

7

An Age of Unions

The Revival of Regional Unions

By the mid 1850s the Free and Secession churches in both the Maritimes and the united Canadas were ready, even eager, to resume the union negotiations that had collapsed so soon after the Disruption. Ministers and laymen of the two traditions had been brought into close co-operation through such organizations as the Sunday school movement and the Evangelical Alliance, and had discovered that their outlooks were basically identical. They shared the same attitudes on social issues; they were generally supporters of political liberalism; they were all evangelical and mission-oriented. In the Maritimes secessionist divinity students were being educated in the Free Church's Theological Hall at Halifax; in Toronto the seminaries of the two Canadian churches were in close proximity and shared the undergraduate facilities of University College. In 1857 the Rev. Dr. James Bayne, Secessionist minister at Pictou, said to the Free Church Synod, "United how much more powerful should we be for evangelizing the world."¹

One year later two Nova Scotian synods appointed union committees that began meeting immediately, while on Prince Edward Island the Free and Secession presbyteries started their own unofficial negotiations, promising to unite whether their synods did or not. Part of this impulse to union in the Maritimes arose from the growing anti-Catholic feeling, originating with the "papal aggression" controversy of the early 1850s but intensified in Nova

Scotia by the conflict between Joseph Howe, prime minister in the provincial Reform government, and the strong Irish Catholic group who had hitherto supported his party. When Howe's government was defeated in 1858 Howe blamed the influence of Archbishop Walsh of Halifax. This politico-religious struggle affected the union movement by encouraging Presbyterians and other Protestants to form a solid front against any political interference from the Catholic church.

The union of the Free and Secessionist churches in the Maritimes was achieved in 1860 with a minimum of difficulty. Traditional differences over church-state relations were made a matter of "forbearance," and the only subject of discussion was the name of the new body. Some of the separatists of 1844 wanted to retain the title "Free," but Professor Andrew King of the Theological Hall, a leading advocate of union, struck a strong note for Canadianism. "I value the name Free," he said. "In Scotland it is appropriate and necessary; but here it is not so. Here we can claim the higher and still more honoured name, Presbyterian."² It was agreed that the new church would be known as the Presbyterian Church of the Lower Provinces. Every congregation and every minister of the two older bodies joined in the union, giving the new church eighty-two ministers and some fifteen thousand adherents in all, probably about four times as numerous as the adherents of the two regional Kirk synods.³

The formalities of this union were held at Pictou, cradle of Presbyterianism in the Maritimes. Two large army tents erected by the government accommodated the more than three thousand people who attended the historic event. Over one tent floated a banner of traditional Presbyterian blue, inscribed with white letters, "For Christ's Crown and Covenant" — above the other was a white flag with the text, "That they all may be one."⁴ After Professor King had been unanimously and fittingly elected as moderator, the vast gathering was addressed in English and Gaelic, and congratulatory messages from other Christian denominations were read. "There is no other union on record," commented the *Presbyterian Witness*, "characterised by such perfect unanimity and cordiality."⁵

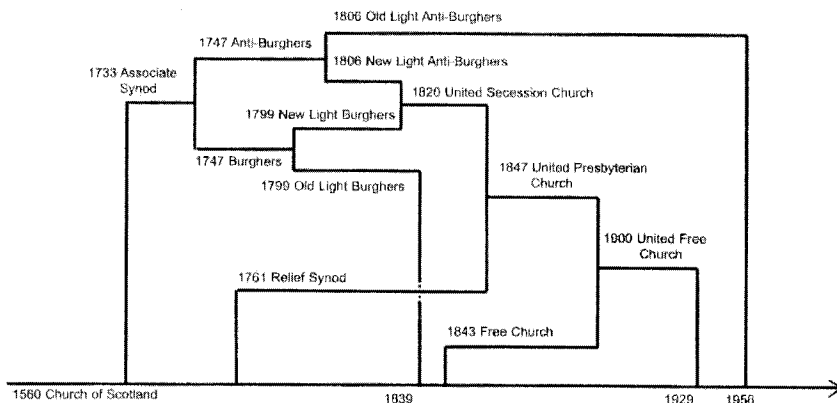
Even while negotiations for this union were under way, the small Free Church Synod of New Brunswick was anxiously seeking a union with its sister synod of Nova Scotia, which at that moment seemed preoccupied with its proposed union to the Secessionist church. When discussions dragged on between these two Free Church bodies, the New Brunswick synod considered the possibility of union with the Kirk in that province. The consummation of the Nova Scotia union in 1860 delayed the matter still further because the New Brunswickers feared that inclusion in the new Halifax-centred union would swamp them

and perhaps lose them all financial support from the Free Church in Scotland. By 1865, however, the shortage of ministers in New Brunswick forced them to accept a union which was completed the following year, and to their great relief, it proved to be in every way a blessing for the smaller synod. For its part the Kirk, and especially its laymen, were unwilling to join with “dissenters,” but in 1867 the New Brunswick Kirk Synod united with the small Nova Scotia Kirk (which had revived only after 1854), to form the Synod of the Presbyterian Church of the Maritime Provinces of British North America. Thus in the space of seven years union had reduced the number of Presbyterian bodies in the Maritimes from five to two.

