Division with a Cause: A Reconsideration of The Scottish Disruption in Canada

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INTRODUCTION

The Disruption of 1843, in the words of S. J. Brown, 'was probably the most important event in the history of nineteenth-century Scotland and a major episode in the history of the modern Western Church.'[1] The upheaval had global ramifications, especially in colonial societies where Scottish settlers carried their ecclesiastical controversies with them, giving rise to rival Presbyterian denominations from Nova Scotia to Australia. Remarkably few scholars have carefully probed the impact of the Disruption beyond Scotland, however, and much of the existing literature rests upon impressionistic evidence and doubtful theoretical assumptions.

The controversy in British North America, for example, has typically been viewed through an interpretative lens focused upon Canada's transition from colonial subordination to independent nationhood. In this telling of the tale, Scottish colonists initially transplanted ecclesiastical traditions ill-suited to their new circumstances; these needed to be jettisoned in order for distinctively Canadian institutions to emerge. In this perspective the theological and political battles between Presbyterians in Scotland had no relevance in America, and the split between Kirk and Free Church loyalists in Canada (i.e. modern Ontario and Quebec) and the Maritime colonies constituted tragic and altogether pointless schisms which only served to delay the birth of a unified and authentically Canadian denomination. This analysis appears in textbooks by Presbyterian scholars such as John Thomas McNeill, H.H. Walsh, and H. Keith Markell, the latter concluding that the division between the Kirk and the Free Church in Canada was 'to some extent exotic' and that the 'whole controversy had a certain air of unreality.'[2]

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1 S. J. Brown, 'The Disruption and the Dream: The Making of New College, 1843-1861', in D. F. Wright and G. D. Badcock (eds.), *Disruption to Diversity: Edinburgh Divinity, 1846-1996* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), p. 30.

2 H. Keith Markell, 'Part II', in Neil G. Smith, Allan Fraser, and H. Keith Markell, *A Short History of the Presbyterian Church in Canada* (Toronto: Presbyterian Publications, 1966), p. 51. Also see John Thomas McNeill, *The Pres-*

Scholars have often displayed an overt bias against the Free Church, emphasizing that a few firebrands instigated the Canadian disruption out of misguided commitment to their ethnic loyalties and irrelevant theological principles. Thus, Neil Gregor Smith described the men who launched the Free Church in Canada as well-intentioned rigorists who 'held strong convictions on the spiritual independence of the church and the headship of Christ.' Unfortunately, in Smith's view, they placed the importance of 'a principled stand' ahead of the concrete needs of Canada's churches. These impatient zealots failed to recognize that the 'essential work of the church could be carried on effectively in the church as it was,' and that grievances could be aired and errors corrected 'patiently.' By plunging Canadian Presbyterians into 'an unseemly rivalry' over ecclesiastical issues that had no local significance, they demonstrated that 'idealists in a hurry' might be 'martyrs by mistake.'[3]

John S. Moir linked the controversy to the long struggle of colonial Kirk leaders to gain recognition as a co-established Church alongside the Anglican. Under the Clergy Reserve Act of 1840, the Church of Scotland in Canada received twenty-one percent of the funds generated by the 'Clergy Reserve' lands. Moir showed that this modest legislative victory deeply influenced some ministers when the Scottish Disruption threatened to divide the Synod of Canada. Like other interpreters, Moir regarded the issues that triggered the 1843 Disruption as irrelevant in North America and argued that the zeal for disunion in the colonies was driven by newly arrived Scots who had not yet adapted to the Canadian environment. Their attachment to Scottish causes constituted a 'deadly' threat to the prosperity of the Canadian Kirk. The formation of a Canadian Free Church in 1844, Moir concluded, 'appeared to be a triumph for Scottishness over Canadianization.'[4]

Barbara C. Murison acknowledged an even broader range of factors, including the crucial role of lay leaders who exercised *de facto* control over most local congregations. Yet Murison failed to develop this important

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byterian Church in Canada, 1875-1925 (Toronto: Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1925), pp. 13-15; and H. H. Walsh, *The Christian Church in Canada* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1956), pp. 210-15.

3 Neil Gregor Smith, 'By Schism Rent Asunder: A Study of the Disruption of the Presbyterian Church in Canada in 1844', *Canadian Journal of Theology* 1.3 (1955), pp. 175-83.

