



## Presbyterian History

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### ***Robert Murray and Alexander James: Debating Confederation, Jan-Mar 1865***

by Peter Bush

The factors bringing political leaders from Upper and Lower Canada, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia together in Charlottetown, PEI, Sept. 1-9, 1864 have been listed many times. For the purposes of this essay the important thing is: the gathering is widely regarded as the moment when Confederation went from being an idea to becoming an actual possibility. The Charlottetown Conference was followed the next month by a gathering in Quebec which took the vision cast in Charlottetown and put it into the language of a constitution, to be known as the British North America Act. In the course of two months in the fall of 1864 Confederation went from an idea in some people's minds to being the draft constitution for a country.

The silence of the official church bodies regarding Confederation is notable. One is hard pressed to find official statements in the records of the Presbyterian Church, or any denomination for that matter, either in favour of or opposition to Confederation. Only by reading the religious newspapers of the day does one learn what church people thought about the proposed federation. The primary media of the day was the newspaper. Dozens of newspapers existed. Geographical communities had their papers and religious communities had their newspapers. The religious newspapers covered the political, social, and economic issues of the day both domestic

and international, along with matters of religious interest. While each paper catered to readers of a particular denomination the newspapers were not the official organ of their denomination. One such paper was the Halifax-based *Presbyterian Witness and Evangelical Advocate*, a weekly edited by Robert Murray. Murray started working for the paper in 1853, becoming editor in 1856 at the age of 23, serving in that capacity for 54 years. Under his leadership the *Witness* (as it was known) grew in influence and in subscription base. Murray was a licensed lay preacher among the Free Church Presbyterians; but not an ordained minister of Word and Sacraments.

Murray was an out-spoken supporter of Confederation, in fact, historian John Webster Grant stated the *Witness* was the "most enthusiastic of all" the religious press. While the *Witness* was particularly enthusiastic, the religious press in the five colonies overwhelmingly favoured Confederation. Murray editorialized on Jan. 7, 1865, while a few things needed improving in the proposed Constitution, "we would not venture to assume the tremendous responsibility of opposing for any slight reason a movement radically right, a movement rendered imperative by circumstances and cordially approved and endorsed by the great and wise [persons] who sway the councils of the British Empire." Murray was prepared to trust the political leadership to act for the good

of all parties including Nova Scotia, where most of his readers lived.

Murray's support of Confederation did not prevent him from publishing alternate views in the *Witness*. Starting in late January 1865 a significant debate about Confederation took place in the pages of the *Witness*, as Alexander James challenged the editor's view regarding the upcoming union through a series of six letters to the editor written over a two month period. Murray responded through a series of editorials. While not absolutely certain who Alexander James was, it seems most likely it was Alexander James the judge, a friend of Joseph Howe, and a Presbyterian lay person. (The James' House (also called Evergreen House) is now home to the Dartmouth, NS museum.) This debate carried on by two Presbyterian lay people framed the issues primarily with theological concepts, with political or economic arguments being used as examples to bolster the theological debate.

James' first letter, published in the *Witness* on Jan. 28, 1865, took Murray to task for his support of "the scheme of Confederation" which James believed would negatively impact Murray's readers, being "subversive of their liberties and privileges, injurious to their temporal prosperity, and offensive in the sight of God." James did not blame the editor, "because, although I question the soundness of your argument, I am fully convinced of the sincerity of your motives. May God lead you to employ your fine talents in a better cause."

James criticized Confederation advocates for promising improved economic well-being within the new federation. He saw in the argument an attempt to make people discontented "with what God has given" and playing to "worldly motives." Instead James argued, God "has not withheld from us any blessing in our present position that we have asked of him." Therefore it was incumbent on Nova Scotians and all Maritimers to join the psalmist's song, "Bless the Lord, oh my soul, and forget not all God's benefits." James was in good company as a number of writers in the reli-

gious newspapers were disturbed by promises of increased prosperity if Confederation was adopted, suggesting such arguments taught people to not be content in the lot they found themselves. This critique of a nascent prosperity gospel provides an opportunity to reflect on these powerful forces in our own day.

