

# WRITING RELIGION INTO THE HISTORY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA:

## *A Review Essay*

By Gail Edwards

*Catalysts and Watchdogs: BC's Men of God, 1836-1871*

Joan Weir.

Victoria: Sono Nis, 1995. 116 pp. Illus. \$14.95 paper.

*God's Little Ships: A History of the Columbia Coast Mission*

Michael L. Hadley.

Madeira Park: Harbour, 1995. 308 pp. Illus. \$28.95 cloth.

*No Better Land:*

*The 1860 Diaries of the Anglican Colonial Bishop George Hills*

Roberta L. Bagshaw, ed.

Victoria: Sono Nis, 1996. 307 pp. \$21.95 paper.

CONFRONTED WITH THE RELIGIOUS beliefs that motivated Christian missionary activity, many Canadian historians seem to echo the famous comment of an eighteenth-century Anglican bishop to John Wesley, founder of Methodism: "Sir, the pretending to extraordinary revelations and gifts of the Holy Ghost is a horrid thing — a very horrid thing."<sup>1</sup> Living in a secular age, we are faintly embarrassed by the notion of religious experience and describe religious enthusiasm with the distaste of the Augustan rationalist. In so far as church and religious history have been incorporated into Canadian historical research, the emphasis has been placed on understanding church-state relations and on the place of religion in intellectual history. The ways in which religious beliefs shaped social and cultural identity are less well documented, and serious exam-

inations of the dynamics of personal belief and social structures in the activities of missionaries are even more scarce. Few Canadian historians have applied discourse analysis to missionary narratives to tease out issues of theology and personal spirituality. Instead, missionary activity is either placed within broad frameworks of colonial conquest or relegated to the backwaters of denominational history.

The absence of a serious consideration of religious experience as a category of analysis is particularly acute in British Columbia history. In part, this may be due to the popular perception that BC is now, and thus has always been, predominantly secular and that religion, therefore, has had a minor role to play in its development. A reader would look in vain in the index of Margaret Ormsby's history of the province for evidence of reli-

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Ronald A. Knox, *Enthusiasm: A Chapter in the History of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950; repr., Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 450.

gious activity. More recent authors of general histories, notably George Woodcock and George Bowering, mention missionary activity only to dismiss it as the efforts of corrosively destructive colonializing God-botherers. On the other hand, religious histories of the province, for the most part, have been triumphant accounts of the progress and growth of particular denominations, written from within by interested amateurs.

Three recent histories of missionary activity, written for the general reader, attempt to address this imbalance in BC history by reinserting religious activity into frameworks of social history, with varying degrees of success. Joan Weir's *Catalysts and Watchdogs: BC's Men of God, 1836-1871* examines the early history of church development in nineteenth-century BC. Although Weir never explicitly defines the "Men of God" in her study, it quickly becomes apparent that her exclusive interest is in Anglican missionaries, for she sees them as leaders in the new colony and as "the only available brake, counter-balance, mentor or sounding-board" (p. 12). Weir clearly subscribes to the "great-men" theory of history, describing missionary activities as triumphalist narratives of progress impeded only by personality conflicts and the challenges posed by the remoteness of the colony. Her over-determined insistence on the influence of Anglican missionaries on the political and social life of the colony leads her to patronizingly dismiss the Roman Catholic Oblate missionaries as having a restricted sphere of influence.

Weir's understanding of the broader currents of nineteenth-century religious history seems superficial. She displays a lack of sensitivity to doctrinal difference and to the forms of worship

practised by different sects. For example, in her analysis of the conflict between Herbert Beaver, Anglican chaplain at Fort Vancouver, and John McLoughlin, chief factor of the fort, she twice states that McLoughlin conducted a mass himself—an impossibility for a Roman Catholic layperson (p. 27 and p. 32). Her brief description of the differences within Anglicanism between the Tractarians and the Evangelicals does not address the tensions in the Church of England in the wake of the Oxford Movement, which strained relations between missionary groups. For Weir, it would seem that the precise nature of the insult of being called a "Puseyite" has no particular historical or theological significance (p. 45). Similarly, Weir's unsympathetic portrait of George Hills, the first bishop of the Anglican diocese of Columbia, reduces conflict between the Tractarian Hills and the Evangelical dean of the cathedral, Edward Cridge, to a personality difference.