4 John S. Moir, 'The Quay of Greenock: Jurisdiction and Nationality in the Canadian Presbyterian Disruption of 1844', *Scottish Tradition* 5 (1975), pp. 38-53 (quote on p. 39), and 'The Backwash of Disruption', in *Enduring Witness: A History of the Presbyterian Church in Canada* (Toronto: Presbyterian Publications, 1970), pp. 101-27.

observation, and ultimately reached the same conclusion as Moir. The disruption of the Presbyterian churches, both in Canada and the Maritime colonies, constituted 'divisions without causes' and signified the 'triumph of denomination over environment.' Murison assigned much of the blame to outside agent provocateurs, most notably Dr. Robert Burns of Paisley, the former Chair of the Glasgow Colonial Society and a leading Free Church partisan, who toured Canada and the Maritimes in early 1844, and according to his critics sowed 'poisonous seeds' of discord wherever he travelled. 'The Disruption was deliberately exported from Scotland to the colonies […] and as deliberately received there,' Murison concluded, by settlers who ignored the best interests of Canadian Presbyterianism because 'their mental horizons remained emphatically Scottish': 'Whatever good came to Scotland (and this is a matter for debate), it is difficult to see a great good resulting from the Disruption in the "colonial Zion."'[5]

An alternative view was offered by Richard W. Vaudry, who argued that the new denomination 'was firmly rooted in Canadian soil' and constituted a 'successful adaptation' of Scottish tradition to the colonial environment.[6] Vaudry sympathetically cast the Free Church as an evangelical 'revival movement' that injected into Canadian Presbyterianism a missionary zeal and activism that had been lacking, and that soon became the dominant strand of Canadian Presbyterian identity. In a study of theological education at Knox College, Toronto, Brian J. Fraser took a similar approach, emphasizing the dynamic 'entrepreneurial […] evangelicalism' of the Free Church that 'appealed to a growing number of Canadians in the late 1840s and the 1850s.'[7]

Although valuable, none of these works provides a satisfactory explanation for the Disruption in Canada. Existing scholarship has largely ignored the apologetic literature produced by colonial Free Church leaders, who exhaustively answered the charge, echoed by later historians, that

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5 Barbara C. Murison, 'The Disruption and the Colonies of Scottish Settlement', in Stewart J. Brown and Michael Fry, eds. *Scotland in the Age of the Disruption* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), pp. 135-50 (quote on p. 147), and 'The Kirk versus the Free Church: The Struggle for the Soul of the Maritimes at the Time of the Disruption', in Charles H. H. Scobie and G. A. Rawlyk, eds. *The Contribution of Presbyterianism to the Maritime Provinces of Canada* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), pp. 19-31 (quote on p. 31).

6 Richard W. Vaudry, *The Free Church in Victorian Canada 1844-1861* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989), xiv.

7 Brian J. Fraser, *Church, College, and Clergy: A History of Theological Education at Knox College, Toronto, 1844-1994* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), p. 7.

they blindly followed Scottish events and fomented needless schism. Even Vaudry's sympathetic treatment glosses over the carefully constructed arguments they offered in defence of their actions. We especially need to weigh their analysis of the local Canadian context, for like Scotland, Presbyterianism in the colonies varied considerably from place to place. P. L. M. Hillis found that 'the sociology of the Disruption varied according to region and according to the different social groups within each region,' and that numerous factors, 'including the personality of the local ministers and local traditions, played an important role in deciding who stayed and who went out of the Established Church in 1843.'[8] The same was true of the 1844 Disruption in Canada.

CANADIAN PRESBYTERIANS & THE EMPIRE

Let us begin with the much-discussed theme of 'Canadianization,' an especially troublesome construct when applied to nineteenth century Presbyterians of the Scottish diaspora. A generation ago Phillip Buckner critiqued the notion that Canadian national consciousness developed via rejection of competing loyalties, instead emphasizing that imperial subjects in the Victorian world typically held multiple complementary identities.[9] Canadians who strongly identified with their colonial homeland could also be passionately committed to the Empire and think of themselves proudly as British. Many studies of Nineteenth Century Scotland reach parallel conclusions about Scottish identity. John M. MacKenzie, for example, has argued that Victorian Scots manifested their deep sense of cultural distinctiveness by participation in the British Empire, an entity that 'had a tendency to perpetuate and enhance regional and ethnic identities among indigenous peoples.'[10] Thus, most Canadian Presbyterians of the early Victorian Age simultaneously identified as Scottish, British and Canadian, and experienced no tension in holding these overlapping attachments together. The notion that they must jettison their Scottish identity in order to forge an authentically Canadian Church would simply never have entered their thinking.[11]

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8 P. L. M. Hillis, 'The Sociology of the Disruption', in Brown and Fry, eds. *Scotland in the Age of Disruption*, pp. 44-62.

9 Phillip Buckner, 'Whatever Happened to the British Empire', *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 4 (1993), p. 12.

10 John M. Mackenzie, 'Empire and National Identities: The Case of Scotland', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 8 (1998), p. 231.

11 Denis McKim makes a similar point in '"Righteousness Exalteth a Nation": Providence, Empire and the Forging of the Early Canadian Presbyterian

This reality alone undermines the dominant interpretation of the Canadian Disruption. When the Synod of Canada in Connection with the Established Church of Scotland convened in July 1844, laity and clergy alike had wrestled with the theological, social, and political dimensions of the crisis for many years. Deep-seated commitments to the Kirk or Free Church side of the dispute had already crystallized in the Canadian Scottish community; the Synod's deliberations did not so much cause the schism as formalize an existing division. Of the ninety-one ministers on the Synod's roll in 1844, three broad groups had emerged by the opening of their annual meeting. Approximately twenty were determined to repudiate the Synod's nominal ties to Scotland's Establishment, while perhaps twice that number wished to maintain the *status quo*. The rest constituted a middle party that sympathized with Free Church principles but hoped to find a compromise that could preserve institutional unity.[12] There is no good evidence that any of these factions were any less Scottish in their identity, nor any more Canadian in their commitments, than the other two groups.