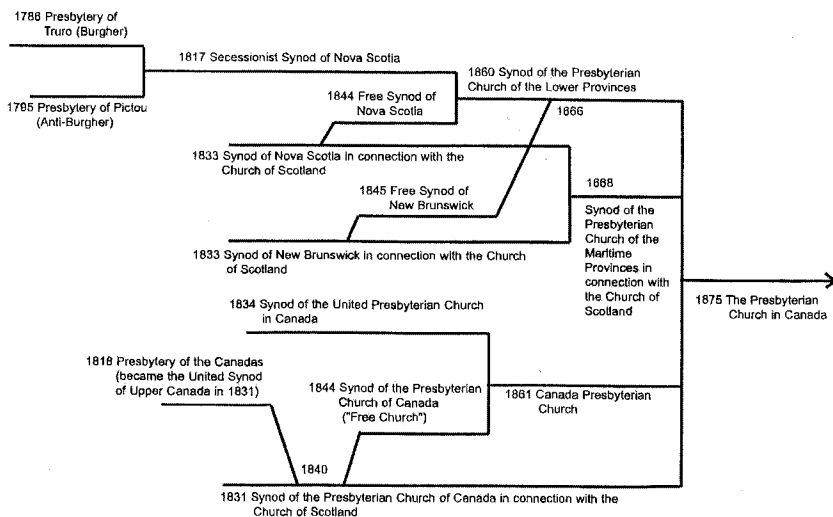
In the two Canadas the Clergy Reserves were no longer an issue dividing Free Churchmen and United Presbyterians after the mid 1850s, and the Free Church was voluntarist in fact if not in theory. The United Presbyterians were concentrated in western Upper Canada - in the eastern regions where their churches were few, individual United Presbyterians tended to join the Free Church. The ideal of church union was supported especially by laymen of the Free Church, the same group that had forced their will on synod in the 1848 controversy over acceptance of Clergy Reserves Funds. For a decade neither church had been prepared to sacrifice its own position regarding voluntarism, but the approaching end of the Clergy Reserves and growing interest in the Evangelical Alliance led Free Church members to petition their synod in 1854 to take up again the matter of church union to meet the needs of a “thinly scattered Presbyterian population,”⁶ a proposal that had the full support of the Secessionist *Canadian Presbyterian Magazine*.⁷ The voluntarism of Rintoul and Esson was reflected in the opinions of some of their Knox College students who candidly expressed to presbyteries their reservations regarding the duty of civil magistrates to uphold religion. The ordination of more young voluntarist Free Church ministers and the death of older clergy who had rejected voluntarism as “error” was changing the attitude within the synod. In this matter, as in so many others affecting the Free Church, the influence of the Browns was important. George Brown was a self-proclaimed voluntarist in all things — except sabbath observance!

Beginning in 1854 a flood of congregational petitions for union descended on the Free Church Synod. The synod was also presented in 1854 with United Presbyterian resolutions favouring union and calling for “forbearance” on the question of church-state relations. To the annoyance of the United Presbyterians, the Free Church Synod insisted that its traditional position on Christ’s headship over the nations would have to be part of the terms of any union. This was also a less than satisfactory reply in the opinion of the Free Church petitioners. The synod of 1855 rejected a resolution of Robert Burns

Major Presbyterian Unions in Scotland



Major Presbyterian Unions in Canada



A Few of the Fathers of 1875



Dr. William Fraser



Dr. William Reid



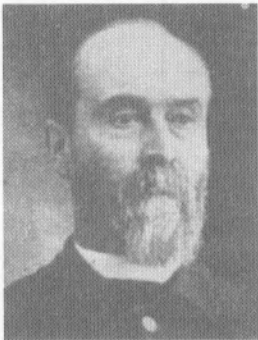
Dr. John Jenkins



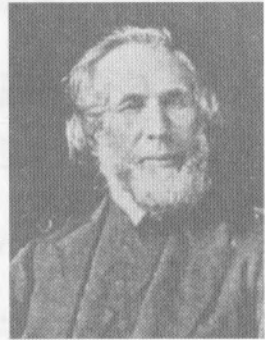
Rev. Hugh Mackerras



Principal Allan Pollok



Dr. Alexander Falconer



Dr. Alexander Topp

that accused the United Presbyterians of “errors of a dangerous character regarding the nature of Christ’s supremacy over the nations,”⁸ and settled for a less offensive statement, essentially reaffirming its decision of the previous year. Nevertheless, the United Presbyterians preferred to interpret this action of 1855 as evidence of “a measure of harmony of sentiments,” and by 1857 committees of the two churches had prepared a basis of union. This document reflected the Free Church attitude on church and state, specifically so regarding sabbath observance and the use of the Bible in publicly supported schools.⁹ Assuming that United Presbyterian silence meant virtual assent to the basis of union, the *Canadian Presbyterian* went so far as to suggest a name for a new Presbyterian body — “The United Church of Canada.”¹⁰

Apparently the United Presbyterian committee had gone too far in the direction of compromise, for their synod of 1858 wanted an additional clause inserted in the basis of union to recognize the right of “full and unfettered forbearance” regarding church-state relations. One correspondent of the *United Presbyterian Magazine* warned that the proposed union as it stood could lead to the creation of secessionist groups. The Free Church Synod was now, however, committed to union, and under pressure from its congregations to accept a compromise. The United Presbyterian resolution certainly disturbed the old guard Free Church minority composed of Michael Willis, John Bayne and a few others, but the majority ruled. A self-contradictory statement about national responsibility to recognize God, with “forbearance” in practice, was imbedded in the final basis of union accepted in 1859 and implemented in 1861 by the formation of the Canada Presbyterian Church. Within one generation of the Disruption, the bald facts of Canadian religious and political life had made the Free Church’s traditional opposition to voluntarism so meaningless that Presbyterian church union could be achieved by a statement on church and state that meant whatever each party wanted it to mean.¹¹ Only the Rev. Lachlan McPherson in Middlesex County refused to honour a union which had sacrificed the principle of Christ’s headship over the nations.¹²

The Organ Controversy Again

The organ controversy which had begun in the 1850s really came into its own as an issue in the early 1860s.¹³ St. Andrew’s Church, Toronto, apparently ignored objections to its new organ and when the Kirk Synod met in 1862 in that very church, its congregation asked approval for continued use of the instrument. The whole question of instrumental music was apparently the most exciting one before Synod, which continued debate until one o’clock

in the morning before it decided not to interfere wherever congregations were united in their desire for such music. Within the next four years, at least eleven other Church of Scotland congregations introduced instrumental music, St. Andrew's, Montreal, having paid \$5,000 for a Canadian-built organ. The Church of Scotland in Canada was actually leading the way in musical worship, not merely for other Canadian Presbyterians but for the mother church in Scotland as well.

