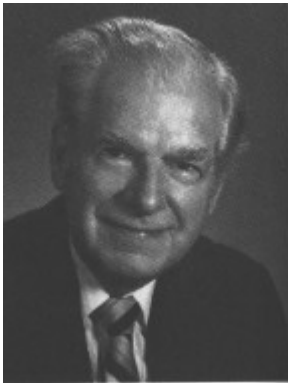


**JOHN WEBSTER GRANT: Historian of  
Christianity in Canada, Churchman, Hymn Writer  
and Translator (1919 - 2006)**  
by Marguerite Van Die



St. Andrew's United Church in Toronto was filled to capacity on December 20, 2006, for the memorial service to celebrate "the life and love" of John Webster Grant, United Church theological educator and Canada's foremost historian of religion. In his customary thoughtful and unassuming manner, Grant had left instructions that when the time came there were to be no high-toned eulogies nor humorous stories about the deceased, though he had wryly added he did not expect to be present to ensure his request be honoured.<sup>1</sup> Honoured it was, however, and in a sober but joyful service. Those present heard brief introductions to, and sang five, of the splendid hymns Grant translated or composed in the course of his career, words dating back to the early and medieval period, and all reflecting his intimate knowledge of Christian praise and worship.

Six months later, a second commemoration took place when historians of religion gathered in Saskatoon at a joint session of the Canadian Catholic Historical Association and the Canadian Society of Church History, which he had helped found in 1960. They came to listen to colleagues reflect on Grant's prodigious scholarly impact, with individual presentations devoted to his

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from letter to the Rev. John Hartley, copy to the author, email, 16 June, 2008.

writing of aboriginal history, Protestant and Roman Catholic history in Canada, and on his influence as a hymnologist, churchman and historian within the United Church of Canada.<sup>2</sup> This was also the occasion to celebrate the launching of his last book, published posthumously, *Divided Heritage: the Presbyterian Contribution to the United Church in Canada*. An essentially private and modest man he wrote little about himself, and it is only now thanks to this outpouring of appreciation and reflection, and to scattered autobiographical information in this most recent book that we can begin to interpret John Webster Grant's life and work.<sup>3</sup>

## Life

A historian who faithfully attended the annual meetings of a variety of denominational historical societies, Grant would privately confide on those occasions when the participants' nostalgia for old-fashioned Methodist revivalism blazed conspicuously, that his own sympathies lay with the more subdued expressions of Presbyterian piety. His old-time Presbyterian roots were deep, and are described in charming detail in his final book. Born and raised in Pictou, Nova Scotia, he attended elementary school in a building which had once

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<sup>2</sup> Susan Neylan, "John Webster Grant's Contributions to Aboriginal Historiography"; Paul R. Dekar, "The Contribution of John Webster Grant to Protestant Religious Historiography"; Mark McGowan, "Reflections on John Webster Grant's Influence on Catholic Historiography in Canada"; John H. Young, "John Webster Grant and His Place in the United Church in Canada". *Historical Papers 2007, Canadian Society of Church History*, pp. 149-180.

<sup>3</sup> See also Phyllis Airhart, "Professor John Webster Grant", a tribute recorded in the Minutes of the Senate of Victoria University, April 4, 2007; John S. Moir, "Life," *Divided Heritage: The Presbyterian Contribution to the United Church of Canada* (Yorkton, SK: Gravelbooks, 2007) p. 231-4.

housed Pictou Academy, the province's first institution of higher education, founded in 1816 by Presbyterian minister, Thomas McCulloch. The latter's intimidating granddaughters, distant relatives of the Grants, young John visited from time to time with his mother, Dorothy Waddell. She was a former school teacher, and the great-grand-daughter of one of Truro's early Presbyterian ministers. His father, the Rev. William P. Grant, also a Presbyterian minister, had died of TB when his son was only two. Thanks to happy summers spent in nearby Sunny Brae, his father's family remained an important part of his life. During these vacations, as the only male in an entirely female household, it was his task at evening prayers to read from "the Book". This was followed by extemporaneous prayer given by the person in charge, each member kneeling before (and trying to keep stationary) their respective rocking chairs. Such rituals, he later mused, were part of an inheritance whose value increased with the years for "they created a habit of observance that could easily be internalized."<sup>4</sup>

Living at a time and place where sociability centred largely on Pictou's three Presbyterian churches, he also recalled with fondness the presence of secular festivities like lobster fests and "Hogmanay". For the latter, as the only male in a family of two, he was allocated the task "by a long-standing tradition of patriarchy" to extend new year's greetings to neighbours, and receive the cookies and milk they offered him as a substitute for the customary libations given adult revelers.