Although critics have charged Free Church leaders with blindly pursuing Scottish developments while ignoring the needs of Canadian Presbyterians, the dissenting ministers themselves argued strongly the opposite case. In a pastoral letter, setting forth their reasons for withdrawing from the Synod, they emphasized the need to stake out their independence from the homeland, and to build a Church that could embrace all North American Presbyterians and not merely those attached to the Scottish Kirk:

> In a country like Canada, the Presbyterian population of which is composed of immigrants from all quarters of the world, the idea of the dependence of the Synod on the Church of Scotland has […] prevented that Catholic and comprehensive growth and development to which she might […] otherwise have attained. She has been little better than a Church for the Scotch, or rather, we might say, the Scotch of the Establishment.

The mission of the Canadian Free Church, the letter concluded, was to become 'really and thoroughly a Free, Independent and Catholic Church […] around which all Presbyterians might rally because adapted and intended for all.'[13]

Identity', *Historical Papers: Canadian Society of Church History* 39 (2008), pp. 47-66.

12 Vaudry, *The Free Church*, pp. 14-37.

13 *The Ecclesiastical and Missionary Record for the Presbyterian Church of Canada*, 1.1 (August, 1844), p. 4.

Free Church spokesmen wanted to clarify the ambiguous relationship between colonial churches and the Scottish Kirk, a critical issue ignored by clergy on both sides of the Atlantic until the Scottish Disruption forced them to grapple with the problem. Canadian Free churchmen attributed much of the blame for their ecclesiastical crisis to this longstanding failure to codify their independence, clouding all discussion of Presbyterian affairs in the colonies:

> The exact nature of the relation in which the Synod in connexion with the Church of Scotland has hitherto stood to that church, and the terms on which she has held her endowments from the State, are still matters about which conflicting views are entertained. The whole subject of the relation in which, on Presbyterian principles, a Colonial Church should be held to stand to the parent Church in Britain, has never yet received that consideration, or derived the advantage of that thorough elucidation, to which its great importance entitles it; and each party is apt to make their own crude and undigested views on what they think to be proper and desirable in this matter, the rule as to what actually is.[14]

At the Synod of 1844 the Free Church party first attempted to end this confusion by offering resolutions proclaiming the independence of the Canadian Synod from the Scottish Kirk and dropping the phrase 'in connection with the Established Church of Scotland' from their name. Contrary to the common assertion that this issue was purely academic, urgent matters of essential practice and polity were at stake. Although all factions agreed that the Church of Scotland held no appellate authority over them, most ministers in the Bathurst, Montreal, and Quebec Presbyteries insisted that their connection to the Established Church was more than nominal but that the Canadian Synod was in fact an integral part of the Scottish Kirk, was constitutionally bound to maintain a *bona fide* connection with it, and that their legal right to church property and temporalities required their continued adherence to the Scottish Establishment. Peter Campbell, a professor at Queen's College in Kingston and a vocal opponent of the Free Church cause, forcibly argued in widely circulated newspaper columns preceding the Canadian Disruption that '*that insofar as the Church of Scotland can possibly exist in Canada, we are that Church*':

> That we have, all along, not merely admitted, but demanded, that we should be considered as such; that, contending for rights long withheld from us, we have affirmed our identity with the Church of Scotland; that without such affirmation these rights would have no existence; and finally, that the advan-

[14] Ibid., p. 2.

> tages, such as they are, conceded to "The Church of Scotland in Canada" have been claimed by us on the ground of our being not merely sprung from, or similar to, but of our being that Church, as a member is part of the body […].[15]

Campbell argued that this organic union permitted the Canadian Synod to enjoy perfect liberty in all ecclesiastical matters, but at the same time it precluded the Church in Canada from making any public statements in opposition to the policies or standards of the mother church.

THE QUESTION OF AUTONOMY

Free Church dissenters found Campbell's position intolerable. They believed that Campbell, who as a professor at Queen's was deeply invested in the establishment of the Canadian Church, advocated a novel interpretation that few if any clergy had held when the Synod was first organized in 1831 from various tributary streams of Presbyterianism.[16] Henry Esson of Montreal's St. Gabriel Street Church, who had come out to Canada in 1817 from the Presbytery of Aberdeen and had played an important role in the Synod from the beginning, derisively rejected Campbell's views as pure 'fiction.' Esson, who was one of only two ministers in the Montreal Presbytery to withdraw in 1844, recollected that the phrase 'in connection with the Established Church of Scotland' had been adopted with little discussion or reflection, but that nobody at the time understood the colonial Synod to be bound organically to the Scottish Kirk or in any fashion dependent upon her for either ecclesiastical guidance or civil support. For most clergy and laity, Esson insisted, the name signified merely that a majority of the ministers and people had originally belonged to the Church of Scotland before their emigration, but they were no more united to that body than an adult son is bound organically to the parent whose name he carries. If the Synod was indeed ecclesiastically independent, as even many 'Adhesionists' conceded, and if the name had now become an offensive stumbling block to large numbers of Canadian Presbyterians, then Campbell's position seemed a stunningly irresponsible prod to needless schism. In the present crisis the Canadian Church simply needed to declare independence, formally codifying the complete freedom that virtually all ministers and laity assumed that they had possessed since the Synod's formation. Esson charged Campbell and his supporters with

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15 *Kingston Chronicle & Gazette*, 13 January 1844, p. 2; *Toronto British Colonist*, 19 January 1844, p. 2. Italics are Campbell's.

