

The Canadian Unitarian-Universalist Record Survey

by **HEATHER WATTS**

For over 150 years the congregations of the small but influential denomination now known as Unitarian-Universalist have guarded their own records. As societies flourished or waned, survival of those records very much depended on the interest of individual members. In the past ten years, this situation has changed as more and more societies have deposited material in local or provincial archives, but much still remains in the communities where it was created, inaccessible and unknown to the academic community or the general public.

In 1988, a committee of three Unitarian historians, Dr. Mary Lu MacDonald of Halifax, Dr. Phillip Hewett, and Marilyn Flitton, both of Vancouver, concerned for the safety of denominational records, received a Canadian Studies Research Tools grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, to locate and describe them. Between November 1988 and March 1989, the project archivist, Heather Watts, visited forty-two active churches and lay-led fellowships across Canada, as well as making contact by telephone or letter with members of over twenty-three historic churches and former societies. Records of Canadian Unitarian-Universalists have now been discovered in locations as disparate as a log cabin overlooking Georgia Strait, a potter's studio in rural Saskatchewan, a mansion on Mount Royal, and a garage in New Brunswick.

Unitarianism is a "heresy" almost as old as the Christian church. Originating in a denial of the doctrine of the Trinity, Unitarian movements existed at various times in Italy, Switzerland, Hungary, and Great Britain. Joseph Priestley, the discoverer of oxygen, was a Unitarian minister who fled religious persecution in England to found the first Unitarian church in North America at Philadelphia in 1794. Dissenting Presbyterians from Ulster were among the organizers of the first Unitarian services in Montreal in the 1820s. Other founding members were the English brewer John Molson, and New Englanders Horatio Gates and Ariel Bowman, who came from American Unitarian backgrounds. The Foster sisters, Harriet Cheney and Elizabeth Cushing, well-known early Canadian writers, and daughters and cousins of American Unitarian ministers, are considered to have been responsible for keeping the small congregation together between 1837 and the arrival of the first settled minister, the Ulster Unitarian, John Cordner. Assistance for the fledgling groups in Canada continued to come from both the American Unitarian Association (AUA) and the British and Foreign Unitarian Association (BFUA).

Their members sought freedom of conscience and belief, and saw themselves as part of the liberal and progressive spirit of the age. Their religion repudiated ancient creed and dogma, returning instead to the original teachings of Jesus. The discoveries of science and of Biblical scholarship were welcomed, and members were encouraged to devote themselves to the improvement of society. Many were active in politics and social reform. Sir Francis Hincks, youngest son of one of the leading Unitarian ministers in Ireland, was associated with both the Toronto and Montreal churches during parts of his long political career. His brother William Hincks, professor of natural history at University College, Toronto, also served as minister of the Toronto church for four years, and was an active campaigner for such social causes as abolition of the slave trade and capital punishment, temperance, peace education, extension of civil rights and shorter hours of work.¹ Dr. Emily Stowe, the first woman to practice medicine in Canada, signed the Toronto membership roll in 1879. The movement was never large — in the nineteenth century, Unitarian churches were located in Montreal, Toronto, Saint John, Winnipeg, Ottawa, and Hamilton — and in communities where no society existed, Unitarians settling there were usually assimilated into other Protestant denominations.

Two interesting sub-groups exist within the modern Unitarian-Universalist denomination, the Icelanders and the Universalists, and both have records which date back many years. Icelandic Lutheran churches were present on the shores of Lake Winnipeg in the late nineteenth century, the scattered parishes making up an area known as New Iceland. Accustomed to the liberal Scandinavian form of Lutheranism, many of the Icelanders chafed under the conservative leadership of the North American movement. In 1890, Bjorn Petursson, who had been living in Icelandic communities in Minnesota and had adopted Unitarianism, moved to Winnipeg where he founded and led the First Icelandic Unitarian Church. In that same year, Rev. Magnus J. Skaptason was expelled from the Icelandic Lutheran Synod for his heretical views, and led five of his congregations on the western shore of Lake Winnipeg to form the Icelandic Free Church in America, which almost immediately applied to join the Unitarians. The Icelandic Church of Winnipeg agreed to share its minister and building with its English-speaking counterpart in 1934, and the two congregations merged eleven years later. Icelandic-language records continued to be kept up to 1945 and Rev. Philip Petursson, who ministered to both language groups, held occasional services in Icelandic as late as the mid-1960s. Other Icelandic speaking congregations at Arborg on Lake Winnipeg, Wynyard, Saskatchewan, and Blaine, Washington (an international congregation) still hold their own records, but those remaining from some thirty other former churches of the Unitarian Conference of Icelandic churches have been deposited in the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.

Like Unitarianism, Universalism spread into Canada with British and American settlers. A Universalist society was organized in London, Upper Canada, in 1831, and in Halifax in 1837, while a network of preaching circuits operated in the Eastern Townships of Lower Canada in the 1820s. The census of 1851 showed 1,031 Universalists in Sherbrooke County alone, and similarly large concentrations were reported from Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Canada West, far outnumbering Unitarians.