James argued further there was "no special call in God's providence to us to go into this Confederacy." James could find nothing that would constitute the call of God to change from the present political and economic arrangement meaning the colonies were entering Confederation "entirely uncalled of God." God was not leading the Confederation process nor had God provided any indication it was proceeding with God's blessing. James believed in God's call in individual lives and also in the corporate and political life of the community. Such a call was not rooted solely in the internal life of the believer, or even in the internal lives of the gathered community, James believed God's call would be supported by external signs to which people could point as indicative of the call of God.

The third critique suggested the Union was "offensive in the sight of God" because public prayer had not been part of the decision-making process; the leaders had not asked for God's "blessing and guidance" in their deliberations. In so doing they had failed to acknowledge the sovereignty of God over their plans. This failure was further highlighted in the draft Constitution's lack of any reference to God. James went on, "No day has been appointed in any of the Provinces for public prayer in relation to it, nor has any public request been made to ministers of God or private Christians to deal with Him on the subject in their approaches to the throne of grace." James' concern here was not that some thought-less, "God bless Canada" phrase be adopted by political leaders. Through public prayer and the acknowledgement of God in the Constitution political leaders could acknowledge their loyalty to the sovereign who had placed them in their positions of authority.

Murray's editorial response to James appeared in the same, Jan. 28, issue of the *Witness*. Murray argued precisely because there was no pressing need requiring changes in the Maritimes' political and economic arrangements Confederation was "matured in a time of internal peace and prosperity"; this gave it a strength it would not have had if done out of necessity or even desperation. Second, Murray argued there was a call: the invitation to join the Canadas was a call; the encouragement of the British government was a call. With eloquent flourish, he wrote "The voice of the age calls upon us to be up and doing – to conquer these forests of ours, to open up our Mines, to weld our isolated communities together with bands of iron. Surely we must not lag behind in the race of improvement when so magnificent a field is open before us!" The progress of history was calling for Confederation to be established. Here then a central difference between Murray and James appears, how does one determine what within the flow of current events and the direction of history is from God and what is not from God? Where one saw rapacious greed, the other saw the progress of history; where one heard a call to be "up and doing", the other heard a call to live in simple contentment. The debate continues to our own day: Is economic progress always a good thing? What direction is history going?

Finally, Murray agreed the prayerlessness of the political leaders was troubling, "We certainly would rejoice had the Conventions at Charlottetown and Quebec been inaugurated with prayer to the GOVERNOR of the NATIONS [sic]. Such a step would have become Christian statesmen. But unfortunately our public men are not used to public prayer." Canadian politicians were not like their neighbours in the United States of America where religion and politics freely mixed. The politicians who negotiated Confederation were publicly a-religious, in part fearful of heightening tensions between Catholic and Protestant, a balancing act not required of most American politicians.

James in his second letter, published Feb. 4, criticized Nova Scotia's political leaders for failing to consult their constituents about Confederation. While seemingly a political argument contending as it did for a referendum, James framed the argument in terms of the spiritual sin of pride. Confederation "it is assumed – perhaps sincerely – by our leaders that it is good for us." James noted human beings "are not infallible" for "the best laid schemes of the wisest of [people] often fail miserably". He drew the conclusion, "the most promising projects undertaken without Divine sanction may be expected to end in disappointment". In other words, pride leads to a fall. In failing to hold a referendum James hoped the political leadership would "fall into these maneuvers" and experience a "defeat in such a manner as will put an end to the question".

Murray chose not to respond to this letter. Instead he published other letters to the editor which raised concerns about the political process being used in Nova Scotia. These writers believed Confederation would have faced less opposition in rural Nova Scotia in early 1865 if the public had been consulted as to their views, for example through a referendum.

