

**"TO OUR REMOTEST BORDER":
CHRISTIANITY AND EMPIRE IN CANADIAN WRITING**

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God bless our wide Dominion
Our fathers' chosen land,
And bind in lasting union
Each ocean's distant strand...
To our remotest border
Let plenty still increase,
Let liberty and order
Bid ancient feuds to cease.

These lines from Arthur Seymour Sullivan's "Dominion Hymn" allude to Abraham's commission in the book of Genesis, a familiar passage for the founders of religious colonies. Sullivan, like the Pilgrim Fathers before him, conflates election and territorial possession: God's dominion and the dominion of the British Crown. At the same time, in this conflation some puzzling paradoxes emerge: the land is "our" dominion; it is chosen by our fathers; the land is both "true freedom's fairest scene" and yet "bound." Unlike the Pilgrim Fathers, the upholders of the Dominion also view themselves as representatives of Britain. The passage, then, embodies a vision of Canadian territory as sacred only after being claimed as political dominion; it also suggests a tension between freedom and imprisonment, empire and nation, complicity and rebellion.

The association of political, religious, and commercial models in the settlement of Canada appears in a number of Canadian writings, as does the notable dilemma of freedom within boundaries, autonomy and central authority. In Sinclair Ross's novel *As For Me And My House* (1941), the young Philip Bentley imagines that the Church will "[offer] escape" from financial destitution and domestic ties; however, within a few years he is seeking "escape from the Church before it was too late" (42, 45). Further into the colonial past, Sara Jeannette Duncan's 1904 novel, *The Imperialist*,

foreshadows the conflation of sacred and secular discourses in the powerful speech of a young, idealistic politician named Lorne Murchison:

We stand for the principles that make for nation-building by the slow sweet processes of the earth, cultivating the individual rooted man who draws his essence and his tissues from the soil and so, by unhurried, natural, healthy growth, labour sweating his vices out of him, forms the character of the commonwealth, the foundation of the State. So, the imperial idea seeks its Canadian home... The imperial idea is far-sighted. England has outlived her body. (229)

In this passage, the association of nation-building with cultivation—with a particular perception of land—is also notable. Later, I will suggest that this particular view becomes associated with evangelicalism, with liberal politics, and with individual enterprise in the commercial realm. In contrast is the Church of England view of conservatism, replication of British institutions, and imposition of constructed sacred space on the land. In both models, land must be made sacred either through transformation or tradition.

In this paper, I am particularly interested in examining how these discourses operate in Canadian fiction, and I have selected two novels—one colonial and one postcolonial—to explore the problems, challenges, and tensions that emerge. In Duncan's *The Imperialist*, the ideology labelled "imperialism"—which actually suggests decentralisation and is associated with liberalism—comes into conflict with the stable model of replication suggested by conservative politics and state churches. The visionary preacher leaves to evangelise the prairies. In W. D. Valgardson's *Gentle Sinners*, we see the effects of that movement on a prairie family; the decentralisation of evangelicalism is here conflated problematically with the empire of the American New Right. In both texts, Christianity aids in the demarcation of dominion by political and commercial interests, and these concerns have a profound impact on the characters. Moreover, the motif of ideological self-imprisonment and liberation emerges in both novels, suggesting the difficulties of the settler subject—representative of British dominion—in escaping discursive boundaries.¹ The very question of dominion itself becomes central in both. Jim Davidson's study of "de-

dominionisation" in former settler colonies contends that dominion status often implies the identity of colony and imperialist centre; in this paper, I will explore that concept further.

