

Review Article

Books and Baptists in Atlantic Canada

by CARMAN MILLER

The Diary of Joseph Dimock. GEORGE E. LEVY, ed. Hantsport: Lancelot Press, 1979. 207 p. ISBN 0889991049.

The Journal of the Reverend John Payzant (1749-1834). BRIAN C. CUTHBERTSON, ed. Hantsport: Lancelot Press, 1979. xiii, 130 p. ISBN 088999143X.

Repent and Believe: The Baptist Experience in Maritime Canada. BARRY M. MOODY, ed. Hantsport: Lancelot Press, 1980. xi, 217 p. ISBN 0889991243.

The Life and Journal of the Rev. Mr. Henry Alline. JAMES BEVERLEY and BARRY MOODY, eds. Hantsport: Lancelot Press, 1982. 268 p. ISBN 0889991685.

The New Light Letters and Spiritual Songs, 1778-1793. GEORGE A. RAWLYK, ed. Hantsport: Lancelot Press, 1983. xvi, 361 p. ISBN 088999188X.

The Newlight Baptist Journals of James Manning and James Innis. DAVID G. BELL, ed. Hantsport: Lancelot Press, 1984. xvii, 398 p. ISBN 0889992517.

The Sermons of Henry Alline. GEORGE A. RAWLYK, ed. Hantsport: Lancelot Press, 1986. 174 p. ISBN 0889993106.

An Abiding Conviction: Maritime Baptists and Their World. ROBERT S. WILSON, ed. Hantsport: Lancelot Press, 1988. 249 p. ISBN 088999384X.

Baptists in Canada, 1760-1990: A Bibliography of Selected Printed Resources in English. PHILIP G.A. GRIFFIN-ALLWOOD, GEORGE A. RAWLYK, and JAROLD K. ZEMAN, compilers. Hantsport: Lancelot Press, 1989. xix, 266 p. ISBN 0889993998.

In 1981, Baptists accounted for only 2.9 per cent of the Canadian population. Distinguished by its belief in adult baptism of believers and congregational government, the Canadian Baptist mosaic is differentiated by colour, language, ethnicity, region, and theology. Almost sixty per cent of Canadian Baptists belong to the Canadian Baptist Federation, which consists of three regional conventions and the Union of French Baptist Churches. Another twenty-four per cent of Canadian Baptists are members of the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches. The rest are divided among the North American Baptist Conference, descendants of German-speaking churches; the General

Conference of Canada, composed of Swedish Baptists; the Canadian Convention of (U.S.) Southern Baptists; as well as some 225 independent, unaffiliated Baptist congregations.¹ Despite their small number and divisions, Canadian Baptists have made a marked contribution to public life, especially in the field of higher education; Acadia, McMaster, and Brandon University are monuments to the efforts of Canadian Baptists.²

The birthplace and heartland of the denomination, Atlantic Canada, contains about thirty per cent of Canada's Baptists. There, Baptists are more united, visible, and organized than in the rest of the country; resources and leadership from this region have helped establish and shape the character of the denomination, within Canada and abroad. It is appropriate, therefore, that the first major collective initiative to examine the history of Canadian Baptists should come from and focus on Atlantic Canada. Sponsored by the Acadia Divinity College and the Baptist Historical Committee of the United Baptist Convention of the Atlantic Provinces, the Baptist Heritage in Atlantic Canada project is designed to publish primary documents and studies on the origins and development of the region's Baptist tradition. The professional credentials of its editorial committee underline the project's scholarly intent; the project's publications to date are convincing evidence of its general success.

Over a decade since its inception, the Baptist Heritage project has now published nine volumes, beginning with George E. Levy's edition of *The Diary of Joseph Dimock* in 1979. Two of the volumes contain essays; another volume is a comprehensive bibliography of Baptists in Canada; and the rest are devoted to the diaries, journals, sermons, songs, and letters of some of the movement's more dynamic early leaders. All of the latter contain full, accurate, and annotated texts, and extended, critical introductions. The growing sophistication of the research and analysis, in part a measure of the project's success, is reflected in these scholarly introductions. Among the best are the following: D.G. Bell (ed.), *Newlight Baptist Journals of James Manning and James Innis*; James Beverley and Barry M. Moody (eds.), *The Life and Journal of the Rev. Mr. Henry Alline*; and George A. Rawlyk's two-volume *The Sermons of Henry Alline and The New Light Letters and Spiritual Songs, 1778-1793*. Occasionally the introduction is infinitely more important than the text, as is the case with Bell's excellent introduction to James Manning's rather feeble text.

A new, dynamic picture of the origins and early history of the Maritime Baptists emerges from the pages of these volumes. The history, geography, and significance of Henry Alline's traumatic "New Light" movement (1776-1783) and subsequent "great awakenings" retain their central place in Baptist historiography. Although Alline's shadow still haunts Maritime Baptists, he is no longer seen as exclusive Baptist property, but as the magnetic progenitor of a broad, Maritime, evangelical tradition which followed various and often divergent paths. Of comparable importance to Baptist historians is how this often confused and confusing, but inclusive, Allinite movement, with its indifference to the sacraments, government, and liturgy, and its insistence upon the primacy of religious experience, was transformed into the exclusive, orderly, Calvinist Regular Baptists, with its insistence upon closed communion, adult immersion, and an educated clergy. In part, the great transformation is explained by the excesses of Alline's early disciples and other enthusiasts, especially the antinomian New Dispensationists, who believed that Christ had freed them from the constraints of the moral law. (One of the more demented New Dispensationists, John Lunt, was charged

with rape in 1792, assisted by the father of the victim; and another, Amos Babcock, murdered his sister, Mercy Hall, at Shediac in 1805.) The "great transformation" toward order, orthodoxy, and respectability was, of course, more than a reaction to excess. It was also carefully "stage-managed" by a few skilled ecclesiastical politicians, and was often fraught with personality conflicts, misunderstanding, and apparent duplicity. No effort is made to canonize these early Baptist leaders, whose faith sometimes faltered, and whose private lives were far from exemplary: Innis's love of the bottle and Harris Harding's weakness for women are but two of the more conspicuous examples.