Murray's lack of response and choosing to publish other letters critical of the political process, gave James hope his letters were having an impact. James was back in the *Witness* the following week, Feb. 11. After arguing the speed with which the agreement had come together had allowed no time for reflection on the concept of Confederation or the terms of the Constitution, James turned to the heart of this letter. He attempted to convince Murray to join the forces standing in opposition to Confederation, "I trust that your good Claymore, which has so often done service on many a well fought field, will not...be permitted to rust in its scabbard, but that you will do battle valiantly for the Headship of Christ, and endeavour to prevent this Province from being dragged into any Union or Federation whatever, that is attempted to be built on any less secure foundation than the CHIEF CORNER-

STONE [sic].” The failure to acknowledge the headship of Christ in the negotiations leading to Confederation demanded Christians defend Jesus Christ as ruler over all principalities and powers.

Murray feeling compelled to respond, did so on Feb. 18. First, he summed up his analysis of the political and economic arguments by stating he was “confirmed” in regarding Confederation as a good thing especially for the Maritime Provinces. Second, he set out to reclaim some religious ground for the pro-Confederation forces, pushing back against James’ claim the Constitution was “Godless”. While God was not named in the Constitution, Murray suggested that did not make Confederation “Godless”. “All things have some relation to God. ‘In him we live and move and have our being.’... Politics, trade, agriculture, education, everything in short, should be under the broad, healthy, benignant, sunny firmament of Christian faith and devotion. The earth with all that it contains belongs to God, and to acknowledge His sovereign rights never interferes with our due enjoyment of His blessings; rather does it add zest to every privilege, and enhance every joy. The all-absorbing question of Confederation, Colonial Union, has its ‘religious aspect’.” The fact Confederation advocates did not acknowledge this religious dimension in public did not mean God was not involved. If Canada failed to become “a great, free, enlightened, Christian people”, the fault would not be with the lack of references to God in the Constitution, rather the fault would lie with the citizens of country. The citizens made a country Christian not the Constitution or even the political leaders.

By this point in the debate both sides were running out of energy. James, in his fourth letter, published on Feb. 18, stated he had “not intended to refer again in your columns to the question of Federation”, but issues raised in other newspapers provoked a response. James saw a threat to religious freedom in a “Godless” Constitution and politicians unwilling to engage in public ex-

pressions of their religious convictions. If politicians did not practice their religion in public would they not be willing to sacrifice anyone’s rights to the public practice of their religion. James therefore wanted the protection of religious freedom added to the Constitution. For James this meant freedom for Christians of all kinds to align their lives with their understanding of Christian teaching, in the 1860’s an awareness of what religious freedom meant in relation to other world religions was only just beginning.

Murray did not respond to James’ concerns, he was evidently tired of the debate. James did write two more, short letters, Mar. 11 and Mar. 25, focused on fears that in a country spreading from British Columbia to Nova Scotia and Cape Breton Island, the eastern parts of the country would be “a convenient appendage”. While rooted in the “Geographical Impossibility” of Confederation, James framed the concern in terms of justice regarding role and voice within Confederation. Murray called the “Geographical Impossibility” argument an “idle and unpatriotic sentiment”.

This brief, yet intense, debate provides a window through which to witness committed Christian thinkers struggling through an important political matter. The debating points were largely theological, rather than narrowly ethical, in marked contrast to the way Christians 150 years later debate matters of political significance. Further, the debate raises questions about the place and deeper significance of politicians engaging or not engaging in public religious practices. Finally, James and Murray demonstrate the value of allowing time for extended conversation rather than reducing things to sound bites or tweets. While succinctness can enhance clarity, at times it simplifies so complexity is lost. Complexity and nuance take time to see and reflect upon. The James-Murray debate raises interesting questions about public debate in our own time.

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## A Note from the Editor

Over the last 8 months I have been asked a number of questions which if put together would go something like this: *If the buildings which Presbyterian congregations use for worship, pay the utilities for, and maintain belong to the Trustees Board of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, how is it there are any pre-1925 church buildings in the hands of Presbyterian congregations?*

The question arises because in 1925 a majority of Presbyterians went into the United Church of Canada, but not all Presbyterian church buildings did.

