

Religious Guardians of the Peaceable Kingdom: Winnipeg's Key Social-Gospel Gatekeepers of Canada West

By Richard Sanders

With the ethnic cleansing of Indigenous peoples from the prairies and the arrival of the railway in the 1880s, Winnipeg's train station was the "Gateway to the West." By the onset of WWI, over a million newcomers had been moved in to settle western Canada.

While Canadian churches maintained their blissful silence about the imperial land grab, the mass confinement of Indians on reserves, and the cultural genocide imposed by Christian residential schools, they quickly created morally indignant narratives to decry the rapid influx of nonAngloSaxons. In reaction to these immigrants, who they considered inferior, some of Winnipeg's most prestigious clergymen took it upon themselves to become the civil-society "gatekeepers" of fortress Canada. These progressives were soon locked in a battle against the gate-crashing "aliens" who had penetrated the walls of their sacred Peaceable Kingdom.

With brave and heroic tales about the progressive spread of enlightened British culture across the untamed West, mainstream Protestant churches saw themselves as the vanguard of a grand imperial project called Canada. In waging their cultural war against First Nations, these self-appointed guardians of national security created popular myths about their valiant mission to protect Canada from savage attacks by religious, political and racial inferiours. Later, when confronted by unwanted immigrants with religious beliefs and political loyalties that competed with their own, AngloProtestants changed the sights of their xenophobic narratives and worked themselves into a new, moral frenzy.

To convey their collective panic, they filled a host of traditional cultural vessels—from sermons, college lectures, missionary tracts and other, more popular religious fictions, like novels—with cautionary tales about strangers. These narratives were like church bells sounding warning of an impending peril. East Europeans—seen as spiritually backward, unassimilable and politically radical—were seen as a worrisome new threat by respected gatekeepers of Canada's Christian civilisation.

In their propaganda war against unwanted foreigners, Winnipeg gatekeepers demonised a certain class of "enemy aliens." This was soon followed by their mass captivity in WWI-era, labour camps.

Invading the Kingdom

Between 1871 and 1911, Canada's prairie population grew by 1.3 million: 375,000 in Alberta, 492,000 in Saskatchewan and 430,000 in Manitoba.¹ Most settlers came west via Winnipeg on Canada's new railroad. They were largely Anglos, especially in Manitoba where 64% were British. While Germans and Scandinavians made up 15% of the total, Francophones were only 6%. During this preWWI spurt, the dominance of northwest Europeans began to decline. For example, the prairies' British population fell from 86% in 1901 to 77% in 1911.

During that same decade, east Europeans became far more visible on the prairies. Manitoba's Slavic community of Austro-Hungarians, Russians and Poles, almost quintupled from 12,760 in 1901, to 59,230 in 1911. This increased their presence from 5% to 13% of the total population.² Most of these Slavs were Ukrainian. About 170,000 of them had entered Canada between 1891 and 1914, with a record number of 22,000 arriving in 1913,³ on the very eve of WWI.

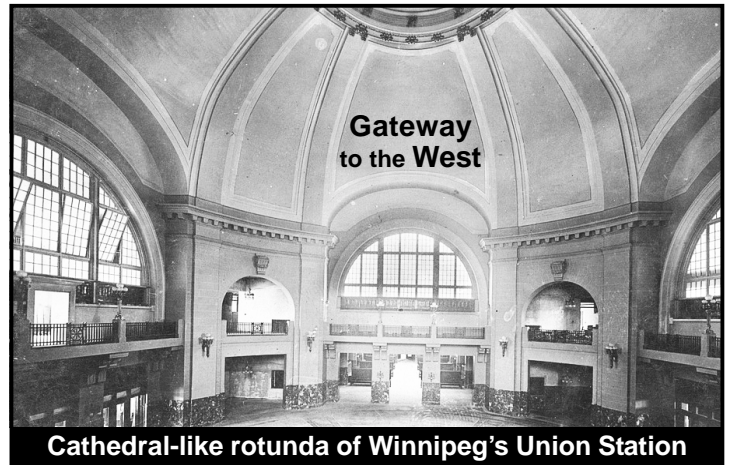
But gates are not just entry points, they are also exits for expelling the unwanted. While between 1903 and 1908 Canada deported 1,401 "undesirables," 1,748 were thrown out in 1909 alone. This followed an influx of aliens fleeing Czarist repression after the Russian revolution of 1905-1907. (See pp.36-39). This record number of deportations was not matched until 1914. During WWI, 5,943 were unceremoniously thrown from our gates.⁴