Natalie Davis's study of Roman Catholic and Protestant ceremonies in sixteenth-century Lyon suggests how delimiting the boundaries of Christianity within the social body of the city differentiated between secular and sacred space; when the notion that all territory is sacred became more pronounced, emblems were brought into the core of the cities and integrated into civil ceremonies. Edward Muir describes the "sacralisation of urban space and institutions" as secular power and control were conflated with religious concerns. These studies are relevant to an examination of how Christian churches participated in the British imperialist enterprise of several centuries later. In the context of Canada, the question of political recognition and ownership of land became crucial in the relations of various denominations.²

The political notion of dominion inscribed in the British North America Act of March 9, 1867 proposed a union of four provinces "under the Crown of the United Kingdom". In addition, that dominion was to have "a Constitution similar in Principle to that of the United Kingdom". This vision of Canada as a replication of the union across the Atlantic quickly problematised the role of religion; in the case of Lower Canada (primarily Roman Catholic) this may appear obvious, but less familiar perhaps is the tension among Protestant denominations in Upper Canada. These denominations were rapidly involved in the many political and commercial debates of the 19th century; thus, while there may have been few truly religious motivations for emigration, the dominion ideal embodied in the Constitution "expressed a determination to establish the Kingdom of God in a new country and became a way of articulating a mission for the nation".³ Therefore, it is not entirely surprising that the evangelical denominations conflated the political notion of dominion with religious proselytism, giving it a slightly different meaning; for them, dominion meant not replication of the union across the Atlantic but complete social

transformation. Congregationalist William T. Gunn, for instance, expressed the so-called dominion project, creating "one great National Church of all that love God, working together to make our Dominion His Dominion from sea to sea and all the kingdoms of this world the kingdoms of our Lord and His Christ".⁴

It was the Church of England, and its presumed centrality, that first bolstered the notion of a "Christian state." However, the evangelical churches proved more powerful in spreading the Gospel, since—with their radical view of all space as potentially convertible—they were able to operate without hierarchies, structures, or even buildings. The emphasis on a loosely-formed organisation of itinerant preachers made the evangelicals ideal religious colonisers. Evangelicalism in Upper Canada challenged the ideal of an "orderly, stable, and hierarchical society" and upheld "ideals of individual self-expression, social equality, and democratic consent".⁵ It seems understandable, then, that these denominations soon became associated with political decentralisation and the forces of private business. Through figures such as Egerton Ryerson in the mid-19th century, they were rooted in notions of conversion, conviction of sin, and the free gift of grace.⁶ In contrast, the Church of England became associated by necessity with a "providential social order... the separation and subordination of classes"; the church was to be an "instrument of allegiance" to state authority (Christie 18). Anglican missionaries focused on prudence, zeal, sobriety, diligence, conformity to doctrine, meekness, and gentleness, rather than radical conversion and voluntarism. The vision of "civil and religious freedom" challenged the notion of the imperialist centre as superior, although evangelicalism did envision a dominionisation; however, for evangelical groups, this vision was "a completely christianised Canada" (Grant 75). It seems ironic that the slogan of the Royal Bank aptly summarises the approach of these groups: "we built this bank one customer at a time"—complete transformation, acre by acre.

In Upper Canada, the tension among Protestant visions of dominion was highlighted in the debate surrounding the Constitutional Act of 1791,

which gave Church of England clergy exclusive rights to perform weddings, reserved land, allowed for state appointment of clergy, and paid these church representatives from provincial coffers. The most controversial aspect of this entitlement was the "Clergy Reserves," land set aside for "Maintenance and Support of a Protestant Clergy" where "Protestant" generally meant "Church of England." The Reserves encompassed one-seventh of all land grants, following the procedure established in England. Not surprisingly, challenges to the Clergy Reserve system came with the ideological forces of radicalism, socialism, and commercial interest.