Universalism was a reaction to the harsh doctrines of Calvinism prevalent in the nineteenth century. It was largely a rural movement, made up of independent and

usually self-educated members who had left other Protestant denominations. Women were permitted unusual freedom to preach and to take part in congregational affairs. The first Universalist woman preacher in Canada (and possibly the first of any denomination) was Mrs. Mary Ann Church, who built up a congregation at the village of Merrickville, Upper Canada, in the 1830s. Individualistic and free-thinking, Universalists resisted organization and regulation, even by their own Conventions, a characteristic that resulted in somewhat hit-or-miss record keeping and was later to be an impediment to growth.

Universalism peaked in Canada in the 1860s and, as the other Protestant denominations moderated their Calvinism and became more tolerant and inclusive in their attitudes, there ceased to be a need for this gentle alternative. Only three Universalist churches survived into the middle of the twentieth century — at Halifax, Nova Scotia, North Hatley, Quebec, and Olinda, Ontario. In 1961, they voted to join the continental merger of all Unitarian and Universalist churches. The cumbersome name Unitarian-Universalist continues to pose something of a problem. Whereas most American churches use the longer title, Canadian churches tend to prefer Unitarian alone to describe themselves. The three former Universalist churches and some of the newer Canadian fellowships, true to their independent tradition, have chosen to include Universalist in their title.

Unitarian societies are congregationally governed by a board of trustees elected by the membership. Their ministers are trained in a number of theological schools, including Harvard Divinity School, accepted for fellowship in the denomination by an examining committee, and are chosen to serve a particular society by its members acting through a search committee. Ministerial and lay delegates are sent to the annual meetings of the Canadian Unitarian Council and the Unitarian-Universalist Association, whose headquarters are in Toronto and Boston respectively. These organizations provide administration, publications, curriculum material, and communications.

The records generated by Unitarian and Universalist groups are of the same type as those of any congregationally governed church. The difference between Unitarian records and those of the United or Presbyterian church, for instance, is in the much looser national organizational structure which lacks central or regional control over record keeping and record storage. Despite this lack of guidance, inspection, or interest by others in the records of individual congregations, a surprisingly large volume of material has survived. Universalist records date from 1837 in Halifax, 1844 in the Eastern Townships of Quebec, and the last quarter of the nineteenth century in Ontario. The oldest Unitarian records are in the Montreal and Toronto churches (1842 and 1845 respectively) with churches in the larger western cities opening up from the early years of this century. A rapid expansion of the lay-led fellowship movement occurred in the 1950s and 1960s, and most of these records exist even when the group has not survived.

Almost all congregations have copies of their by-laws, minutes of annual and congregational meetings, and minute books of their governing board. A membership roll for some part of their existence is usually found, and marriage, baptism, and funeral records are kept in the province of Quebec and sporadically elsewhere. Older congregations will usually have a list of their ministers. Other records that may exist are correspondence, newsletters and orders of service, sermons, local congregational histories, building and property records, financial records, records of separate men's and

women's groups within the congregation, and records of committees of the board, particularly religious education and social responsibility committees. Some interesting nineteenth- and early twentieth-century photographs exist among the files of the older churches. Most churches have only begun to keep computerized membership and financial records in the last two years, but this aspect of record keeping will obviously increase. At the present time, a printed copy of all computer material of a permanent nature is being kept, and no disks are being saved. Sermon tapes are made for the sick or shut-in, but are rarely kept on a permanent basis.

Researchers are only beginning to use Unitarian and Universalist records. In Halifax, where the 150-year-old records of the Universalist church were placed in the Public Archives of Nova Scotia for safekeeping in 1977, local historians and genealogists are becoming familiar with the wealth of information which they contain on religious affairs and nineteenth-century families. In Fredericton, Montreal, Picton, Winnipeg, Edmonton, and Calgary, Unitarian and Universalist material has been placed in public repositories more recently. It is probable that this trend will continue, making the material readily accessible to religious, social, and intellectual historians, to students of Canadian studies, and to those interested in the development of liberal thought in Canada.

Description in the guide to records currently being compiled will be at two levels, fonds and series, the fonds level description being based on the form recommended by the Working Group on Description at the Fonds Level to the Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards (Bureau of Canadian Archivists) in 1988. The guide will contain a brief history of the Unitarian and Universalist movements in Canada, and a glossary of terms. At the end of March 1989, all the information necessary to produce the record guide had been collected. With the hoped-for continuation of the Canadian Studies Research Tools grant for 1989-90, work will soon begin on its compilation. Several changes in denominational record keeping are expected to result from the completion of the survey and record guide. A pamphlet or brochure will be prepared and circulated to all active societies, giving simple instructions on congregational record keeping, and basic instructions on proper conservation and storage. At the completion of the grant period, the committee supervising the project is expected to issue recommendations to societies regarding the deposit of records with provincial or local archives. It is possible that a central repository may be established where microfilm copies of original material retained in the local community will be kept. There has been great interest and support for the project from congregations across the country. Perhaps its most significant short-term effect lies in a much increased awareness of the importance of denominational historical records.

Notes

1 Phillip Hewett, *Unitarians in Canada* (Toronto, 1978), p. 54.