By war's end, Canada was engaged in "the deliberate and systematic deportation of agitators, activists and radicals," said historian Barbara Roberts. The "threat they posed was not to the people of Canada" but to "vested interests such as big business, exploitative employers, and a government acting on behalf of interest groups." Deportees included opponents of WWI and conscription, militant labour activists and radical socialists. The *excuse* for deporting them was often that, as indigents, they might need state assistance.⁵

Information Gateways

Winnipeg clergymen, Charles Gordon, J.S.Woodsworth and J.W.Sparling, were on the front line of a culture war to maintain the supremacy of Canada's AngloProtestant civilisation. Although they did not control the physical gates through which aliens entered and exited Canada's gates, these Social Gospellers did exert control over the flow of information about aliens.

Social Gospellers were gatekeepers in the sense invoked by Kurt Lewin, the Jewish-American father of social psychol-



Cathedral-like rotunda of Winnipeg's Union Station

ogy who fled Germany in 1933. In 1943, Lewin published his gatekeeping theory to explain how individuals controlled the flow of commodities and data within social systems. Interestingly, he was influenced by political scientist Harold Lasswell's 1920s research on the decision-making processes used to create WWI propaganda.

Lewin said that his gatekeeping model could be used to understand social organizations and newsrooms. Since then, scholars in many disciplines have developed Lewin's gatekeeping theory to analyse how data is filtered through various systems to construct social realities.⁶ As mass communications professors Pamela Shoemaker and Tim Vos have explained:

"Gatekeeping is the process of culling and crafting countless bits of information into the limited number of messages that reach people each day.... [It] determines not only which information is selected, but also what the content and nature of the messages, such as news, will be."⁷

Gatekeeping theory can explain how Social Gospellers used ethnocentric religious and political filters to select data about aliens that they then crafted into narratives to sway the minds of their parishioners, politicians and the public at large.

Rev. Charles Gordon, aka “Ralph Connor”

The leading populariser of the Social Gospel was best-selling author, Rev. Charles Gordon. His first three swashbuckling novels sold over five million copies. The “sole purpose” of his first book, he said, “was to awaken my church ... to the splendour of the mighty religious adventure being attempted by the missionary pioneers” in Canada’s west.⁸

Using the alias Ralph Connor, Gordon was “the most successful practitioner ... in the world” of a genre called “imperial adventure fiction.”⁹ His thirty novels also captured the spirit of so-called “Muscular Christianity,” a Victorian movement stressing a mix of pious athleticism with virile masculinity. It was hardcore Christian evangelism on imperial steroids.

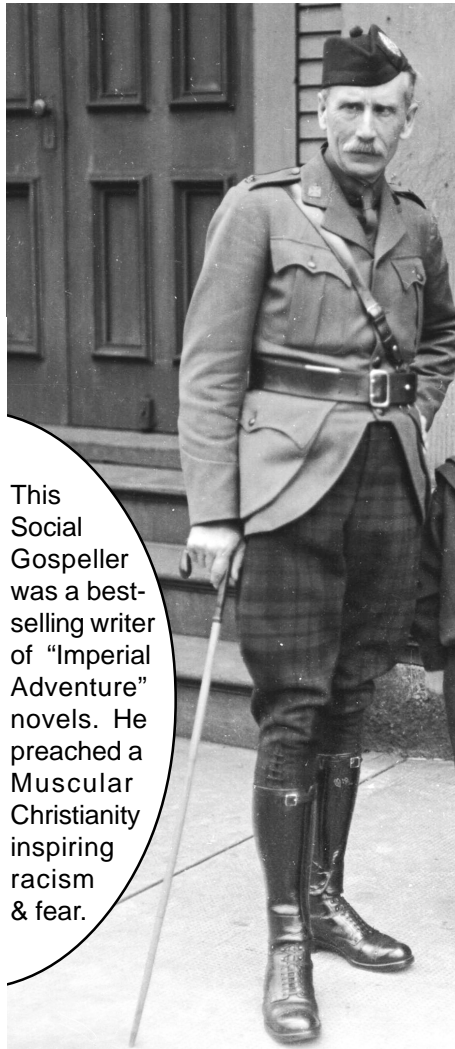
In *The Social Uplifters: Presbyterian Progressives and the Social Gospel in Canada*, Brian Fraser—a Church History professor at Vancouver’s School of Theology—praised Gordon as one of the “central figures in articulating and implementing a social Christianity.”¹⁰ What he does not explain is that Gordon used his literary pulpit to preach an ethnocentric xenophobia that spread fear and hatred.