Following the 1921 General Assembly two things were evident: first, Church Union of Methodist, Congregationalist, and Presbyterian denominations was going to take place; and second, not all Presbyterians (both individuals and congregations) would be entering the United Church. In the face of these two realities, the advocates for Church Union began to draw up the legislation for provincial and federal legislatures to pass creating the United Church of Canada and establishing the legal rights of that entity. Presbyterian John McNeill, a supporter of Church Union, writing in 1925, described the purpose of the legislation “to secure a fair adjustment of property and prevent future litigation.” Legal historian Sara Knight, writing 80 years later, described the goal of legislation’s drafters: “to create a piece of legislation that provided adequately for the minority, but on the majority’s terms.”

To accomplish this the United Church Act stated (clause 5) all property belonging to the three denominations, their boards, congregations, missions, educational institutions, etc. was deemed the property of the United Church of Canada. This definitive statement was modified by clause 10 which stated, if a duly called congregational meeting “decide by a majority of votes of the persons present at such meeting and entitled to vote thereat not to enter the said Union of the said Churches, then and in such case the property, real and personal, belonging to or held in trust for or to the use of such non-concurring congregation shall remain unaffected by this Act.” In other words, if a majority of those

present at a congregational meeting voted to stay out of Church Union, then all the property connected to that congregation did so as well. Where no such vote took place the building and other property became part of the United Church, the default assumption was that congregations were joining the United Church. The Act further stated even if a Session did not want to hold a congregational vote, a percentage of a congregation’s membership could request a vote be held.

Over 300 congregations voted to remain Presbyterian and kept their buildings. Through local trustees they held those buildings because The Presbyterian Church in Canada as a denomination had no legal standing in 1925. Without the action of these local communities of faith in voting and preserving the buildings, the present Presbyterian Church in Canada would have no congregational buildings over 90 years old.

By 1939 through some legal cases which had opened doors and the willingness of the United Church to bend on its demands, The Presbyterian Church in Canada became a legal entity. The Board of Administration brought to the 1939 General Assembly an Act of Parliament incorporating the Trustee Board of the denomination. The Act had received Royal Assent on April 5, 1939. Among the clauses was direction to all local trustees holding property “real and personal” in the name of a Presbyterian entity to “forthwith assign, convey, or otherwise transfer such property or interest therein” to the newly formed Trustees Board of the church. With this legislation the Trustees Board of The Presbyterian Church in Canada received title to all Presbyterian property “real and personal” which had been vested with any local trustee.

Further reading see: Sara Knight, “Voices United?: The House of Commons’ Role in the Creation of the United Church of Canada”, *Dalhousie Journal of Legal Studies*, Vol. 13, 2004: 101-124.

M.H. Ogilvie, “Book Review: Freedom of Religion: A Canadian Cautionary Tale – The Resistance to Church Union in Canada, 1904-1939, by N. Keith Clifford, *Osgoode Hall Law Journal*, Vol. 24, # 1, Spring 1986: 187-196.

## HISTORICAL VIGNETTE

Robert Murray also wrote hymns, two relating to Confederation and the nation of Canada. First, he wrote a third verse to “God save the Queen”, Canada’s then national anthem.

Murray continued the prayer of the song with:

Our loved Dominion bless  
With peace and happiness  
From shore to shore;  
And let our Empire be  
United, loyal, free,  
True to herself and Thee  
For evermore.

Second, in “From ocean to ocean” he frames the Triune God’s role in the nation’s political life:

From ocean unto ocean  
our land shall name you, Lord  
and, filled with true devotion,  
obey your sovereign Word.  
Our prairies and our mountains,  
the forest, fertile field,  
our rivers, lakes, and fountains  
to you shall tribute yield.

O Christ, for your own glory  
and for our country's weal;  
we humbly plead before you:  
yourself in us reveal.  
And may we know, Lord Jesus,  
the touch of your dear hand,  
and, healed of our diseases,  
the tempter's power withstand.

Where error smites with blindness,  
enslaves, and leads astray,  
proclaim in loving-kindness  
your joyful gospel day,  
till all the tribes and races  
that dwell in this fair land,  
adorned with Christian graces,  
within your courts shall stand.

Our Savior King, defend us  
and guide where we should go;  
forth with your message send us,  
your love and light to show,  
till, fired with true devotion  
and kindled by your Word,  
from ocean unto ocean  
our land shall name you Lord.