After the Kirk's decision of 1862, the organ question was largely confined to the Free Church and Secession union churches. In 1861 St. Stephen's Church in St. Stephen, New Brunswick, ignored its synod's ruling against its organ. Similarly St. John's Church at Chatham in that province was condemned for acquiring an organ in 1864 but continued to use it until the death of its minister in 1868, after which the offending instrument was replaced by a choir. Like its Canadian counterpart the Church of Scotland in the Maritimes simply allowed its congregations to follow the dictates of conscience and pocketbooks about introducing instrumental music. Such "calmness and reason" as the Kirk might claim for itself on the organ controversy was, however, notably lacking in the new Canada Presbyterian Church. The Free Church-United Presbyterian basis of union of 1861 had explicitly rejected innovations in worship, yet voices were heard in the 1860s suggesting that the church was being left behind the times musically-speaking, to the permanent detriment of the church because of the alienation of young people.

By 1867 the organ question was again before the Canada Presbyterian Church Synod because Knox Church, Montreal, was charged with using an organ. Although other churches in that city were known to have been doing the same, no charges had been brought against them in the presbytery. When the accused congregation decided to appeal to synod, John Redpath, wealthy industrialist and elder of St. Gabriel Street, remarked, "Twenty years from this these scenes will be looked back upon as absurd....Before twenty years organs will be in every Church in the province."¹⁴ Knox's congregation pleaded that people were being driven from the Presbyterian Church "by the antiquated and singular form of our service." The Canada Presbyterian Church was declining in influence even while the Methodists were increasing. Was there not an explanation here in the more attractive Methodist services? One commissioner replied that instrumental music would sound the knell of the purity of the Church, but another asserted that if the church were ever to be Canadian and not Scotch, it must make its worship services attractive to "all classes and all nationalities." After long debate the synod resolved to send the question to the presbyteries. The next synod, in 1868, got the presbyteries' answers - five approved of the congregation's request and eight disapproved.

The great debate was resumed, and after twelve amendments were discussed at great length, the synod decided that the best solution was postponement.¹⁵ Meanwhile Knox Church continued to use its organ.

In June, 1871, William Proudfoot's old congregation in London (then ministered to by his son, J. J. A. Proudfoot) requested permission of the General Assembly of the Canada Presbyterian Church to reintroduce the organ music it had been forced to abandon at the union of 1861. After another lengthy debate, in which the opposition was led by the conservative John Ross of Brucefield, the request was granted "in the meantime," and the question was sent down to presbyteries and session for report at the Assembly of 1872. That Assembly became, as anticipated, the moment of truth on the organ question for the Canada Presbyterian Church. Only four of seventeen presbyteries reporting disapproved of the London congregation's request. Fewer resolutions were offered this time and the winner by nearly a two-to-one majority determined that, "the matter is not one in which uniformity of usage should be enforced by this Church."¹⁶

Nevertheless, for several years voices were still raised against the "kist o' whistles," and the question of spiritual worship with a carnal instrument played its part in the discussions leading to Presbyterian union in 1875. The organ question was one of the reasons given by John Ross of Brucefield and Lachlan McPherson of East Williams, and by their congregations, for refusing to join the union.¹⁷ Within congregations it was usually the younger generation, already accustomed to using melodeons in Sunday school and prayer meetings, who urged that organs be placed in the sanctuary. By the turn of the century few Presbyterian congregations worshipped without some form of musical accompaniment, although the process of installing organs had sometimes been associated with incidents, humorous or the reverse.

Stanley Street Church, Montreal, originated in a secession from Erskine Presbyterian Church led by Sir William Dawson, principal of McGill, when an organ was installed by the latter congregation in 1874. Twenty-two years later Stanley Street acquired its first organ for its sanctuary. In Cooke's Church, Toronto, a predominantly Irish congregation, an organ used for choir practice was ejected from the church basement in 1880 by a small group of protesters, who, after being fined \$50 or twenty days by the civil courts and suspended from church membership, founded their own congregation, Carlton Street Presbyterian Church. Six years later, when that congregation collapsed financially, a new "Reformed Presbyterian Church," still opposed to instrumental music, was formed, and continued to exist as Bloor Street East Presbyterian Church. Even when an overwhelming majority in any congregation accepted the introduction of organs, diehards might still be

found to register their individual protests, such as the man in Huron County who expressed his dissent by moving to the Methodist church down the street — which already had an organ!¹⁸ Perhaps the opponents of organs were at times inspired prophets, for when Sir John A. Macdonald's home church, St. Andrew's, Kingston, went "modern" in 1889 by installing an organ and celebrating that "popish" festival, Christmas, the church burned down on hogmanay.

The Example of Confederation

Although a union of the British North American colonies had been discussed spasmodically for generations, it was not until 1864 that the Confederation movement began in earnest. Maritime union was already being considered when the cultural, religious and economic conflicts between Upper and Lower Canada reached a crisis in the political deadlock of June, 1864. Fear of war with the United States, the loss of the reciprocity agreement with the Americans, threats and hostile actions by American members of the Fenians, an Irish nationalist group, indirect pressures from railway promoters, and finally the urgings and intervention of the British Colonial Office — all played their part in bringing about the confederation of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and the province of Canada on 1 July, 1867. In the creation of this "new nationality," as George Brown called the young dominion, the Christian churches of Canada played a relatively minor role. Confederation had more influence on Canadian religious development than the churches had on the events leading up to Confederation.

