

**THE FRENCH CANADIAN MISSIONARY SOCIETY:  
A STUDY IN EVANGELISTIC ZEAL AND CIVIC AMBITION<sup>1</sup>**

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The French Canadian Missionary Society (FCMS) represents one of the most extensive Protestant efforts ever made to evangelize the French-speaking inhabitants of North America. It was an interdenominational organization founded in 1839 by leading evangelical clergy and laypersons of Montreal. For the next forty-two years, until 1881, the Society pursued its objective of evangelizing the Roman Catholics of French Canada through a three-fold strategy of colportage, evangelistic preaching, and education. At the peak of its work, the Society boasted numerous churches, preaching stations, schools and workers.

It has been suggested that the FCMS was essentially a religious manifestation of a more widespread Anglophone determination to solve the problems of Lower Canada by assimilating French Canadians into the “superior” culture of the British.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, our thesis is that evangelical belief, maintained with benevolent conviction, was the primary motivation of the FCMS. At the same time, at least one other strand of motivation cannot be denied. The FCMS was also moved by civil aspirations. Its leaders were members of the Anglo-Saxon commercial class of Lower Canada, and their evangelistic zeal, though genuine, was far from disinterested. The Gospel, they believed, would surely transform Lower Canada, and the ensuing progress,

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<sup>1</sup> This article was published in *Fides et Historia: Journal of the Conference of Faith and History* 36, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2004): 67-81.

<sup>2</sup> Bernice Andrews, “The Rise and Fall of the French Canadian Missionary Society, 1839-1880: A Study in Conflicting Aspirations” (Unpublished paper, University of Toronto, 1977).

prosperity and peace would be blessings in which the FCMS leaders themselves would share.

This study will be limited to the early years (1839-50) of the Society's operation, during which virtually all the themes which motivated FCMS leaders during the remaining years of the Society's existence crystallized and emerged clearly.<sup>3</sup>

## EVANGELICAL AWAKENING AND MISSIONARY INITIATIVE

Without fanfare, four Swiss adults disembarked in New York City in 1834. Acting in response to a strong compulsion, they had left their homes in the mountains of French-speaking Switzerland and crossed the Atlantic en route to native Indian settlements in western Upper Canada. These four were an expression of a powerful international movement now known as the Second Evangelical Awakening—a movement first of religious vitalization and then of outreach. In 1834 the missionary enterprise was in its infancy: fervency often outpaced wisdom, and strategies were experimental. Such awakened evangelicals as these were convinced that all rationalistic Protestants, all Roman Catholics, and of course all non-Christians were in need of evangelization, and they chafed for wider opportunities to spread the faith. The crowds that filled the Edinburgh Tabernacle, the Methodist circuit-rider in the wintry forests of Upper Canada, and the British missionary translating foreign tongues in the steamy swamps of Serampore were all part of it.

*Le Réveil* was the manifestation in French-speaking Europe of this international

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<sup>3</sup>See Glen G. Scorgie, "The Early Years of the French Canadian Missionary Society, 1839-1850" (MCS thesis, Regent College, 1982), written under the supervision of Dr. Ian S. Rennie.

awakening.<sup>4</sup> These were the roots of the four Swiss evangelists from Lausanne, the Rev. and Mme Henri Olivier and their two single male companions. By traveling up the Hudson River valley, within days the missionaries approached the fertile valley of the St. Lawrence River, where the first French settlers had established permanent residence well over two centuries before. Until 1759, the citadel of Quebec had guarded the entrance of the valley from foreign intrusion. Sheltered upstream behind Quebec lay a small, unique French society thinly strung out along the shores of the great waterway and with its back up hard against virgin forests. Geographically insulated from most European influences, it had perpetuated its own conservative folkways and religious aspirations. It is hard to think of any society where Roman Catholicism was more entwined with national identity than in French Canada.

The British had not been quick to populate the Old Province of Quebec following their conquest of it in 1759 and its formal secession by the Treaty of Paris (1763). Although few came initially, those who did acquired before long the lion's share of the colony's commercial enterprise. The first substantial influx of English-speakers came during and after the American War of Independence, as American loyalists expressed their allegiance to the monarchy and institutions of Britain by moving north to live under British rule. The Loyalists soon became a majority on the sparsely-populated western frontier of the Old Province, which prompted the division of the Province into two parts in 1791—Upper and Lower Canada—along lines that correspond to the present-day Canadian provinces of Quebec and Ontario. Only a minority of the Loyalists put down roots in Lower Canada (modern Quebec). Consequently the British

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<sup>4</sup>See John B. Roney, "Romantic Historiography and the European Réveil, 1815-1850," *Fides et Historia* 30, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 1998): 3-14.

population of Lower Canada remained modest, and mainly confined to the urban centers along the St. Lawrence–Quebec City, Trois-Rivières and Montreal. Though small in comparison to the rapidly-increasing population of Upper Canada, the English-speaking commercial class of Lower Canada prospered at the helm of a growing Canadian economy no longer based on furs, but on grain, lumber, and the importation of British manufactured goods. British immigration increased significantly, however, following the Napoleonic Wars. New roads, railways, larger ships and an ambitious canal system were all part of the vision of a commercial class vigorously competing with American interests for the wealth potential of the frontier.