## Reviews of 2016 History Prize Winners

Carol Garvin, compiler, *A History of Haney Presbyterian Church, Maple Ridge, BC: 1875-2015*

So often congregational historians see their congregation’s beginnings as arising out of nothing and in great detail describe the blooming of the newly planted church. Such a telling pays little attention to what went before the start of the congregation. The 2015 congregational history prize winner takes a very different approach. If this history followed the pattern of many other histories, the story would begin, maybe in 1925, but more likely in 1947 with the arrival of the Rev. J. Murdo Pollock. By choosing to begin the story in 1875, the compiler reminds readers the Triune God was at work before Haney Church was planted, that Jesus

Christ was being praised in Maple Ridge before the church arrived. The work of God in any community precedes the establishment of a congregation and the work continues even after congregations close their doors, to this theological truth this history points. For Haney knows what it is to go through difficulty, to struggle for its survival, and to face overwhelming tragedy.

Haney Church between 1963 and 2013 provided the Presbyterian Church with no less than seven ministers, a truly remarkable contribution to the life of the church, leaving a legacy that reaches far beyond the narrow confines of the Haney building, or even the Maple Ridge community.

This history, having sold out two printings is available only on CD-ROM from Haney Church.

J.S.S. Armour, Judith Kashul, William Klempa, Lucille Marr, Dan Shute, eds., *Still Voice - Still Heard: Sermons, Addresses, Letters, and Reports, The Presbyterian College, Montreal, 1865-2015* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015)

To mark the 150th anniversary of Presbyterian College, Montreal the editors chose to tell the history of the college by selecting significant persons who were connected to the college as graduates, professors, or prominent supporters. A present day author situates each person in their context introducing them to the reader, then a sermon, address, group of letters is presented so the person is heard in their own words, and that is followed by the present day author providing a brief commentary on the sermon or address. The result is very much like walking through a portrait gallery, using individuals to tell the story of an institution. In the process the focus shifts from the role of people in the institution to the institution being the connective tissue holding the diverse stories together.

These connections are particularly evident in the early years chapters recounting John William Dawson, Jane Drummond Redpath, and A. Daniel Coussirat who are drawn together by the giant figure of Donald Harvey MacVicar.

I was pleased to see Andrew Shaw Grant included in the collection, Grant's far ranging influence as a mission-driven church bureaucrat is not well known. His story as a key player in the continuing Presbyterian Church story is counter-balanced by the presence of George Pidgeon in the gallery. Pidgeon, a prominent Unionist, reminds us the college has had influence beyond the bounds of the Presbyterian Church.

The last six chapters do much the same as we are introduced to people like James Naismith, basketball inventor and muscular Christianity advocate; Cairine Wilson, political leader; John Foote, military chaplain and winner of the Victoria Cross; and Sheldon MacKenzie, visionary, educator, and pastor.

The journey through the gallery is certainly satisfying and the editors offer readers an unusual telling of the college's history.

Copies of this winner of the Academic Church Prize can be purchased from the publisher.

Margaret Jean Taylor, *Sunsets and Gentle Breezes: A Memoir of life as I found it* (Calgary, 2015)

Reading *Sunsets and Gentle Breezes* is like listening to the matriarch of the family tell her story on her terms. So often matriarchs find their stories re-shaped by others, often academics, to fit into a larger narrative. In the re-shaping important elements of the story are lost, sometimes even the central truths of the matriarch's story are lost. Not so with *Sunsets and Gentle Breezes*.

Taylor describes her early life as the daughter of a Presbyterian minister, which in itself is a fascinating insight into a group of people who are seldom heard from – the children of clergy. One of the elements that stands out is the fond memories Taylor has of caring adults in the church who paid attention to her and showed kindness. (As a minister I found this compelling, for I hope the same for my son, that he would be able to say there have been adults in the church who showed him care.)