The role of commerce was also strong in evangelical denominations, and allowed them to establish educational and social networks. By modeling themselves on business organisations, emphasising competition and public debate, these churches could maintain popularity. States Phyllis Airhart:

Evangelicals were remarkably innovative in their methods, and introduced techniques that have been adopted almost universally by voluntary organisations and in some cases by businesses: the every-person canvass, the well-planned convention, the personalising of appeals by the use of anecdotes, and perhaps above all the mass production of printed materials at low, fixed prices. (104-5)

Social, political, and commercial networks were vital in the extension of dominion for evangelical groups: for example, Methodist John Macdonald provided businessman Timothy Eaton with a line of credit; the Methodist Church was the beneficiary of Hart Massey's farm implement profits; James Ashdown, a hardware wholesaler in Winnipeg, helped establish Wesley College; the Baptist president of the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, William McMaster, founded a university. The growing emphasis on cooperative church organisations was also reflected in business mergers, trusts, and multi-locational businesses in the early 20th century. The Lord's Day Act of 1906 set aside a day of leisure in accordance with religious convictions, but simultaneously defined the territory of commerce. It is in this manner that both political and religious dominion were extended, and ultimately conflated: the former through parades and processions and the latter through Sunday traditions. John Webster Grant writes:

The parade located religion in time and space; Sunday pointed it to eternity. The parade risked an over-emphasis on entrenched values that threatened to hold captive to vested interests. Sunday was associated with a taut moralism that too often identified religious commitment with the observance of legalistic taboos. Together they reflected the ambivalence of a society in which faith in God and loyalty to one's own were readily confused, but in which a healthy tension between sacred and secular values was also possible. (236)

It is easy to see how the complete spatial management implied by this paradigm could quickly become imprisoning. Moreover, the struggle between the political, commercial, religious, and spatial models emerges in Duncan's *The Imperialist*.

This novel depicts the fictional community of Elgin in Upper Canada, at a time of growing industry and commerce, and increasingly stronger national churches; the community appropriately questions its connection to Britain and the cultural dominion of the imperialist centre, as well as that of the United States. In this novel, imperialism comes to be associated with decentralisation—more closely identified now, perhaps, with a notion of “commonwealth”: a devolution of power while maintaining cultural ties to England. As Peter Allen suggests, the market square is “central to the town both literally and metaphorically”.⁷ The political imperialist, Lorne Murchison, “does not understand how far his world and he himself are controlled by the tradition of single-minded commercialism that the market represents”.⁸ Thus, a conflict emerges in all spheres between “reasonable, secure, socially-oriented institution” and “idealistic asceticism”.⁹ On one side is the Church of England family of Octavius Milburn, whose ideal is a “practical, go-ahead, self-governing colony” (51); on the other side is Lorne himself, who argues for Canada's growing importance in a multicentric British empire.

The opening of the novel encapsulates this conflation of politics, religion, commerce, and perceptions of space; the setting, for example, is Victoria Day, and the younger sons of the Murchison family—Oliver and Alexander—are asking their father for money to spend in celebration.¹⁰ Oliver finally opts for a bargain: “cash down, we'll take ten [cents]” (19). After

their father refuses to give them "money for nothing" they decide to approach their older brother Lorne, who has just earned thirty cents delivering newspapers. The focus on financial obligation sets the tone for the entire novel. The father, John, is the owner of a hardware store; he and Dr. Drummond, incumbent of the Presbyterian Knox Church, are linked through their mutual support of each other's ventures. Drummond envisions Murchison as "a man who would be punctual with his pew-rent, sage in his judgements, and whose views upon church attendance would be extended to his family" (21). In return for Murchison's support of the church, Drummond shops exclusively at his hardware store, and not at that of the Congregationalist merchant, Thompson.

Duncan's narrator describes the initial emigration of these two pillars of the Elgin community, along with their impact on territory:

So the two came, contemporaries, to add their labour and their lives to the building of this little outpost of Empire...In the course of nature, even their bones and their memories would enter into the fabric. The new country filled their eyes; the new town was their opportunity, its destiny their fate. (21-22)

While Drummond is Presbyterian, he still upholds central authority by praying weekly for the Royal Family, the church hierarchy, and heads of state—including the Canadian Prime Minister and American President. As we are told, "his sphere of duty could never revolve too far westward to embrace them" (22). Moreover, the growth in commercial empire is reflected in the gradual changes to Murchison's store: the ranges upstairs, the increased small wares and imported goods throughout the building.