Perhaps the most serious flaw, however, is Weir's uncritical acceptance of historical narratives that position Native peoples as unsophisticated and inherently cruel, as evidenced in her discussion of William Duncan's activities at Metlakatla and the Methodist Thomas Crosby's work at the Crosby Home for Native girls. She neither recognizes nor challenges the racialized assumptions of White superiority that her primary sources articulate. Overall, while Weir attempts to connect religious impulse to surrounding societal patterns, her lack of critical analysis produces a work not far removed from denominational hagiography.

The reluctance to critically engage with the primary sources also plagues Roberta Bagshaw in *No Better Land: The 1860 Diaries of the Anglican*

*Colonial Bishop George Hills*. She states that her research was influenced “by a desire to find a place for Hills’ voice in the discussion of the colonial period” (p. 12). The diary is a rich addition to the primary source literature. Hills was expected to make regular reports to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, which was supporting the new diocese, and the diary clearly acted as an aide-mémoire for his report. Hills records his first impressions as he met with the colonial society of Victoria and travelled into the Cariboo with his missionaries in the first year of his episcopacy.

Bagshaw’s introduction provides an overview of Hills’s career and describes the various English societies under whose auspices Anglican missionaries were supported. The post-script directly addresses what she calls the pervasive negative image of Hills and, in part, seems to respond to the unflattering portrait drawn by Joan Weir. By placing the Hills-Cridge dispute within the context of Hills’s first-generation Tractarian views on apostolic succession and episcopal authority, Bagshaw clearly identifies how theological belief can inform personal action, and, in so doing, she expands the Hills-Cridge controversy beyond anything that can be reduced to a simplistic personality conflict.

However, Bagshaw’s overall methodological approach to the diary is frustrating. The decision to exclude footnotes means that the general reader is given no help to identify the significance of Hills’s commentary on events. For example, only a reader familiar with Anglican liturgy would recognize that Hills’s language in the diary is frequently shaped by the collects of the Book of Common Prayer. A careful exegesis of the diary

would have identified the ways that Hills structures his narratives within the tradition of missionary literature. Comparisons between the manuscript diary transcribed by Bagshaw and the printed diary that appeared in the 1860 annual report of the Columbia Mission would have provided further evidence of the shaping of the record for a specific audience as well as of Hills’s use of the diary as a first draft of a public document intended to raise funds and to promote support for the activities of the diocese. This lack of a rigorous critical framework means that, ultimately, Bagshaw fails in her stated goal of locating Hills within his historical context.

George Hills was responsible for instituting Anglican ecclesiastical structures and supervising and promoting missionary activities in the new colony. His diary makes clear the tensions between his desire to recreate English patterns of worship and the challenges posed by an evolving and rapidly changing society that rejected the idea of an established church. Michael Hadley, in *God’s Little Ships: A History of the Columbia Coast Mission*, shows that the tensions between conservatism and social change were not easily resolved in subsequent Anglican missionary activities in BC.

The Columbia Coast Mission (CCM) was formed in 1904 to provide pastoral and medical care to remote communities on the BC Coast through a fleet of mission ships that stopped at logging camps and Native villages, and on-land mission hospitals and clinics. Supported by grants from the dioceses of British Columbia and New Westminster as well as from private fundraising, the mission adapted and evolved in the face of shifting demographics and new communication

and transportation technologies until 1982, when the decision was made to terminate missionary activities.

From its inception, the work of the ccm was guided by the strong personal beliefs (and personality) of its founder, John Antle. Hadley argues that Antle's commitment to the social gospel movement shaped the mission's stress on "church Service over Church services" (p. x) and, at times, placed the mission in direct conflict with the bishops who provided it with financial support. The social gospel movement, with its emphasis on the application of Christian solutions to social problems, was widely influential in the early years of the twentieth century in Canada among liberal Methodists and Presbyterians. The Anglican Church in Canada was significantly less influenced by the theology of social gospel, which raises unresolved questions about doctrinal differences between Antle and the dioceses that supported the mission. Certainly Hadley seems to indicate that the ccm never enjoyed the unqualified support that the Methodists gave to their west coast marine missions.