In this tightly knit community, and as part of an extended family with strong ties to missions and church, he found himself at an early age gravitating towards the ministry. Experiencing no dramatic conversion (the closest he ever came to that was during a visit by a team from the Oxford Group in the 1930s) and being of a scholarly disposition and biblically educated, he credited his choice of the ministry to the Presbyterian emphasis on the

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<sup>4</sup> Grant, *Divided Heritage*, p. 5.

preaching of the “Word”. In 1925 when he was six years old, his mother had accompanied Pictou’s one Presbyterian congregation into union, and there appears to have been no doubt in his mind that his own ministry would be in the recently-formed United Church of Canada.

In 1935 he entered Dalhousie University, and three years later, only 19 years old, he graduated with a B.A. *magna cum laude* and the Prince of Wales medal. His first two publications — articles in the *Dalhousie Review* on Maritime demographic change and politics in the Far East — date from this period, and reflect interests that led him to take up a junior fellowship at Princeton to study politics. A year later, however, having turned down a senior fellowship, he returned to Canada to study theology at Pine Hill Divinity Hall in Halifax. Summer mission fields took him to Cape George, Vaughan and Mount Uniacke, Nova Scotia, and to Harrington Harbour, Quebec on the north shore of the St. Lawrence, both of which still reflected their 19<sup>th</sup> century Presbyterian origins. Along with theological training he managed to complete an MA in Philosophy from Dalhousie in 1941, and received a Rhodes Scholarship. Because of the war, however, he deferred taking it up until 1946. Given the critical shortage of ministers as a result of the war, his ordination was speeded up and in 1943 he was inducted into the Cape Breton congregation of North Bay in the presence of a solid phalanx of United Church ministers. All, with one exception, bore the name MacLeod! And all, he recalled with his trademark dry wit, were committed to letting him know in no uncertain terms what MacLeods expected of a minister.

In 1945 he was appointed chaplain in the Royal Canadian Navy, a position he continued to hold in the Naval Reserves from 1952-59. With his young wife, literature scholar Gwendolen Margaret Irwin,<sup>5</sup> he moved to Halifax, and in 1945-6

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<sup>5</sup> A writer and poet, Gwen Grant’s work can be accessed at <http://library.vicu.utoronto.ca/special/F53ggrantfonds.htm>.

was sessional lecturer in systematic theology at Pine Hill. Strong supporters of the SCM, the couple were co-directors of the Student-in-Industry camp in Brantford, Ontario, in the summer of 1946, before taking up John's Rhodes scholarship at Oxford. Three years later, he returned to Canada with a D.Phil., and from 1949-1959 taught as the Woodward Foundation professor of church history at Union College in Vancouver.

Significant publications now appeared, beginning in 1958 with *Free Churchmanship in England, 1870-1940*, based on his dissertation, followed by two monographs in 1960. The first, *God's People in India*, reflected his long-standing interest in modern missions, and followed a sabbatical visiting professorship at the United Theological College of South India and Ceylon in 1957-8. The second, *The Ship Under the Cross: A Survey of the Ecumenical Movement*, pointed to his growing passion for ecumenism, shared by many idealistic Christians of his generation.

These were years of tremendous change in the relationship between the mainline denominations and Canadian society, and Grant participated in the restructuring as a churchman, as well as skillfully analyzing and describing them as a historian. In 1959 he joined the editorial staff of the United Church's flagship publishing house, the Ryerson Press. As editor-in-chief from 1960 to 1963 he helped launch the denomination's innovative but controversial "New Curriculum". Despite this obviously progressive educational programme, he realized to his surprise that many of his lay colleagues at the Ryerson Press had come to associate the United Church not with breadth but with narrowness. Theological students at Union, he had been equally surprised to note, appeared uncertain, even embarrassed, about what the denomination stood for. It can be argued that his subsequent lengthy career was shaped in large part by a strong sense of his responsibility to help the United Church in

particular, and Canadian churches more generally, to understand and define Christian identity in the post 1960 era.

Already during his brief editorship at Ryerson Press it was evident to him that the publishing house's longstanding tradition of pre-eminence as a Canadian intellectual centre had gone. By 1970, when the United Church divested itself of the Press, he had resumed his earlier love of university teaching, and from 1963 to his retirement in 1984 was professor of church history at Emmanuel College in Toronto. Thereafter, until shortly before his death, and the diminution of strength following several small strokes, he continued to teach as guest lecturer, to participate in academic conferences and to research and write. His wife Gwen predeceased him in 2002, and though he tried valiantly to carry on with his scholarly interests, his final few years were challenging, and save for a few close friends and relatives, were often lonely. Those who visited him in his retirement residence could not fail to note that prominent among the limited possessions he had taken with him were an impressive number of recent books on Canadian religious history authored by younger historians to whom he had been a valuable mentor. Their task, they often appreciatively noted, was simply to flesh out with smaller studies the comprehensive and nuanced framework John Grant had unerringly provided.