Without exception the churches were favourable to the idea of confederation, but the religious press seldom commented on the political process. Individuals, especially in Nova Scotia, were not always such wholehearted supporters of political union as were their religious leaders. On 1 July, for instance, the citizens of Pictou reportedly marched to the local American consulate with a petition requesting admission into the republic to the south.¹⁹ More than a year earlier the Presbyterian Witness, unofficial voice of the Presbyterian Church of the Lower Provinces, had warned its readers, "The people and government of Britain anxiously desire a union of these colonies...Is it wise to incur their serious displeasure?"²⁰ The two Canadian Presbyterian periodicals — *The Home and Foreign Record* of the Free Church and *The Presbyterian* of the Church of Scotland — expressed some reservations about the details of confederation but none about the principle. Of all the contemporary religious newspapers none was more outspokenly

enthusiastic in its support than the Halifax *Presbyterian Witness*, whose readership ironically contained many of the most adamant anticonfederates.²¹

The implications of Confederation for the future of the churches were noted early by the religious press. "There never was a time when it [Presbyterian union] could be more appropriately brought forward than at present," wrote one correspondent of the *Presbyterian*²² "With the coalescing of our divided provinces it is not unnatural to connect the coalescing of our divided churches." In 1874, just before the union of Canadian Presbyterianism, that fervent nationalist, George Munro Grant, prophesied to the Montreal branch of the Evangelical Alliance a coming union of all Canadian Christians. Such a "Church of Canada" might even include Roman Catholics, said Grant. "Why not? God can do greater things even than this. And who of us shall say, God forbid!"²³ A first step, however, would be Presbyterian union, and Confederation was an important stimulus in bringing it about. A united Canada needed, even demanded, one Presbyterian church from sea to sea.

The Presbyterian union of 1860 in the Maritimes and its parallel union of 1861 in the united province of Canada provided a prelude and a precedent for a union of all Presbyterians in the British North American colonies. The refusal of the two regional branches of the Church of Scotland to enter these unions had led the *Presbyterian Witness* to remark, "It is contrary to the genius of Presbyterianism to be hanging on to the skirts of transatlantic churches."²⁴ This urge toward a "national" Presbyterian church was reinforced by the Confederation movement. Political union in itself created additional practical reasons for renewed efforts for total Presbyterian union. On the very eve of Confederation the *Presbyterian Witness* noted the coming challenge. "Never was there a finer field than the New Dominion for the Pulpit and the Press and the Schoolmaster."²⁵ The spirit of union was in the very air of Canada and the vision of church extension into the Canadian West and to foreign fields demanded that practical responses replace pious expressions of Presbyterian brotherhood.

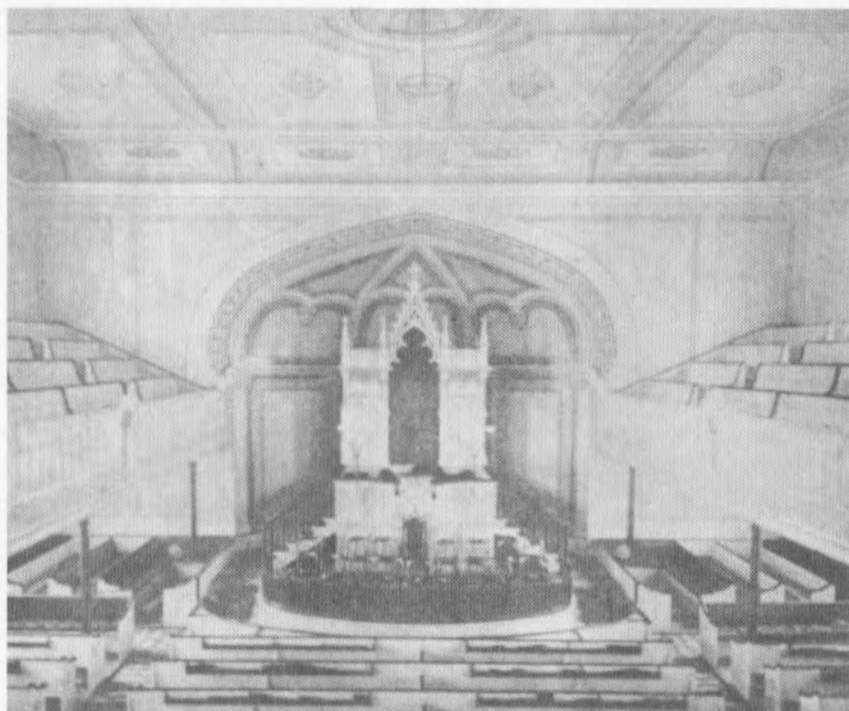
Both the traditions and conditions of the Free Church-Secession bodies (the Canada Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church of the Lower Provinces) predetermined their leadership in the renewed union movement. Both churches were larger, more dynamic and more "Canadian" in their outlook than the Kirk branches in Canada or in the Maritimes. On social questions such as temperance and Sabbath observance, the Free Church-Secessionists were united and vocal, where the more latitudinarian Kirk was often silent. The Free Church-Secession unions exemplified in themselves a growing awareness of their "Canadianism" — they were financially independent of their parent bodies in Scotland, devoted to the principle of

voluntarism, aggressively expansionist in both home and foreign missions work. By contrast the Kirk was closely tied, psychologically and physically, to Scotland. It gloried in its Scottishness; it favoured the privileged position of an established church. In central Canada one-third of its income was derived from the Clergy Reserves, and two-thirds of its ministers in the Maritimes depended on aid from Scotland. Generally its members supported the Conservative party in politics, whereas the Free Church-Secession groups usually could be counted as Liberals. The Kirk somehow represented social prestige and superior respectability, and this was an image that it deliberately fostered.