The language of commerce also extends to the educational themes of the novel. For instance, when Lorne graduates from law school, the newspaper article reads, "Elgin congratulates Mr. L. Murchison for having produced these results, and herself upon having produced Mr. L. Murchison" (27). The Collegiate Institute is described as taking "in raw material and [turning] out teachers"; it "was a potential melting-pot: you went in as your simple opportunities had made you; how you shaped coming out depended upon what was hidden in the core of you. You could

not in any case be the same as your father before you; education in a new country is too powerful and stimulant for that, working upon material too plastic and hypothetical" (76). Moreover, even when the idealist minister, Hugh Finlay, arrives in Elgin, his relationship is described as a commercial competition; life itself, states Finlay at one point, "is a business" (71).¹¹

Again, though Drummond is not Church of England, his views most strongly parallel those of the political centralist: the believer in replication of institutions and central control. Ironically, he becomes associated with the businessman whose links to decentralisation are forged through his son and daughter. Drummond's propensity for this model—his connection, unfortunately, with the Milburns—is suggested in the description of the church building as "his dominion, its moral and material affairs his jealous interest, and its legitimate expansion his chief pride. In 'anniversary' sermons, he seldom refrained from contrasting the number on the roll of church membership... with the particular increase in the year just closed" (62). While this employment of a commercial discourse and enthusiasm for growth suggest Drummond's liberalism, his reluctance to delegate authority pulls him towards conservatism. Thus, as the congregation continues to expand, and particularly as the working-class population increases, the pressure builds on Knox Church's space. Drummond decides to appropriate an old schoolhouse for Presbyterian services, but refuses a separate clergy; while the Methodists "could tolerate decentralisation", (63) Drummond cannot accept a "deviation of congregational funds" (64).

If Drummond embodies the limitations of a centralist model for the churches, Finlay presents an evangelical model, parallel to Murchison's notion of imperialist union—multilocal and multicentred. Drummond is described according to the following geographical paradigm: he "moved with precision along formal and implicit lines; his orbit was established, and his operation within it as unquestionable as the simplest exhibit of nature... not a line [of his training] was missing nor a precept; nor was the mould defaced by a single wavering tendency of later date" (67). Finlay, in contrast, is described as a "passionate romantic" with "spiritual

indications" (68); rather than maintaining formal lines, Finlay finds that "in the pulpit alone... he can expand." We are told that "he had something...he had horizons, lifted lines beyond the common vision, and an eye rapt and a heart intrepid" (69).

That description of Finlay is parallel to Elleke Boehmer's designation of "the colonial gaze":

The gaze was made manifest in the activities of examination, inspection, peeping, poring over, which were accompaniments to the colonial penetration of a country...In writing, the gaze appears as bird's eye description, and is embodied in the high vantage point or knowledgeable position taken up by a writer or traveller as he re-creates the scene. (71)

Both Drummond and Finlay adopt this vantage point in the pulpit, but each has a distinct perception of space and strategy of management: while Drummond seeks mostly replication and imposition of religious institutions, aiming to do little more than maintain the support of local Presbyterians, Finlay's gaze is directed beyond the immediate, and his language that of liberation. As he later claims, the new country boasts "a physical freedom in which one's very soul seems to expand" (140). He tells Advena Murchison, "Political activity over there is half-strangled... by the secular arm of religion; here it doesn't impede the circulation!" and "an empty horizon is better than none" (110). It seems appropriate, then, that Finlay leaves Elgin at the end of the novel to take a post at the "White Water Mission Station in Alberta" (250). Thus, the political ideal of liberal imperialism fails, but religious evangelicalism moves successfully west. Moreover, Duncan's novel suggests that while the two models of external control and gradual transformation appear distinct, the links between them are strong: Lorne marries Dora Milburn; Advena Murchison marries Finlay; it is Drummond who initiates the applause during Lorne's ill-fated speech. In a seemingly-paradoxical statement, Lorne says "imperialism is intensely and supremely a national affair" (229).