Hadley repeatedly states that the worship conducted by ccm missionaries was essentially non-sectarian, reflecting both Antle's impatience with doctrine and the diverse religious affiliations of the communities served by the ships. However, the photographs reproduced in *God's Little Ships* make it clear that services were led by missionaries in cassock, surplice, and stole — the distinctive vestments of an Anglican priest of the time. Equally, the form of worship structured by the Book of Common Prayer was distinctively Anglican. Whether those served by the ccm mission ships saw the enterprise as non-sectarian is never made clear.

Hadley's enigmatic comment that "except for Native peoples, neither Antle nor Greene was particularly interested in winning members for the Church of England" (p. 41) raises further questions about the idea of a non-sectarian missionary impulse. Were Native people excluded from non-sectarian worship due to a lack of acceptable prior religious commitment? Were they particularly in need of conversion to Anglicanism? Throughout the book, Hadley is relatively uncritical of the frameworks of paternalistic and colonial belief that shaped interactions between the ccm missionaries and Native communities. Hadley presents evidence that the ccm did not necessarily support the actions of the federal government in its attempts to outlaw the potlatch, but he fails to identify the racialized narratives of progressive White ways that shaped the mission's reports and the provision of health and pastoral care to Native communities. He is even less critical of the rigorous gender discrimination practised by the ccm missionaries, practices that he describes as devolving from a "characteristically male cast of mind" (p. 104). The interaction of religious beliefs and social systems that created and maintained the exclusive male world of the Columbia Coast Mission are seen by Hadley as natural and commonsensical rather than as an expression of the unequal relations of power that also informed Native-White missionary relations.

What is now needed in bc history is a reintegration of religious and missionary history into the broader constructs of social and cultural history through an examination of the ways in which religious beliefs shape and are shaped by social and cultural identity. What did it mean to be an

Anglican or a Methodist in nineteenth-century BC — socially, politically, culturally? Were there indeed differences in leadership strategies between Anglican and Roman Catholic bishops, and how were these differences manifested in the social relations of power that governed colonial society? Moving beyond sectarian histories of missionary activity might elucidate the differences between and among denominational strategies for evangelization and provide the basis for a broader understanding of the missionary impetus in the context of

colonial and imperial BC. Closer attention to particular missionary discourses, and to the ways in which missionaries articulated their understanding of work and personal belief, would allow a more nuanced reading of the inter-section of religious activity and British imperial hegemony represented by a prayer for more missionaries printed in the 1894 *Official Report of the Missionary Conference of the Anglican Communion*: “Defer not; delay not; send especially labourers into all the heathen parts of our own British Empire.”

### *Bowering's BC: A Swashbuckling History*

George Bowering.

Viking: Toronto: 1996. 416 pp. Illus. \$32 cloth.

By Allan Smith, *University of British Columbia*

**T**HIS IS A VERY FUNNY BOOK. Written in a chatty, accessible way and full of splendid anecdotes — my favourite remains the tale of W.A.C. Bennett's antic attempt to celebrate his financial rectitude by sending a flaming arrow into a barge filled with the province's paid-off (and gasoline-soaked) bonds — it breaks new ground concerning the familiar subject of BC looniness. From its reading of Amor de Cosmos's career to its fun with “the Zalm” this book deepens and extends our sense of BC as a terminally (pun intended) zany place full of politicians who act — and sometimes look — as though they ought to be “wearing big red putty noses” (p. 153).

*Bowering's BC* is also a very serious book. Bowering wants to introduce what he clearly expects will be a non-specialist readership to a number of

points, and he hammers those points home with zeal and energy. The most basic point concerns the nature of written history itself. Not completely committed to the postmodern idea that the history historians produce is reducible to a set of contested accounts (taking this up in an unqualified way would prevent him from claiming any authority for his own version of events), he nonetheless makes clear his belief in the “constructed,” “ideological” character of much of that history and in its involvement in the processes by which dominant groups and orthodoxies maintain their influence.

That belief certainly underpins his impatience with what he sees as the way the work of some of his most prominent predecessors helped to marginalize whole ranges of BC experience. Margaret Ormsby's view of the