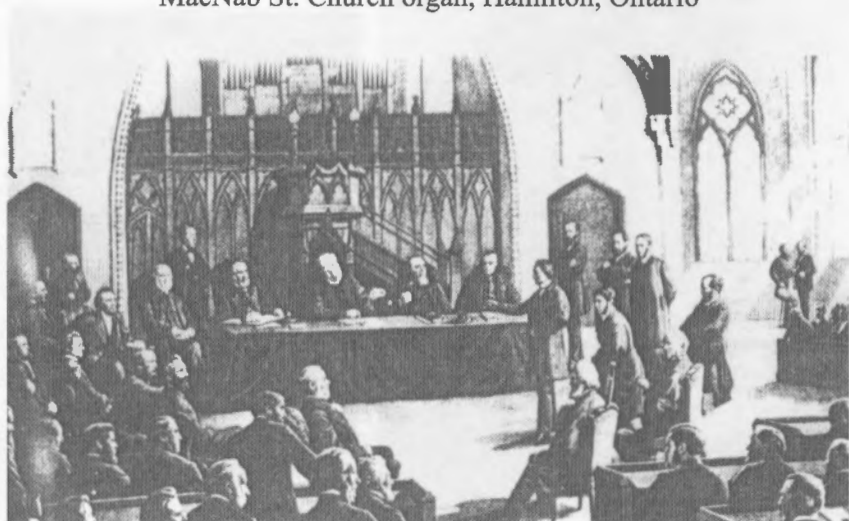
The Kirk was predominantly an urban church, yet in the Maritimes and in central Canada the Kirk was recording few gains at a time when its rivals were expanding rapidly. In 1868 the Kirk had only thirty-one charges in the Maritimes — seven years later that number had not changed. Similarly in central Canada the Kirk had more vacant pulpits in 1872 than in 1868. In a word the Kirk was slowly dying in Canada — it had no Canadian roots; it was losing more ministers than it recruited; it was not adding to the number of its adherents at anything near the rate of expansion of the Free Church. Understandably there was considerable pro-union sentiment among the laity of the Kirk, and by the 1870s anti-union feeling was largely restricted to a small “old guard” of Kirk ministers in Ontario and Montreal.

The initiative for further Presbyterian union began in 1865 among a self-appointed committee of Free Church laymen centred in Montreal. This action was led by prominent local business and civic figures, such as John Redpath, most of whom had been active in establishing the Presbyterian College in that city as an alternative Free Church seminary to Knox which had fallen into temporary academic disrepute. In 1866 their committee addressed an open letter to all sessions of the Kirk and the Canada Presbyterian Church in Ontario and Quebec, declaring that the issues of 1844 were no longer relevant to the Canadian situation, and urging each session to express itself clearly on the urgent question of Presbyterian union. Two-thirds of the sessions replied, and were almost unanimously favourable to the project. Suddenly the lay movement collapsed because of the threat of a Fenian invasion from the United States. Canadian unionist laymen were so busy with militia activities to counter Fenianism that they were unrepresented at synod that year.

This unexpected interruption delayed but did not destroy the union movement. During its next three annual sessions the Kirk Synod discussed union and the secular press maintained popular interest in the idea by giving extensive space to letters and speeches by the lay proponents of Presbyterian union. The *Globe*, for instance, commented in 1870 that in less than a decade



MacNab St. Church organ, Hamilton, Ontario



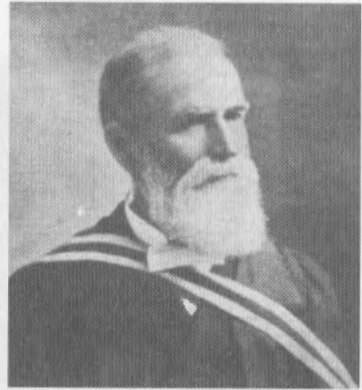
Negotiations, Union of 1870



John Cook



Morrin College



Donald Harvey MacVicar

union had made Free Churchmen and Secessionists indistinguishable, and a further union with the Kirk would quickly produce a similar melding.²⁶ By this date the Fenian scare had disappeared and Manitoba had entered Confederation, adding a new sense of urgency to union discussions. Opposition to the union project seemed slight and pro-unionists stressed not merely the divine sanction of their cause but its naturalness and necessity. Differences of doctrine and practice existed, admittedly, but attention was focused primarily on the practical aspects. The passing of time had softened old animosities and participation in interdenominational activities had prepared the way for union by broadening the outlook of all Canadian Presbyterians.

One indication of this new climate of opinion was the essay on union written by Robert Campbell, minister of St. Gabriel Street, which won the \$200 prize offered by a Montreal layman for the best pamphlet supporting union. Campbell reviewed the standard arguments regarding the advantages of union, but then he proceeded to open a new and decisive chapter in the history of the movement by stating that a bigger church would offer more challenges and opportunities to attract better men to the ministry. This was an appeal that fell on receptive ears in the Maritimes where a shortage of clergy had already developed since the union of 1860. Early union discussions had centred, though not exclusively, on the idea of a regional union for central Canada. Henceforth the idea of a dominion-wide union was taken for granted and the two Maritime branches of Presbyterianism entered wholeheartedly into the general union movement. For all groups, however, the watchword of union was "forbearance," which meant at best a willingness to bury former disputes in a charitable search for reconciliation, or at worst a silent toleration of others' viewpoints as long as those viewpoints had no direct practical application.

The Union of '75

The first official steps towards union followed on the suggestion in 1870 of Dr. William Ormiston, the retiring moderator of the Canada Presbyterian Church, for a conference of all four Presbyterian bodies.²⁷ Within the Canadian Kirk the opponents of the union were now divided and leaderless since the death of Dr. Alexander Mathieson one year earlier. Members of the union committee appointed by the Kirk in response to the invitation included Dr. Cook of Quebec, Principal Snodgrass of Queen's College, Alexander Morris, federal cabinet minister, and James Croil, editor of the *Presbyterian* and a

prominent Kirk official. The delegates named by the Canada Presbyterian Church included former moderator Dr. Alexander Topp, William Taylor of Erskine Church, Montreal, and one member of the Ontario Legislative Assembly. Both churches in the Maritimes appointed similarly prominent ministers and laymen, but it was Topp, Cook and Morris who arranged the time and place for the meeting of the twenty-four delegates.