If *The Imperialist* focuses partly on the extension of commercial, political, and religious dominion, the epilogue to this vision emerges in

Valgardson's *Gentle Sinners*. Here, the evangelical perception of all space as convertible—all one needs is an itinerant minister and a gathering—implies an imprisonment; the horizon becomes a mark of captivity rather than freedom. A similar paradox emerges in *As For Me And My House*, in which the prairie town named 'Horizon' is associated with boundaries and limits; in *Gentle Sinners*, the 20th century inheritor of evangelicalism struggles to escape the bonds of commercial and political interests associated with the American New Right. Throughout this novel, religious institutions are written over natural space: in the conflation of commercial and religious discourses, in the bizarre summer camp set in the wilderness of Manitoba, and in the deserted chapel appropriated as a grain elevator.

The main character, Eric Sigfuson Finnson, is a young man who attempts to liberate himself from his parents' religious fanaticism, associated with materialism and biblical fundamentalism. Like Valgardson himself, Eric has been raised within an Icelandic-Canadian family; however, the Icelandic identity has been overwritten in his parents' attempts to conform to the mainstream. They name him "Bobby Smith," and it is only when he escapes to the home of his uncle Sigfus that he is given an Icelandic name, Eric. Eric's entrapment in the neo-colonial discourse of his parents is reflected in his opening description as "someone long in prison who, instead of despairing, has lived in hope of avenging himself upon his jailers" (8). He breaks out of his parents' house in the city, "a shopping bag dangling from his left hand, a wide-brimmed square-topped hat gripped in his right... wearing a black suit, a white shirt open at the neck and tennis-shoes" (5). His clothing thus marks the two fundamental elements of his parents' discourse. In fact, he is occasionally mistaken for an itinerant preacher until his clothing is stolen; his shoe contains the thirty dollars he has stolen from his father's "emergency fund for converts" (13).

Eric's parents embody a distortion of evangelical values, rejecting secular authority but embracing secular values—disregarding laws yet readily purchasing the message of easy salvation. His father, for instance, distorts the notion of transportable sacred space; he

Drove so fast that nothing could be focused on before it was jerked away...As he drove, he always listened to a cassette tape recorder playing hymns, reciting prayers or teaching lessons in self-improvement. One time, he had been taking a curve at 90 [miles-per-hour] when a front tire blew out...Eric distinctly remembered that the hymn blasting forth at that moment was *Nearer My God to Thee*. (93)

Furthermore, the car here becomes another emblem of ideological imprisonment, denying the liberation implied by the surrounding wilderness to which Finlay escapes.

Eric's attempt to free himself from this paradigm begins with a complete rejection of all religious belief, an alliance with the paranoid sadist named Larry, and a romance with Melissa—a girl who herself is victimised by the capitalist Tree Brothers. As Eric tells Melissa, "[my parents] stuffed me so full of themselves, I thought I was going to vomit" (138). It seems that the only way to escape this tyranny is to embark on a geographical journey into the wilderness, beyond its reaches, and to engage in an active counter-conversion. This ritual is marked by a number of pseudo-sacraments: a baptism and renaming under Sigfus's water pump; a eucharistic meal of porridge, *skyr*, and coffee (8-9). While Sigfus ostensibly challenges the Christian ethos, he ultimately embodies a redemption of the evangelical paradigm, surprising Eric by saying grace before a meal and then responding with "Just because my sister breathes doesn't mean I intend to quit" (156). Later, he summarises this individualist approach with the acknowledgement that "it's not a matter of whether a man will have gods but, rather, which ones he'll worship" (171).