16 The streams are traced in William Gregg, *History of the Presbyterian Church in the Dominion of Canada* (Toronto: Presbyterian Printing & Publishing Company, 1885).

caring more about the 'endowments and emoluments which are derived from clergy reserve lands or from the bounty of Government' than the unity and liberty of the Canadian Synod.[17]

The Synod's autonomy was certainly at risk in the controversy. During the winter of 1843, as the Colonial Committee of the Scottish Kirk wrestled with future financial support for Canadian missions, it drafted an unprecedented circular letter which it sent directly to colonial ministers, assuring them of continued monetary assistance but only if they maintained '*bona fide attachment*' to the Established Church of Scotland.[18] In the Committee's report to General Assembly, it frankly acknowledged its intent to minimize the impact of the disruption abroad by gaining pledges of loyalty from colonial ministers in advance of the forthcoming Canadian Synod meeting. The Colonial Committee also warned that should a disruption occur in Canada and the withdrawing clergy seek a share of the Clergy Reserves, it would move at once to have the action 'disallowed by the Government at home.'[19] Canadian Free Church proponents saw this as an ominous violation of Presbyterian polity and a dire threat to the freedom of the Canadian Synod. Official correspondence between independent churches must properly be exchanged between the appropriate governing authorities, in this case the Moderator of the Synod of Canada rather than private ministers. Together with the General Assembly report the controversial circular letter signalled that the Church of Scotland regarded the Canadian Synod as a dependent entity, that it claimed the right to interfere in colonial ecclesiastical affairs, and that it would not allow Canadian Presbyterians freedom to make their own decisions through their constitutionally elected representatives in Synod unless they conformed to the wishes of the Scottish General Assembly. As Henry Esson trumpeted:

> There is no unambiguous intimation here, no uncertain sound, in *the warning or almost threat* held out, that the connection with the Parent Church shall no longer be suffered to be purely nominal. Let the Canadian Church once bow her neck to the yoke, now for the first time sought to be imposed upon her, let her suffer herself to be saddled, bridled, and mounted, she will soon prove to

[17] Henry Esson, *An Appeal to the Ministers and Members of the Presbyterian Church Under the Jurisdiction of the Synod of Canada, on the Question of Adherence to the Church of Scotland as by Law Established* (Montreal: J. C. Becket, 1844), p. 32.

[18] Ibid., pp. 26-27.

[19] Ibid., p. 48.

> her cost, like the steed in the Fable of Aesop, that the rider will laugh to scorn all her claims of liberty, and will mock at all her remonstrances.[20]

The Canadian Synod had passed resolutions in 1841, 1842, and 1843 upholding Free Church principles and voicing unequivocal support for the Church of Scotland's struggle against 'intrusion' and government interference in ecclesiastical matters. These resolutions received unanimous support in 1841 and 1842, from many ministers who later refused to sever their ties with the Scottish Establishment. When the Presbytery of Hamilton introduced similar resolutions of sympathy for the Scottish Free Church in 1843, after the Scottish Disruption, eleven members of Synod, led by Peter Campbell, dissented. Still, however, a strong majority of 28-11 approved.[21] To the Free Church supporters, these acts of Synod constituted the official voice of the Canadian Church and could not subsequently be simply ignored or set aside for the sake of expediency or out of fear of losing temporalities. If, as Campbell openly stated, and the Colonial Committee of the Scottish Kirk seemingly insisted, '*bona fide attachment*' meant that the Canadian Synod could not criticize the actions of the Established Church in Scotland but must maintain silence in the face of what many Canadian Presbyterians considered sin, it was difficult to understand how colonial Presbyterians could be regarded as fully independent in ecclesiastical matters.[22]

It also appeared that the Synod of Canada lacked consistency in its doctrinal statements and had nothing authoritative to offer Canadian Presbyterians seeking theological guidance on fundamental matters of faith and practice. Throughout Canada confused laity looked to their pastors for clarity about the Synod's position *vis a vis* both the Scottish Establishment and the new Free Church. To which denomination would Canadian Presbyterians now contribute missionary offerings? From which denomination would they seek missionaries and new ministers? 'Could we,' Esson demanded, 'as true men, faithful to our principles, to our God, and to our cause, feel one moment's hesitation in deciding between these two churches? Was not the choice already made, predetermined before the disruption by the resolutions of 1841 and 1842? If we are to hold any

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[20] Ibid., p. 47. Italics are Esson's.