The Joint Union Committees gathered at Montreal in September, 1870. All ministerial and all but two lay members were present. The laymen, particularly Alexander Morris, were much in evidence at this and later conferences, even chairing some of the sessions in recognition of the important role that the laity had played in initiating the union movement.²⁸ Problems of doctrine did not pose any serious barriers in the union discussion — less than two hours were required to reach agreement on the Bible as supreme standard of faith and the Westminster Standards as authoritative exposition of that faith. An equally short time was spent discussing the Temporalities' Fund, the Kirk's inheritance from the stormy Clergy Reserves controversy. Since state support from this source was now limited to the Kirk in Ontario, and since nearly twenty per cent of the Temporalities' Fund had just been lost in a bank failure, so small an endowment remained that those Presbyterians of the voluntarist tradition simply avoided any official reference to that old bone of contention.

The main issues which occupied the remainder of the three days concerned the future of the literary and theological colleges of the four churches. Here a wide divergence of attitude became obvious at the earliest stage of the negotiations. Kirk tradition favoured denominational education at all levels, and certainly at the college level, but the Free Church-Secessionists held firmly that the church should enter education only where the state failed to, and that essentially meant theological training. The Maritimes branch of the Kirk had no institution of higher education so that there was no conflict of interests with the Halifax Theological Hall, but in Quebec and Ontario the situation was critical. The Kirk's small Morrin College at Quebec, now just a decade old, had an immediate rival in The Presbyterian College, Montreal. Both were in competition with Knox College and the theological department of Queen's, which were currently facing financial and other problems. Could a united church justify maintaining four such rivals within five hundred miles of each other?

Equally important, should Morrin and Queen's colleges be abandoned as literary institutions to follow the Free Church and United Presbyterian practice already established at Halifax, Montreal and Toronto of leaving all arts and science teaching in the hands of the state? Manitoba College, the Canada

Presbyterian Church's new institution at Winnipeg, posed no such problems at the moment, since there was no secular university in that province. Whether Morrin and Queen's literary departments were maintained or scrapped, whether the theological colleges were amalgamated or retained separately, the vested interests and educational traditions of some Presbyterians were bound to suffer. The 1870 union meeting compromised for the moment by leaving a final decision of the "college question" to the future united church.

On two other potentially sensitive topics the delegates similarly sidestepped controversy. The centuries-old divisive argument over the headship of Christ was dismissed with a compromise statement about "full liberty of opinion," and the equally contentious matter of modes of worship — involving the disputed use of organs, hymns, and such "high church" ritualism as kneeling during prayers — was avoided with the formula, "the practice presently followed by Congregations in the matter of worship, should be allowed, and further action in connection therewith be left to the legislation of the United Church."²⁹ The doctrinal basis of union and its supporting explanatory resolutions had apparently been agreed upon in a few days in 1870, and the committee members understandably congratulated themselves on their success. "Entire unanimity was not to be looked for," James Croil wrote in the *Presbyterian*, "the wonder is that the divergence was so comparatively slight."³⁰ After this auspicious meeting, union, in Dr. Topp's opinion, was only a matter of months away. Such pious hopes were premature. When all four churches discussed the union proposals separately during the summer of 1871, the degree of divergence and of opposition began to emerge. Within the Canada Presbyterian Church the Rev. John Ross of Brucefield rallied the anti-unionist minority with charges that the clause on church worship was too vague, and the "Headship" of Christ insufficiently protected. The commissioners met this opposition by adding six more prominent figures to the union committee, including D. H. MacVicar, Principal of The Presbyterian College, and William Caven, next principal of Knox. The Canadian Kirk Synod voiced its approval of union if Queen's were maintained inviolate, and then named its six additional committee members. In the two Maritime churches some minor reservations were expressed about the terms of union, but in the end both bodies rather passively followed the lead of the two central Canadian churches.

The enlarged union committees met again in Montreal in September, 1871, to revise the basis of union, and the only substantial change required the elimination of theology from Morrin and Queen's colleges. Principal Snodgrass, who had bitterly but vainly opposed this resolution subsequently refused to call the Kirk Synod for discussion because he felt that the Canada

Presbyterian Church which had forced this change must now offer a solution. Although the latter's General Assembly proposed after long debate that the colleges should enter union as they were, some Kirkmen now believed that the Canada Presbyterian Church would only accept a union in which it could obliterate the Kirk.

The revised basis was approved by fourteen of the fifteen presbyteries of the Canada Presbyterian Church. But the opinion of the rank and file of the Canadian Kirk was not tested and the two Maritime churches waited throughout 1872 for their opposite numbers in central Canada to find an agreed basis. To date both the difficulties and delays had all originated in Quebec and Ontario, and it was with considerable reluctance that the union committees from those provinces agreed to meet in the Maritime provinces in the spring of 1873. Perhaps the more tolerant climate of Saint John, New Brunswick, was responsible for the final agreement on a single basis of union to be placed before each of the four churches that summer. This delay of two years had, however, inspired anti-unionists in Ontario and Quebec with hope and a sense of purpose. Although thirty persons at most attended an anti-union rally at Toronto, it was now clear that the opposition had crystallized and schism seemed unavoidable. The ultimate Presbyterian union seemed unlikely to reflect the degree of unanimity found in the unions of 1860 and 1861.

Opposition to union was focused largely on that age-old Presbyterian bugbear, church-state relations. Union committee members might have thought that their forbearance on the issue of the headship of Christ would be imitated by others, but such was not the case. There was little point in repeating that the headship of Christ was largely theoretical in the Canadian context of separation of church and state. That had been true in the 1850s when the union of the Free Church and United Presbyterians had been stalled on that self-same issue. The practical considerations had not mattered then or now — what was at stake was a principle which, in the eyes of the anti-unionist minority, could not be compromised without betraying the witness of Presbyterianism through the ages and through all dangers and adversities. It was the United Presbyterians who in 1861 had insisted on adding to that Basis of Union, “unanimity of sentiment is not required” on the question of Christ's headship. In 1861 only the Rev. Lachlan McPherson had refused on principle to unite. By 1874, however, this issue became the main rallying point for anti-unionists, all of them from the former Canadian Free Church.