### **Historian of Christianity in Canada**

One cannot emphasize enough the contribution that Grant made to the writing of religious history in Canada precisely at a time when mainline denominations were devaluing their traditions, and when society in general was becoming increasingly secular. Previous religious history written within the context of an unexamined Christendom had been largely denominational or biographical, but now the times called for a more synthetic and interpretive approach. In 1967, the year of the Canadian centenary, Grant and his colleagues H.H. "Nick"

Walsh and John Moir, launched a three volume *History of the Christian Church in Canada*, with Grant authoring the final volume that examined Canada's first century, 1867-1967. With consummate skill and elegance he offered a sweeping overview that included all the churches and placed them within the wider lens of an evolving Canadian identity. Looking back on the way he shaped his narrative, one realizes how much it owed to his vision of an ecumenical Christianity, in which he never minimized differences but at the same time kept at the forefront the churches' shared task of mission to the nation.

Vision did not become reality, however. His volume, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, appeared in 1972, and by 1987 the cautious optimism of its conclusion already appeared dated. Responding to a call for a revised edition, he noted in an entirely new concluding chapter that in retrospect, signs of ecclesial renewal and ecumenical rapprochement had been weaker than he had realized. "The unofficial establishment of Christianity in Canada, already in 1967 more shadow than substance," he acknowledged, "is in 1987 little more than a memory." Chapter sub-headings in the new conclusion conveyed starkly the changes of the previous two decades: "years of crisis"; "different drummers" (new countercultural, charismatic, conservative groups); and "old emphases in transition" (such as the unhitching of evangelism and social Christianity, which long had together driven the "christianization" of society). Comfortable with ambiguity, Grant never succumbed as many did to nostalgia, or to lamenting a lost past. Even in 1987 the history of Christianity offered a source of hope, or probably more accurately for someone shaped by Presbyterianism, one simply trusted the mysterious ways of Providence. He concluded his new chapter with "...the noise of the things that are dying still drowns out the voice of the things that are coming to birth", quoting his colleague, Quebec historian Jean Hamelin (who had chronicled an equally devastating period for the Roman Catholic Church in

that province).<sup>6</sup> Two decades later Grant's thoughtful 1987 revised conclusion still remains the most coherent entry into the complexity of Christianity in contemporary Canada, and it is little wonder that this final chapter figures prominently as required reading for seminarians, as well as for Canadian history students.

A quick count of his many publications, listed in an appendix in *Divided Heritage*, yields 12 monographs, 5 edited books, and 61 articles and contributed chapters. For reasons of space, brief mention can be made only of two other major monographs. Each, *Moon of Wintertime: Missionaries and the Indians of Canada in Encounter Since 1534* (1984), and *A Profusion of Spires: Religion in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (1988), is characterized by groundbreaking research, intimate familiarity with the strengths and weaknesses of institutional Christianity, and skillful contextualization and analysis of complex traditions. Anyone interested in understanding the interplay of 19<sup>th</sup> century European and Canadian Christianity will do well to read the latter. In a single chapter, for example, Grant lucidly ties together Roman Catholic Ultramontaniam, the Scottish Disruption, and the British Tractarian movement, all as responses to encroachments by the state on church life. The earlier book, a study of the complicated nature and role of missions to Canada's aboriginal peoples, is more controversial. Written at a time when there was virtually no public awareness of the abuses of the residential school system, missionary activity to natives did not have its current political connotations. In this early groundbreaking study, though Grant chose as his primary subject not the recipients but the purveyors of missions, he did not let his empathy for the missionary endeavour prevent him from being at times critical of the ways missionaries had presented Christianity. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, mutual exchange

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<sup>6</sup> John Webster Grant, "Postscript: After the Deluge", in Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, 2d. ed. (Burlington: Welch 1988) pp. 244-5.



of religious traditions, which he considered to be necessary if Christianity were to be indigenized, became increasingly difficult in the face of denominational institutionalization. "A realistic evaluation of Indian Christianity," he thoughtfully concluded, "must take into account not only what Indians made of Christianity but of what it did for them."<sup>7</sup> And while this was not the focus of his own survey, a new generation of scholars has taken up his challenge and carried on the historic study of missions with an equal regard for the ambiguity and complexity of cross-cultural religious contact.

### **Churchman**

Grant's concern to offer an informed balanced history of Christianity in Canada was never divorced from his own active commitment to the life of the church. His support for the shared denominational vision that had resulted in church union in 1925 is evident in his other 1967 publication, *The Canadian Experience of Church Union*. Ecumenism continued to fuel his enthusiastic participation and leadership as a key United Church representative in union negotiations with the Anglican Church and with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) which began seriously in 1965. Here at a time when many considered ecclesiastical traditions a disposable encumbrance, he modeled for his theological students and his denomination how these were in fact essential to restructuring a meaningful Christian church presence in a modern secular Canada. In the end, however, the union negotiations into which he and other denominational delegates had put great trust and energy failed to achieve widespread support, and were ended in 1975 by the Anglican Church. In 1985 talks between the two remaining partners ceased. A related ecumenical venture proved somewhat more enduring.