[21] See Esson's Appendix for these resolutions, which were also reported in British newspapers. See, for example, *Belfast News Letter*, 13 August 1841, p. 1 and *Caledonian Mercury*, 17 August 1843, p. 1.

[22] Alexander F. Kemp, *Digest of the Minutes of the Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Canada; with a Historical Introduction* (Montreal: John Lovell, 1861), pp. xiii-xiv, highlights the importance of this issue in the birth of the Canadian Free Church.

communion or connection with any church on earth, one would have supposed that there was no room for deliberation.'[23]

The difficulty in the Canadian Synod's position was acknowledged even by some who adhered to the Scottish Kirk. During the March, 1844, meeting of the Quebec Presbytery John Cook, of St. Andrew's Church in Quebec, set forth the position which was to carry a majority of the Synod several months later. Cook, a student of Thomas Chalmers who had Evangelical leanings, pastored a politically influential congregation in a heavily French Catholic province. He had worked tirelessly on the campaign to gain government support for the Presbyterian Synod and had no intention of risking this hard-won victory unless absolutely necessary. The Presbyterians of Canada depended heavily upon assistance from Scotland and the government, Cook reasoned, and would for many years to come. Their connection to the Established Church of Scotland assured them of vitally needed support, and if the mother church did not attempt to interfere in the internal ecclesiastical affairs of the Canadian Synod his conscience did not bother him in maintaining a nominal connection to her. Yet Cook recognized that in light of the recent schism in Scotland, their relationship to the established Kirk, acknowledged by the government as the legal basis of their share in the Clergy Reserves, might in fact lead to troubling restrictions on the long-standing freedom claimed by Canadians:

> It never occurred to us to consider to what extent her internal dissensions might proceed, and how injurious they might prove to us. Our connection with the Church of Scotland was, as we supposed, our tower of strength. Now amidst the distractions of party it may become a reed to pierce us, or a stone of stumbling. We cannot […] feel sure, that the peculiar authority which she possesses over us, will be exercised with the same forbearance as heretofore—and certainly our own position is unnecessarily insecure and […] unfavorable to an independent course of action. We receive Government support, very needful in the present state of our Church. But for the continuance of this support we are dependent […] on our giving satisfaction to a third party, altogether removed from the sphere of our labors, and otherwise exercising no authority over us.[24]

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[23] Henry Esson, *Substance of an Address Explanatory and Apologetic, in Reference to the Late Disruption of the Synod of Canada in Connection with the Established Church of Scotland, Delivered to the Congregation of Saint Gabriel Street Church, on Tuesday, the 30th of July 1844* (Montreal: J. C. Becket, 1844), p. 16.

[24] *Kingston Chronicle and Gazette*, 13 March 1843, p. 2.

In July 1844 a majority of the Canadian Synod upheld resolutions offered by Cook to maintain for the time being their legal connection to the Scottish Kirk and to refrain from criticizing her policies. Most adhering ministers held charges in Quebec and the eastern townships of Upper Canada, in areas where the Presbyterian populace was dwarfed by Catholics, Anglicans, and other sects, or in urban churches where prominent Scottish businessmen and politicians worshipped. Many, like Cook, undoubtedly hoped that in the future they could secure a new basis for their temporalities that would free them from any external interference in Canadian ecclesiastical affairs; but in the meantime, they believed that their best interests dictated a stance that critics deemed hypocritical in light of Synod's previous resolutions upholding Free Church principles. Henry Esson and the minority who withdrew to organize a new Canadian Free Church believed that these 'adhering' brethren had both fatally compromised their integrity and had badly miscalculated the best interests of Canadian Presbyterianism. The modest amount of government support derived from the clergy reserves constituted a pittance that could be dispensed with should they actually lose these temporalities. However, the inevitable loss of their *people*, which in the Western regions of the province would certainly include entire congregations, signified the destruction of the living Church that they were called and sworn to serve and protect as Christian shepherds.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL CONTEXT

Henry Esson was no voluntarist. Like virtually all Free Church leaders he believed that government had a moral obligation to support a national church; yet he recognized that Presbyterians in Canada could not expect to thrive and expand if they placed their hopes in the clergy reserves. Esson estimated that at best these could afford each minister in the Synod £60 annually, a sum that would quickly plummet as new congregations organized and new clergy joined the Synod's roll.[25] Clearly no expansion of Presbyterianism was conceivable in Canada without the generous voluntary support of committed laity, and in large swaths of the colony, especially to the West of Toronto, the people overwhelmingly supported the cause of the Scottish Free Church.