Interpreting its mandate broadly, the Baptist Heritage series deals not only with the growth of the predominant Regular (Calvinist) Baptists, and the Free Will Baptists with whom they united in 1905 to form the United Baptist Convention of the Maritime Provinces, but also with the Free Christian Baptists, Christians, and other enthusiasts affected by the New Light movement, as well as the various schisms, factions, and "unsteady watchmen" which plagued the Baptist churches. In short, this series is far from an exclusive, pious, denominational history: it is, rather, a critical, scholarly project, based upon rigorous professional analysis.

The series is also more than denominational history. Through it, we see the emergence of a secular society, slowly being weaned from its New England roots, uncertain of its future, sometimes in crisis, yet open to a larger world, not only centred in New England, obliged to adapt to the constraints, and to respond to the challenges of local political, economic, and social imperatives. We also see a remote, poor, colonial society caught up in the "subversive" intellectual world of the late eighteenth century, ready to experiment with new religious, moral, and social forms. The result is a significant religious and political transformation: a hundred years after its creation, and after successive waves of British immigration, a quarter of the population of the Tory, Loyalist province of New Brunswick was Baptist. In some counties, such as Albert (67%), Sunbury (56.2%), and Carleton (51.6%), they constituted over half of the population. The same could be said for Nova Scotia's Fundy-bordered counties of Kings (54.1%) and Annapolis (54.3%). How the Baptists subverted the Loyalists' design, and how it affected the political culture of the region, remains to be explored.

To date, the Baptist Heritage project's primary focus has been on the first fifty years, that is, about 1775-1825; the exceptions to this are two volumes of essays: Barry M. Moody, *Repent and Believe* (1980) and Robert S. Wilson, *An Abiding Conviction* (1988). Both of these volumes grew out of Baptist "heritage" conferences held at Acadia University, the first in October 1979 and the second eight years later. These essays deal with various themes: education, Baptist poetry, the African Association, the role of women, missions, great men, and denominational politics. Not all are of equal quality, and some are very poor, impressionistic accounts based on little scholarship and less insight. Among the best are Rawlyk's essay on "Harris Harding and the Second Great Awakening in Nova Scotia," D.G. Bell's "The Allinite Tradition and the New Brunswick Free Christian Baptists 1830-1875," Robert S. Wilson's "John Mocket as a Church Historian," and Margaret Conrad's "Theodore Harding Rand as Educator, 1860-1900."

Although the production of ten volumes (one is in press), including a bibliography, suggests finality, much more remains to be done, especially for the latter half of the nineteenth and the twentieth century. The proliferation of primary materials for this period and the numerous subjects competing for scholarly attention will, however,

require difficult editorial decisions if a manageable and coherent project is to continue, as it ought. One will want to know how the denomination grew, adapted to, and helped shape an increasingly complex society, confronted by economic and social adversity, and where the borders between the sacred and secular often merged and diverged, and where theological fashions changed. More specifically, the new research and publication agenda will doubtless include information and studies on the important contributions of blacks, women, and youth to the creation of Maritime Baptists, the denomination's participation in foreign and home missions (especially its innovative hospital and prison work), its mission among francophones, the recruitment and education of its clergy and lay leadership, and its often fruitful interdenominational cooperation, to suggest some of the more obvious topics.

A denomination which boasts of its autonomy, democracy, and freedom from ecclesiastical restraints, the Maritime Baptists group provides a sensitive barometer and conduit of external influences, external to both the region and the denomination. One would like to know how Maritime Baptists, as they marched steadily toward respectability, responded not only to American influences, but also to the demands of local, provincial, national, and imperial loyalties, and the religious culture (liturgical practices, social perspective, and theology) of the region's dominant religious denominations. From these and other studies of denominational politics may emerge an understanding of the United Baptist Convention's remarkable resilience, its ability to absorb dissent, contain social, economic, political, and theological differences, counter periodic challenges to its authority, and retain the allegiance of its constituency, without compromising its commitment to the idea of the "priesthood of believers" and congregational autonomy. As this convention moves toward its centennial, this somewhat remarkable feat of consensual governance is worthy of examination as well as celebration.

A modest, low cost production, published by a regional press, the Baptist Heritage in Atlantic Canada series ought to be of interest to scholars of regional as well as religious history. The role of religion has too long been neglected by regional historians. As products of, and formative agents in shaping life and society — more specifically as an integrative force in a highly fragmented region — Maritime Baptists occupy an important place in that larger mosaic of Maritime history, one that deserves closer scrutiny and which promises to broaden our understanding of Atlantic Canada.

Notes

- 1 J.K. Zeman, "Baptists," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, (Edmonton, 1988), pp. 176-7.
- 2 G.A. Rawlyk, (ed.), *Canadian Baptists and Christian Higher Education*, (Kingston, 1988).