Sigfus also embodies the free enterprise and liberal model described earlier. In the bush outside the town, he and his aboriginal brother-in-law teach Eric to fish, and then peddle their catch for a variety of farms throughout the countryside; they help Eric to capture some experience of the divine in an unclaimed landscape. Moreover, it is in that territory that Eric comes upon the empty chapel now owned by Sigfus; ironically, that chapel was almost claimed by the Tree brothers, but Sigfus managed to "[snap] it up right under Little Tree's nose" (169). Sigfus thus upholds a personal faith

which challenges Eric's simplistic rejection of Christianity; as he says defiantly, "Does everything have to be done in a crowd?" (171). However, it is also in this chapel that Eric becomes aware of his immediate inability to escape the horizon of his parents' model:

The shadows behind the altar were as dark as deep water after a storm. From them, the darkness stretched upwards, making the distance between the floor and the window seem far higher than it actually was. A lifetime of trying, Eric thought, would not be sufficient to cover the distance. Panic was released somewhere deep inside him and like an insistent, jarring buzzing, began to spread, blotting out everything else. (169)

While Eric's response is to escape the pervasive darkness of the chapel into the sunlight of the meadow, he later seeks sanctuary in the chapel. He also finally realises that the only way to liberate himself is by continuing to struggle within that ideological prison; he therefore returns to the city, the school, and his parents' home with a new confidence.

Much research remains incomplete on the topic of Christian complicity and challenge to empire-building, particularly in settler cultures and their literatures. However, I have suggested here some of the elements of sacred and secular models that shape the responses of churches to empire, and that influence their perceptions of space. This paper has also suggested how the churches operated in the dominionisation of Canada; the evangelical churches, I have noted, assisted historically in de-dominionisation, at least according to the definitions established by Jim Davidson. Davidson writes that it is only when "our institutions... lose their sense of having been *bestowed*" (151) that true de-dominionisation will be accomplished; as I have argued, that very notion of dominion, however, is distinct from that labelled "imperialist" in Duncan's novel. In *The Imperialist*, dominion is associated with conversion of territory, the potential sacredness of all space, and with the political and commercial forces of liberalism; with conversion comes decentralisation. That evangelical vision ultimately shifted west to the prairies, where it now informs the discourses of both the socialist and conservative movements. The convergence of the two languages of centralism and itinerancy suggests

a fundamental paradox: both envision territory as capable of being made sacred; both see a political and/or commercial role reinforcing religion; both, ultimately, aim for some version of dominion. In particular, I am repeatedly fascinated by the way the Christian mission so often becomes a key element in colonialist discourse and is associated in settler cultures with self-imprisonment; I also, however, envision the possibility that this element itself can be the key to the discourse's dismantling, to reclaiming a model of liberation.

REFERENCES

¹ Stephen Slemon argues that the settler subject has "always been complicit in colonialism's territorial appropriation of land, and voice, and agency, and this is [its] inescapable condition" (110).

² In *God's Dominion: A Sceptic's Quest*, Ron Graham states that in Canada "Religion and politics became deeply entwined over land, education, favours, public money, and the party system"; further, that "quarrels over the grants known as the 'clergy reserves' were a major cause of the rebellion of 1837; and the link between religious belief and social policy was strengthened" (230).

³ Airhart, 99. A similar process is visible in the history of the Christian churches in Canada; the first allusion to Psalm 72—"May he have dominion from sea to sea" (8)—was made by Leonard Tilley.

⁴ Airhart, 100.

⁵ Christie, 11.

⁶ Gauvreau, 51.

⁷ Allen, 43.

⁸ *ibid.*, 44.

⁹ Morton, 107.

¹⁰ We are told, for instance, that "nothing compared with religion but politics, and nothing compared with politics but religion" (60).

¹¹ In keeping with this theme, Elizabeth Morton inadvertently identifies Advena Murchison—Hugh Finlay's romantic interest—as a "known commodity" (105).