Although Peter Campbell indignantly rejected the accusation that he leaned toward 'prelacy,' his side failed to understand the thinking of many Scottish settlers. In a running polemical battle against Free Church editor Peter Brown of the *Toronto Banner*, Campbell habitually employed

[25] Esson, *An Appeal*, p. 39.

sarcastic language guaranteed to offend many rank and file Presbyterians. For example, in one widely reprinted editorial, Campbell lampooned 'Free Church principles' with impolitic words:

> Miserable but most prevalent delusion! How many, alas! do we see starting up around us, who by mouthing melodramatic fustian about the Covenanters, expect to repair a damaged reputation, or to gain a good one. Never, I believe, was the Church more exposed to be overrun with a pest, or all its landmarks of doctrine, discipline, and order more in danger of being removed, than by those who vex godly men with their loud talk about the Headship of Christ.[26]

Such language could not have clashed more dramatically with the deeply held convictions of countless Presbyterians in Canada, including many laity in those eastern presbyteries that voted overwhelmingly to adhere to the Scottish Establishment in 1844. Even before the Synod convened, it was clear that many disaffected Presbyterians would leave churches where the ministers pledged loyalty to the Kirk. In the vacant congregation of Ramsay, near Ottawa, the people gathered a week before Synod to make their views known. Although situated in the Bathurst Presbytery, whose ministers stood solidly with the Scottish Establishment, Ramsay's laity unanimously resolved that the Scottish Kirk was an apostate body that had betrayed the principles of their ancestors: 'We therefore consider it to be our duty, from this day forward, to withdraw from all connexion with the established Church of Scotland.' They castigated those Canadian ministers who, having previously condemned Erastianism, now pledged adherence to the 'Residuary Church,' warning that such men had forfeited their claim to be legitimate shepherds. Henceforth, the Ramsay congregation proclaimed, 'we will not receive any missionary or minister as a preacher amongst us, except he maintains the principles of the Free Church.'[27]

In Spencersville, also within the Bathurst Presbytery, a group of disgruntled Scots in early 1844 announced their 'withdrawal from the Synod of Canada in Connection with the Established Church of Scotland' and their determination to secure a Free Church minister. These settlers built a 'plain handsome church,' sufficiently large to accommodate several hundred worshipers, and soon had crowded assemblies each Sabbath. Four of these separatists, who had migrated from Ruthwell, reached out to their former pastor, Rev. Henry Duncan (1774-1846), seeking his help in finding an evangelical preacher from the Scottish Free Church. In a private letter to Duncan accompanying the official letter from the con-

[26] *British Colonist*, 27 February 1844, p. 2.
[27] *Bathurst Courier and Ottawa General Advertiser*, 2 July 1844, p. 1.

gregation, colonist John Weir wrote: 'glad would I be, and esteem it my highest honour, to sit at the feet of that beloved Church of which you are a member.'[28]

Scattered throughout the Bathurst, Montreal and Quebec Presbyteries were Scottish Presbyterians who had not yet been organized into churches but who met regularly on their own for worship.[29] Many were Gaelic speaking Highlanders who seldom if ever received visits from missionaries. When John Bonar of Larbert toured the colonies in 1845 on behalf of the Scottish Free Church, he discovered near Sherbrooke, in Lower Canada, nearly one hundred families that had migrated from Inverness who had gone more than six years without a sermon. Shortly before the Canadian Disruption, Bonar related, these people learned that a Gaelic missionary was to preach forty miles away, and eager to have their children baptized the entire settlement trekked through the woods to meet him. But once they discovered that the man was from the Scottish Kirk rather than the Free Church, 'they toiled their way home again, saying that they would wait till the Presbytery sent them a faithful minister.'[30]

It was not only in rural Scottish enclaves that dissension brewed. Even in St. Andrew's, Kingston, among the wealthiest and most politically connected congregations in the colony, the majority Kirk faction discovered that they could not control the sizable minority of disgruntled Free Church sympathizers who wished to sever ties with the Church of Scotland. When Robert Burns of Paisley visited Kingston in April, 1844, during his tour as a Scottish Free Church deputy, minister John Machar and the St. Andrew's Trustees determined that he would not preach from their pulpit. A petition signed by one hundred and eleven pew holders challenged this decision to no avail, whereupon the dissenters organized a meeting to plan an ecumenical welcome for the Free Church dignitary. Following Burns' visit, seven of the eight divinity students at Queen's College withdrew from the school in protest, after Principal Thomas Liddle disciplined them for their attendance at Burns' sermon in the neighbouring Wesleyan Chapel. A large public meeting, led by St. Andrew's dissenters, passed resolutions declaring approval of the Scottish Disruption and determination 'to use every effort to aid […] the Free Church of Scotland.'[31]

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28 *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 19 June 1844, p. 2.

29 *Canadian Christian Examiner and Presbyterian Review* 1.2 (April, 1837), p. 59.

30 *Elgin Courier*, 29 August 1845, p. 1.

31 *Kingston Chronicle and Gazette*, 13 April 1844, p. 3; 20 April 1844, p. 2; Robert Burns, *Report Presented to the Colonial Committee of the Free Church of Scotland on Canada and Nova Scotia* (Paisley, 1844).