Church, faith, Christian practice are not separate from the rest of life, instead they are completely interwoven into the Taylor's narrative. This is particularly evident when Taylor reminds readers that she never had a paying job after her marriage – yet she describes herself as a housewife and executive. The appropriateness of this description is clear given Taylor chaired the Board that raised the money and built the Ewart College building on St. George St., Toronto; she also chaired the Committee of Assembly that addressed the question of liberty of conscience regarding the ordination of women (1980-1981). Here the memoir highlights something very important – the Presbyterian Church at its best finds "ordinary" people and puts them in volunteer positions on Boards and Committees where they are given space to use their spiritual gifts with great influence and to the glory of God.

The book is also the account of Taylor and her family, and is richly illustrated with family photos and accounts of family time.

This privately published book is no longer available in hard copy, an electronic version is available from Kenneth Taylor, 1045 Varsity Est. Pl. NW, Calgary, Alberta, T3B 3X5.

## Book Review

by John Vaudry, Pembroke, Ontario

Sinclair B Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism & Gospel Assurance—Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters*. Foreword by Tim Keller. (Crossway, 2016) 256 pp.

The latest book from Sinclair Ferguson, a former Church of Scotland minister now with the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church and teaching at Redeemer Seminary in Dallas, combines history, theology and pastoral insight in dealing with a seemingly obscure event in 18<sup>th</sup> century Scotland.

I suspect few in our church have ever heard of the Marrow Controversy, but it played a significant part in the formation of the Secession churches that were among the strands forming The Presbyterian Church in Canada in 1875. The story begins in the Presbytery of Auchterarder, a question to a candidate for ordination designed to reveal legalistic tendencies, and a Borders area minister named Thomas Boston. While visiting a parishioner, Boston noticed a book entitled *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* and asked to borrow it. Reading this Puritan work altered his outlook making his preaching much more warmly evangelical. Boston had the book re-published, with his own annotations. Others, such as Ebenezer and Ralph Erskine, were also influenced. These “Marrow Men” became known for their emphasis on the grace of Christ and the “Free Offer of the Gospel.” However, in 1720 the Scottish General Assembly condemned *The Marrow* as teaching doctrine contrary to the Confession of Faith, warning people “not to read or use the same.” This book-banning was one of the factors leading to the formation of the Secession churches.

The Marrow Men were accused of being antinomian (i.e., believing all law has been abolished for the Christian, a view that could lead to saying, “We might as well sin so that grace may abound.”). In fact, they were far from that, holding to the Reformed orthodoxy of the Westminster Confession. They differed from their opponents largely in terms of emphasis and in having a strong grace-full and Christ-centred “tincture” to their ministries.

Ferguson tells the story well, setting it against the broader background of the Middle Ages, the Reformation, the English Puritans and the theological and spiritual declension that characterized Scotland in the early 1700s. What makes the book so well worth reading and pondering is the way in which he points out that some of the same essential problems are to be found in the Church today. Legalism and Antinomianism are far from dead, and the answer to them both is the one put forward by the Marrow Men—a true understanding and experience of the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Much of what Ferguson writes will be familiar to those who have studied the Reformed tradition, but even they will learn something from it. There is some helpful Biblical exegesis on such themes as the Witness of the Holy Spirit (Rom.8:14-16), and the question of the three-fold “division” of the Law into moral, civil and ceremonial statutes. Many of the topics he covers are rarely dealt with from our pulpits, to our impoverishment.

Ferguson having done careful research is not afraid to differ from the received teaching (e.g., Calvin and the Puritans are at odds, or there is a direct line from Calvin to the Marrow Men to John McLeod Campbell.)

Ferguson, an outstanding pastor-theologian, applies the teaching of God’s Word to the lives of believers, guiding them through the pitfalls and perplexities of the Christian life. He shows how legalism and antinomianism are related more closely than we might think. Both have subtle forms needing the antidote of the Gospel. We are all legalists by nature and it is “all too possible to have an *evangelical head* and a *legalistic heart*.”

This book is not just fascinating; it is practical and pastoral, spiritually uplifting and encouraging. Derek Thomas, on the back cover, says: this “is one of the most important and definitive books I have read in over four decades.” I’m inclined to agree. It has certainly been a real shot in the arm to me.

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