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<sup>7</sup> John Webster Grant, *Moon of Wintertime: Missionaries and the Indians of Canada in Encounter since 1534* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1984) p. 251.

Appointed to the United Church committee that in 1963 undertook to replace the “blue” *Hymnary*, he became an active contributor. Then two years later, thanks to the union talks, it became a joint Anglican-United Church committee which was to produce a book that would be used by both denominations. Published in 1971, the “red” *HymnBook* contained four of Grant’s translations of ancient and medieval hymns, and an original contribution based on Psalm 122. Regrettably, only one, his translation of the 9<sup>th</sup> century Latin hymn, “O Holy Spirit, by Whose Breath”, can be found in *Voices United*, successor to the *Hymn Book*.

It cannot have been easy as a historian of Christianity, with a special interest in the United Church and its formative traditions, to find oneself, as Grant did, in a denomination which increasingly during his final decades had, in his own words, a “bias for change” and preferred risk to safety. The perceived change expressed itself in various ways, most notably a shift “from fixed principles to contextual solutions”, and “from affirmation of the sacral character of institutions, such as ministry and marriage, to examination of their social function and potential for personal fulfillment”. The words are taken from one of his most profound and insightful comments on the state of the church, gently delivered as an invited theme speaker to the annual general meeting of the United Church’s Division of Ministry, Personnel and Education in 1989. The request, to examine “the way our systems and structures, attitudes to scripture, authority, use of power, hierarchy or mutuality in ministry, etc., have affected our decision making”, had come shortly after the controversial decision of the 1988 General Council that sexual orientation, “in an of itself, was not a barrier to ordination to ministry”. It was a formidable task, and as usual Grant came extensively prepared. In addition to offering his familiarity with the denomination's history, he had examined the proceedings of General Councils to the present. He summarized

his findings in three addresses bearing the title “Roots and Wings”, symbols of mediating past and present. As one who had not regularly attended annual church court events, he had been astounded to discover that beginning in the late 1960s there began a coincidence of truly dramatic and rapid changes. In place of the traditional decision-making at General Council with its emphasis on expertise in an atmosphere reminiscent of a “parliamentary forum tintured — up to a point — by a devotional atmosphere”, engagement now stressed feeling and was more like “an enlarged encounter group”.<sup>8</sup> This shift, which he characterized as a move from intellect to feeling, from a left-brain to right-brain approach, had led among other things to an increasing failure to bring issues to a conclusion at General Council meetings. Among the results were that power now lay with those who were familiar with the system, those “whose advantage is described in contemporary terms as the possession of information”, and whose abilities were displayed more behind the scenes than had been the case of the old consensus-makers. Suggesting various ways to correlate more effectively between decision-making and reception in a denomination that prided itself on being broadly based, and drawing again on the example of the former Presbyterian church courts, he concluded “consultation is likely only to aggravate discontent unless those consulted are able to affect the outcome”.

A sense that the denomination was rapidly losing both its memory and “a coherent and generally accepted vision of the church” with nothing to replace it, became a refrain in his later writings. Among these are a number of cogent articles in *Touchstone*, where with growing urgency, he re-iterated ideas and proposals for the recovery of helpful insights from the past.<sup>9</sup> All

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<sup>8</sup> John Webster Grant, “Roots and Wings,” [typescript], February 1989, 24pp.

<sup>9</sup> John Webster Grant, “They Don’t Speak For Me: The United Church’s Crisis of Confidence”, *Touchstone* 6:3 (September 1988) pp. 9-17; “Unauthoritative Reflections on the United Church’s Story”, *Touchstone* 12:1 (January 1994) pp. 4-12.

of these bear rereading by anyone concerned with the future of the United Church, but of all his many writings as a United Church historian to mediate between memory and hope, none rivals the chapter he contributed to the collection, *Voices & Visions*, commemorating the denomination's sixty-fifth anniversary. Entitled "What's Past is Prologue", it offers a sympathetic, informed sweep of the church's history as well as cautionary insights into some of the major challenges facing it in the future.<sup>10</sup> The chapter opens with the familiar lines from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, "...what's past is prologue, what to come in yours and my discharge." Intended for his denomination, the words also underscore his own deeply informed love of the Christian tradition, and his constant efforts almost until the day of his death, to transmit elements of that tradition as a legacy for the United Church of the future.

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<sup>10</sup> John W. Grant, "What's Past is Prologue", in *Voices and Visions: 65 Years of the United Church of Canada* (Toronto: UCC Publishing House 1990) pp. 124-149