If Free Church sympathizers could not be silenced in Kirk strongholds, the cause of '*bona fide attachment*' was hopeless in the extensive and rapidly rising territory to the West of Toronto, which would always be the demographic centre of the Canadian Free Church. From Hamilton on the western tip of Lake Ontario, westward to Lake Huron, 'bush settlements' were fast filling up with a polyglot populace from Holland, Ireland, and especially the northern Scottish Highlands. Many Scots came from Ross and Sutherland and carried with them their strong attachment to evangelical religion. Zorra Township in the Brock District, for example, was a large Highland enclave made up almost entirely of families who had left Dornoch and Rogart parishes in the wake of the Sutherland Clearances. They had been led to Canada by a blacksmith, George MacKay, one of the revered 'men' who was popularly known as *Duine Righ-lochan*, 'The Man of King-lochan.'[32] Such settlers—and there were many in the Hamilton Presbytery—harboured bitter memories of social injustice and sustained in perhaps equal measure a fierce devotion to the peculiar strain of layled evangelicalism they had known in Scotland and animosity toward the noble family of Sutherland and the establishment that it represented.[33]

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[32] Anna Ross, *The Man with the Book; or Memoirs of John Ross of Brucefield* (Toronto: R. G. McLean, 1897), pp. 5-6.

[33] Donald Macleod, who wrote heated polemics against the clearances and the Kirk's complicity, had migrated to Woodstock in the Hamilton Presbytery. See Douglas MacGowan, ed., *The Stonemason: Donald Macleod's Chronicle of Scotland's Highland Clearances* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001). On the northern Highlands, see Donald Sage, *Memorabilia Domestica; or Parish Life in the North of Scotland*, second Edition (Wick: William Rae, 1899); John Kennedy, *The Days of the Fathers in Ross-Shire* (Edinburgh: John Maclaren, 1867) and Kennedy, *The Apostle of the North: The Life and Labours of the Rev. Dr. M'Donald* (London: T. Nelson & Sons, 1867); Alexander Auld, *Ministers and Men in the Far North* (Wick: John Rae; Edinburgh: Menzies & Co., 1868); Donald Munro, *Records of Grace in Sutherland* (Edinburgh: Free Church of Scotland Publications Committee, 1953; reprint edition, Edinburgh: Scottish Reformation Society, 2015) and George Macdonald, *Men of Sutherland: Sketches of Some of Them* (Inverness: Northern Chronicle Office, 1937; reprint edition, Dornoch: William Murray, 2014). Helpful modern studies include Allan I. MacInnes, 'Evangelical Religion in the Nineteenth-Century Highlands', in *Sermons and Battle Hymns: Protestant Popular Culture in Modern Scotland*, ed. Graham Walker and Tom Gallagher (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990); George Robb, 'Popular Religion and the Christianization of the Scottish Highlands in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries', *Journal of Religious History* 16 (June 1990), pp. 18-34; Donald E. Meek, 'Protestant Missions and the Evangelization of the Scottish Highlands, 1700-1850', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 21 (April 1997), pp. 67-72;

In April, 1833, the Synod of Ross, noting that 'our countrymen in that region labour under a lamentable want of the means of religious instruction,' resolved to send out annually a Gaelic speaking missionary to meet the need of these kinsmen.[34] Although this plan proved overly-ambitious, the Synod did send out missionaries in 1833 and 1836, both ordained by the Presbytery of Dingwall and disciples of John Macdonald of Ferintosh, the so-called 'Apostle of the North.' Year after year Donald McKenzie and Daniel Allan spent months itinerating throughout the southwestern townships of Upper Canada, holding Gaelic worship services, attending weekly prayer fellowships, organizing congregations, and holding annual 'Long Communions' that regularly attracted thousands of Gaels to what many witnesses described as exact replications of a Highland 'Holy Fair.' McKenzie settled over the congregation in Zorra Township, which became renowned in Presbyterian circles as a 'school of the prophets' that produced more Free Church ministers than any other single congregation in all Canada.[35]

There was never any doubt that these Highland evangelicals would reject 'bona fide attachment' to the Scottish Kirk after 1843. Sutherland folk in Zorra, and those scattered across the province to Kincardine on the Huron shore, had resisted theological 'moderatism' to the point of separatism long before the Disruption. They closely followed events back home through letters, and a fresh supply of newcomers from Sutherland arrived yearly, carrying the latest news. They could also read accounts of the Scottish Disruption which appeared in Canadian newspapers and religious periodicals. They knew well how the common people of Sutherland had turned against the Kirk in 1843, as well as the despised Duke of Sutherland's initial refusal to grant them land for new churches, a highly publicized scandal highlighted in evangelical journals around the globe. Such colonists hardly needed outside agent provocateurs like Robert Burns to tell them where their sympathies lay. Burns appeared

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and David M. M. Paton, 'The Myth and Reality of the 'Men': Leadership and Spirituality in the Northern Highlands, 1800-1850', *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* 31 (2001), pp. 97-144.

34 *Inverness Courier*, 12 June 1833, p. 3.