The Rev. John Ross of Brucefield, Ontario, had led the opposition in 1871 and he was not without support. John Bayne agreed with Ross, and Professor D. H. MacVicar gave qualified approval to a demand that Christ's headship

be spelled out in the Basis.³¹ When Ross's opinions were put to the Assembly as a motion that year, the motion was defeated by a two to one majority. There were, of course, several other complaints against the union, but none were debated and this preoccupation with the one topic brought charges that Ross and his Free Church friends were insincere and were simply using the Headship question to block union at any price. The General Assembly of 1872 heard more arguments on the issue before deciding by almost three to two to make no alteration in the Basis. In 1873 the Assembly voted almost four to one to support its previous stand. At last, in 1874, the union committee found a compromise statement that acknowledged the church to be "independent of all other churches in its jurisdiction, and under authority to Christ alone, the Head of the Church, and Head over all things to the Church." This satisfied all anti-unionists, except John Ross, and James Middlemiss from Elora.

Despite the efforts of these few anti-unionists, the Basis was accepted in 1873 by the ruling courts of the four churches and referred to their presbyteries amidst a wave of enthusiasm for union. In the Canada Presbyterian Church, where anti-unionism was strongest, only three of eighteen presbyteries rejected the Basis, but 92 of its 263 sessions disapproved. There was a close geographic correlation of opposition at the congregational and presbytery levels. Only one of eleven Canadian Kirk presbyteries and only fifteen of 107 sessions of the Kirk voted against union. A joint meeting of the Kirk Synod and the General Assembly in 1874 produced several further changes in the Basis, all aimed at disarming opposition and all initiated by the Canada Presbyterian Church. This revision of the Basis was then sent down to presbyteries, sessions and congregations for further consideration, and to the Presbyterian Church of the Lower Provinces which agreed unanimously to these latest amendments by their western brethren. In the fourth church, the Kirk Synod of the Maritimes, agreement was not to be had so easily. Anti-union pronouncements from Quebec and Ontario had strengthened the opposition to union among Highlanders of Pictou Presbytery and among the revivalistic "Macdonaldites" of Prince Edward Island, a small group of followers of Donald Macdonald, an evangelist who had died in 1867. The causes of these Maritime divisions were as much or more political as religious, and no amount of discussion could now sway the determination of this minority to remain independent.

At least the final revisions to the Basis had reduced the anti-unionist strength in the Canada Presbyterian Church — only one congregation, at Zorra, Ontario, still disapproved where 86 had disapproved in the vote taken a half-year earlier. Three of the Canadian Kirk sessions who had been in opposition

previously now joined the unionist majority. After four years of discussion at every level of public, private and church life it was plain that an end had been reached. No amount of concessions, compromises, forbearance or verbal gymnastics would ever reconcile the minority. One final and futile attempt of the anti-unionists to block the great achievement by legislative action in the courts of Ontario and the parliament of Quebec came to naught. The time for formal union was set — 15 June, 1875; the place — Montreal's Victoria Hall Skating Rink.

At the appointed hour the solemn union ceremony began. A choir of one hundred led the six thousand spectators in singing Psalm 100; prayers and the reading of the relevant church minutes followed. The Basis of Union was officially announced and the union declared to be consummated. A new church, the Presbyterian Church in Canada, six hundred thousand members and six hundred ministers strong, had come into existence. "The vast audience joined hands in singing the 133rd psalm with enthusiasm and feeling, probably never equalled in any preceding religious assembly in Canada."³² The end of the long road to Presbyterian union had been reached and that end was now a beginning of greater things. Dr. John Cook, unanimous choice as first moderator of the new church, rose to address the assembled multitude. In words reminiscent of G. M. Grant's Montreal speech of 1874, Dr. Cook said, "I look for a union in the future before which the present [union] shall appear slight and insignificant."³³

Retrospect and Pros©pect

The great service of union was followed by a long evening filled with speeches that revealed much of the past of Presbyterianism, and some of its future. The Disruption of 1844 was referred to as a lesson in disunity; the union of 1875 was hailed as the birth of a strong, vigorous and Canadian church to which future generations could rally in witness of their faith.³⁴ Dr. William Ormiston, father of this union, declared his belief that the churches would have grown together inevitably, but their present action would be an example to Presbyterians in other lands. The long programme continued, and the audience grew restless as speaker after speaker from Quebec and Ontario repeated the same themes. Maritime Presbyterians, whose patience throughout the long negotiations had been so noteworthy, seemed forgotten. At last, late in the evening G. M. Grant rose, set aside his notes and with one ringing sentence on the love of God and Christians, evoked a tremendous outburst of applause. As Grant returned to his seat another Maritimer



Skating Rink, Union 1875

Montreal's Victoria Hall Skating Rink

The enlarged Union Committees met to work out a merger of all Presbyterian churches. The Free Church members were more in favour than the Kirkmen. Church-state relations were a barrier. In 1873 a Basis was agreed upon. The time for Union was at hand. On June 15, 1875, in Victoria Hall, Montreal, a choir led 6,000 spectators in singing Psalm 100. Thus was born the Presbyterian Church in Canada, with 600,000 members and 600 ministers. Dr. John Cook was the unanimous choice for moderator.



General Assembly Commissioners, 1875



John Ross, 1821-1887

John Ross was one of the few who chose not to join, calling the Union "a slippery thing."

remarked pointedly that the new church had found a leader. Grant was indeed destined soon to become the principal of Queen's and after that the acknowledged giant among giants of Canadian Presbyterianism.