An avid imperialist, Gordon transformed fictive Mounties—like Corporal Cameron—into graven macho images of biblical dimensions. Mounties were to be idolised for defending what Gordon called “the ‘pax Britannica’ ... of Her Majesty’s dominions in this far northwest reach of Empire.”¹¹ Gordon’s cartoonified cops, and their tough missionary helpmates, teamed up in novels about the Northwest Rebellion. In Gordon’s racist mind, the villain’s role was played by “thousands of savage Indians, utterly strange to any rule or law”¹² who were “thirsting for revenge upon the white man.” His narrative saw the “insatiable lust for glory formerly won in war” as the “fiery spirit of the red man, long subdued by those powers that represented the civilization of the white man.”¹³

Gordon’s words captured the image of the Métis as “ignorant, insignificant, half-tamed pioneers of civilization,” with their leader, that “blood-lusting,” “vain and empty-headed Riel” who stirred up

“horror unspeakable in the revival of that ancient savage spirit which had been so very materially softened and tamed by years of kindly, patient and firm control on the part of those who represented among them British law and civilization.”¹⁴

Gordon not only reflected the prevailing racism of his time, he promoted,



This Social Gospeller was a best-selling writer of “Imperial Adventure” novels. He preached a Muscular Christianity inspiring racism & fear.

shepherded and covered up the savage cruelty of those who saw themselves as being on the vanguard of a physically, culturally, morally and spiritually advanced race.

Gordon’s zeal for assimilation was channelled through a morality tale, *The Foreigner* (1908). His urgent plea for robust missionary action conjures up the dire threat of depraved Slavs who had penetrated Canada via Winnipeg’s gates. His allegory focuses on the rescue of what he calls “a poor, stupid, Galician [Ukrainian] woman with none too savoury a reputation.” Entering stage right, preparing to save the day, were the heroic churches:

“Many and generous were the philanthropies of Winnipeg, but as yet there was none that had to do with the dirt, disease and degradation that were too often found in the environment of the foreign people. There were many churches in the city rich in good work ... but there was not yet one whose special duty it was to confer and to report upon the unhappy and struggling and unsavoury foreigner within their city gate.”¹⁵

Gordon molded this book’s hero,

Brown, after himself, an AngloProtestant missionary trying to uplift aliens in Winnipeg’s North End. Gordon and Brown were both trapped by an overpowering obsession: to Canadianise and Christianise foreigners. As Brown put it, he wanted “to make them good Christians and good Canadians, which is the same thing.”¹⁶

Through Brown, Gordon articulated the common Canadian phobia that east Europeans could not be absorbed quickly enough into the vastly superior AngloProtestant culture. This process of moral and social absorption required “uplifting” inferior races and cultures with what are now commonly called “Canadian values.” As Brown saw it, east Europeans “here exist as an undigested foreign mass. They must be digested and absorbed into the body politic. They must be taught our ways of thinking and living, or it will be a mighty bad thing for us in Western Canada.”¹⁷

But the novel’s secondary hero—French—expressed the public doubt that Slavs could ever be instilled with the values of Canada’s advanced civilisation. Calling them “a score of dirty little Galicians,” he says “You go in and give them some of our Canadian ideas of living..., and before you know they are striking for higher wages and giving no end of trouble.”¹⁸

But Gordon was no mere novelising missionary, he was also a powerful mediator in “industrial disputes... on behalf of the Dominion government.” While working for the government to bridge conflicts between huge corporations and radical unions, he exchanged many cordial letters with the Liberal’s Labour Minister, MacKenzie King.¹⁹ Gordon also “counted national leaders such as Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Theodore Roosevelt, and Woodrow Wilson among his readers and friends.”²⁰

To Gordon, Canada was not only a faithful servant of British imperialism, it was also part of a divine empire of White nations led by God that was marching towards a glorious, global conquest. As he told thousands gathered at the national missionary congress in 1909, Canada was:

“part of a Greater Empire... that knows no boundary all round this great world, ... an Empire led on to the conquest of the world not by any human mind or by any human hand, but ... by the great God Himself. For this conquest Canada must gird herself now; and if ... Canada is not able to maintain those high traditions for godliness... Canada [will] fail of her destiny... [to] keep pace with the greater Anglo-Saxon nations who are marching on to evangelize the world.”²¹