35 For missionary narratives by McKenzie and Allan, see *Inverness Courier*, 4 March 1835, p. 2; and *The Canadian Christian Examiner and Presbyterian Review* 1:8 (October, 1837), pp. 286-94. On Zorra Township and Highland religion in the region, see Anna Ross, *The Man with the Book;* W. A. Mackay, *Pioneer Life in Zorra* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1899); W. A. Ross, *History of Zorra and Embro: Pioneer Sketches of Sixty Years Ago* (Embro: Embro Courier Office, 1909); and W. D. McIntosh, *One Hundred Years in the Zorra Church (Knox United, Embro)* (Toronto: The United Church Publishing House, 1930).

only briefly in Hamilton and then headed east, never once visiting the western settlements of Highland dominance during his Canadian tour. Yet contributions for the Scottish Free Church flowed in from settlers throughout the region. A congregational bazaar held in Zorra in April 1844 raised $170 for the Free Church Building Fund, a considerable sum for an impoverished bush settlement that underscored the community's continued devotion to their beloved kinfolk who 'were obliged to assemble in barns or in the open air to worship their Creator.'[36]

A majority of those who withdrew from the Synod of 1844 came from the western Hamilton Presbytery, where so many clergy had deep roots in Highland evangelicalism or else had come to Canada as missionaries to labour among mostly Highland settlers. John Bayne of Galt, for example, the first minister to sign the Protest of the Free Church in 1844, was the son of a Gaelic minister in Greenock who later went north as a probationer to the Dingwall Presbytery, his father's homeland, where he was ordained in 1834. Though not fully proficient in Gaelic, Bayne had enough command to receive an almost unanimous call from a parish in Orkney but was rejected by the heritor. He then went out to Canada through the Glasgow Colonial Society as a missionary, and fell in love with the people of Galt, a mostly Highland community that appreciated his evangelical convictions and his ability to understand their Gaelic.[37] Mark Young Stark of Dundas, a village near Hamilton, also came from a Lowland background and spoke not a word of Gaelic. Like Bayne he had come to Canada through the Glasgow Colonial Society after failing to secure a patron in Scotland. As a missionary in the heavily Gaelic speaking West and a member of the Hamilton Presbytery, he came to appreciate the deep-seated ties that connected the local people to their Highland traditions. When the choice between adhesion or independence had to be made, Stark reluctantly embraced independence and became the first Moderator of the Canadian Free Church.[38]

CONCLUSION

Ministers like Bayne, Stark, McKenzie, and Allan understood a crucial truth that too many of the 'Adhering' party failed to appreciate fully:

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36 *Woodstock Herald*, 20 April, 27 April, 4 May, 1844.

37 Alexander C. Geekie, 'A Colonial Sketch: Dr. John Bayne of Galt', *British and Foreign Evangelical Review* 24:18 (July, 1875), pp. 488-504.

38 Allan L. Farris, 'Mark Young Stark: Pioneer Missionary Statesman', in John S. Moir, ed. *The Tide of Time: Historical Essays by the Late Allan L. Farris, Professor of Church History and Principal of Knox College, Toronto* (Toronto: Knox College, 1978), pp. 75-85.

The 'Church of the Fathers' loved by many Canadian Presbyterians had become the Scottish Free Church in 1843. Henry Esson insisted that the vital missionary heart of the Church of Scotland had always been those evangelicals who had gone out from the Kirk in the preceding year; to break communion with them now, he believed, would fatally cripple the prospects of the Synod in Canada. Reflecting especially upon the efforts of the Glasgow Colonial Society, by which so many ministers had reached North America, Esson emphasized 'that to this section of the Church we owe nearly all that we now are—all that we have won in this land.' Considering this history, he reflected, to pledge 'an exclusive connection' to the Church of Scotland constituted a stunning failure to recognize that Canadian Presbyterianism had always been intimately linked to the champions of the Free Church cause:

> They planted, watered, and nourished us, and taking us up, when we were helpless and neglected—have watched over us with paternal and fostering care […]. Our best missionaries and ministers have come forth from them […]. If we separate our cause from that of the Free Church, we take away our vital influence and commit a suicidal act.[39]

Esson was confident that countless lay Presbyterians, if not their ministers, did understand this truth, and that the Synod needed to heed the voice of those people who were disaffected from the Kirk. It was almost inconceivable to him that faithful ministers would choose to retain a nominal tie to the Scottish Establishment if it meant the widespread alienation of the laity, a far more catastrophic disruption of the Canadian Church than the loss of clergy reserves could ever accomplish: 'Are they […] earnest in saying that the connection which they advocate is only nominal, implies no jurisdiction in itself, when they would not sacrifice it to prevent the separation of twenty congregations in Canada West, and the certainty […] of as many more over all the land to follow?' After the schism, Esson sadly observed that the Adhering majority had willingly sacrificed many of their most faithful people rather than risk losing their paltry temporalities, thereby selling 'the jewel of the church for an empty bubble.'[40] Far from authoring a division without cause, Esson and his Free Church colleagues had carefully weighed the options and reached the painful conclusion that faithfulness to Christ as well as the future welfare of Canadian Presbyterians required their complete separation from the Scottish Kirk.

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39 Esson, *An Appeal*, p. 35.

40 Esson, *An Address*, p. 11.