The General Assembly of the new church received congratulations from Canadian Methodists and Anglicans. The Church of Scotland wished "God-speed to brethren who propose to accept union," and the Presbyterian Church of Ireland invoked God's blessing on the union.³⁵ At the same time the secular press of Canada expressed general approval of this great undertaking. Meanwhile the anti-unionists fought on gamely if vainly. Ten ministers of the Canadian Kirk formed their own synod which excommunicated the unionists and started several protracted but futile court cases to obtain the whole property of the old Kirk Synod. Amidst this general rejoicing the voice of the anti-unionists was scarcely audible. John Ross still insisted that the union was inspired by Satan and, alluding to the great gathering in the Victoria Skating Rink, charged that union was "a slippery thing"; "the Church is now sliding away from the high standing that it formerly took" on the Headship of Christ. Douglas Brymner, recently appointed Dominion archivist, published a pamphlet accusing the Presbyterian Church in Canada of tearing "the Crown from the Saviour's brow."³⁶

The Canada Presbyterian Church dissidents, Ross and his mentor McPherson, formed their own presbytery to "guard the dykes" and reaffirm their enduring witness to Christ's "unadulterated" Headship over the nations. The last stronghold of nonconcurrency was in the Maritimes, where as late as 1880 some fifteen congregations made up a synod in connection with the reluctant and embarrassed Church of Scotland. Only the passing of an older generation would eventually eliminate these last hold-outs from union. The basis of their separation lay in a combination of traditional Highland pride, conservative political leanings and Scottish theological controversies. In all, less than five per cent of the ministers of the four uniting churches had chosen to remain out of union, and in virtually every case these men were supported by their congregations. Their action, however, and the long legal wrangles that followed were still a fresh memory in Presbyterian minds when interdenominational union was suggested just a quarter-century later.

The new Presbyterian Church in Canada contained obvious but minor divergences of opinion regarding modes of worship, church-state relations, and political inclinations, but such differences were unimportant compared to the particular traditions common to most Canadian Presbyterians. First and foremost Canadian Presbyterianism had no connections, physical or emotional, with English and Welsh Presbyterianism and, except for the small Presbytery of Stamford, it had virtually no close contacts with Presbyterianism

in the United States. Instead, the uniting churches shared in a single Scottish and Scotch-Irish tradition. The Kirk element contained some “high” churchmen for whom ritualism and ecclesiastical legalism held a strong appeal, but the major influence had come through the strong Free Church-Secessionist traditions of evangelicalism, voluntarism and Canadianism. The Maritime and Canadian unions of 1860 and 1861 had fused two dynamic groups possessing a zealous interest in missions and in moral reform. It was this component which had dominated the negotiations leading to union in 1875 and would continue to dominate and shape the character of post-union Presbyterianism in Canada.

Strength through unity was certainly the theme of union in 1875, and Canadian Presbyterians had shown the way not merely to divided Presbyterians in other countries but to other Protestant denominations in Canada. The new Canadian church possessed a cohesive tradition and organization that could well be envied by others, yet there was a dangerous weakness in this very unity. Proudfoot’s criticism of 1846 about excessive Scottishness was still too true in 1875. The Presbyterian union of that year was undoubtedly a victory for Canadianism as opposed to close transatlantic dependence, but the new church was still marked by a national consciousness — Scottish Canadianism — that limited its appeal for other ethnic groups. Could the new church overcome its Scottishness sufficiently to make itself attractive to other Canadians for whom such names as Knox, Melville and Chalmers had little historical relevance? The Presbyterian Church in Canada certainly included members from Dutch and French “Reformed” backgrounds, but they were numerically so few that their influence in the large national body was unnoticeable. Whatever distinctive characteristics these minorities might have were drowned in the uniformity that grew from union. By a Darwinian law of survival by selection, the new church rapidly assumed the attitudes and interests of its most dynamic and majority element — the Free Church of Canada. The crusades against intemperance, sabbath profanation, public and private immorality, Roman Catholic power, and all semblances of church-state connection — crusades that men like Robert Burns, Michael Willis and George Brown had led in the 1850s and 1860s — were simply transferred after 1875 to the new Presbyterian Church in Canada. For better or worse the new church represented the aggressive Presbyterianism of urbanized, industrialized, expansionist central Canada.

The union of 1875 made the Presbyterian Church the largest Protestant denomination in Canada. It contained over one thousand congregations. Its six hundred thousand supporters and 634 ministers were slightly fewer than the total of those of all the Methodist bodies then existing in the country, but

until the Methodists achieved a similar union in 1884, Presbyterianism ranked second only to Roman Catholicism in numbers. Just as Canada completed its territorial expansion soon after the Confederation of the eastern colonies, so the Presbyterian church rounded out its jurisdiction to coincide with the dominion by including British Columbia after the union of 1875. The tiny colony of Victoria had less than one thousand inhabitants until the discovery of gold on the Fraser River in 1858 attracted some twenty-five thousand prospectors, mostly Americans. The first Presbyterian missionary came from the Irish church to Victoria in 1861, followed the next year by the Rev. Robert Jamieson of the Canada Presbyterian Church. A Church of Scotland missionary, the first of several, arrived in 1866, but except for occasional visits from these men the gold seekers in the Fraser Valley were ignored by the Presbyterian churches.³⁷

The gold rush was actually ending when the Church of Scotland formed a presbytery of British Columbia in 1875. Jamieson joined this presbytery, but in the next decade neither the colony nor Presbyterianism made much progress. It required the completion of the transcontinental Canadian Pacific Railway to place eastern Canada in immediate contact with the dominion's most westerly province. Although appreciative of past support from their mother church, the Kirk congregations in British Columbia were painfully aware that calling ministers from distant Scotland too often caused long vacancies and "an unhappy settlement."³⁸ Jamieson and his congregation had already transferred their allegiance to the Canadian church in 1884, and between 1886 and 1889 the remaining Church of Scotland elements in the province followed suit. Thus, by 1892, just six years after the completion of the C.P.R., British Columbia's population had jumped to almost one hundred thousand, of whom fifteen thousand were Presbyterians, and the eight-minister Canadian presbytery of Columbia had grown to three presbyteries and one synod, with twenty-eight ordained ministers.³⁹ Union from sea to sea had indeed made Presbyterianism nation-wide, and the imperative sense of mission which had contributed to that union was finding new scope on Canada's last frontier in the west, as well as in regions far beyond the seas that encompassed Canada.