A short time after the Swiss contingent's arrival in Montreal, Mme Oliver made the following observations in a letter to Henrietta Odin Feller, a close friend in Switzerland:

I should tell you about Montreal . . . . Within the last dozen years the English have acquired great influence in this city. Many congregations have been formed, and many chapels built. We have been greatly encouraged and strengthened by the good spirit which appears to prevail among Christians . . . . All the congregations take deep interest in the work of evangelization among the French.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, English-speaking Protestantism had made significant gains in Montreal in recent years, and this was not due entirely or even mainly to increased immigration. The vigor and expansion of Protestantism in the Canadas from 1815 onwards was in large part a result of the coincident increase in evangelical fervor within the various communions comprising British Protestantism and its colonial extensions.

Montreal's Protestant ministerial immediately urged the Swiss missionaries to settle in their city. Impressed by the possibilities, the Oliviers agreed and soon began evangelistic services in a small building provided by the Wesleyans. At this early juncture Olivier took a step

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<sup>5</sup>John Mockett Cramp, *A Memoir of Madame Feller* (London: Evangelical Society of the Grande Ligne, n. d.), 63.

which undoubtedly dampened the enthusiasm of most of his local supporters: he requested and obtained baptism by immersion from the local Baptist minister.<sup>6</sup> This action left eight of the nine Protestant congregations in the city wary of him, if not yet unsupportive.

Olivier's health rapidly deteriorated, and he and his wife were forced to return to Lausanne in the Spring of 1836.<sup>7</sup> They did not leave, however, before luring to Montreal two other Swiss evangelicals who were to have notable careers in French Canadian evangelization: Mme Henrietta Feller and itinerant preacher Louis Roussy. Feller, born in 1800 near Lausanne, was a young widow from a privileged background, and endowed with exceptional personal abilities and charisma. No one has yet had more influence on the course of French Canadian Protestantism.<sup>8</sup> She and Roussy soon found themselves, unwittingly, in the midst of one of the most troubled periods in Lower Canada's history. The social unrest building in French Canada would eventually erupt in armed rebellion, causing further political upheaval. Yet this very unrest fostered an unprecedented receptivity on the part of French Canadians to the evangelicals and their message.

From 1815 onwards, French Canadian leaders became increasingly alarmed by the new threat to their cultural survival as large numbers of British immigrants arrived each year, swelling the English-speaking population and altering the demographic profile of the province. In addition, the aggressive English commercial class was not content simply to maintain control

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 67.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Randall Balmer & Catharine Balmer, "'Her Duty to Canada' Henriette Feller and French Protestantism in Quebec," *Church History* 70, no. 1 (March 2001): 49-72.

of the provincial economy. The English were acquiring vast tracts of new land and gobbling up *seigneuries* (ancient French Canadian land holdings) while pressing relentlessly for radical change in the institutions and ways of life of French Canada.

Lower Canada had an elected assembly which the French majority controlled. But this body had little real clout; most power remained in the hands of the Governor, who surrounded himself with appointed councils. Discontented French Canadians, already excluded from much of the commerce of the province, were further frustrated by their political impotence. A wheat crop failure in 1836, and a major financial collapse the following year, pushed matters over the edge. *Les Patriotes*, led by Louis-Joseph Papineau, started the armed Rebellion of 1837. Street fighting in Montreal was followed by armed uprisings in outlying communities. These were quickly suppressed, but Lower Canada remained in disarray. The legislative assembly was dismissed and the constitution suspended. Some *Patriote* leaders were imprisoned while others fled to the United States.

The recurring feelings of dissatisfaction with the established order which give birth to sects normally surface in times of social change, instability and disorientation.<sup>9</sup> Precisely such a lapse in social control occurred in the late 1830s as the Roman Catholic Church temporarily lost its grip on the *habitant* population, due to a cleavage between the Catholic clergy and *Les Patriotes*. Traditionally, the Church had judiciously upheld the cause of French Canadian nationalism. But as Papineau came to espouse radical views the conservative Church drew back; when he began making anti-clerical statements and proposed the abolition of mandatory tithes, the rift widened. In the summer of 1837 the Bishop advised his priests to refuse absolution to

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<sup>9</sup>S. D. Clark, *Church and Sect in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1948), 363.

“seditionists.” In October of that year, twelve hundred *Patriotes* demonstrated in front of the cathedral, prompting a *mandement* from the Bishop demanding civil obedience. By then, public outrage against the Bishop was so strong that he prepared to flee if necessary to Quebec City, admitting that “the people are very excited against me.”<sup>10</sup>

At Grande Ligne, south of Montreal, the Swiss Baptist missionaries and their small group of French Canadian converts were vandalized during the anarchic conditions which prevailed in the Richelieu Valley. In November, Feller, Roussy, and their followers were forced to evacuate to Champlain, New York. When they returned they were greeted with a new openness and tolerance, and this was sustained when rebellion again broke out in 1838.<sup>11</sup> The tumultuous situation in Lower Canada surrounding the rebellions afforded an opportunity for sectarian intrusion. The most outstanding result of evangelical efforts was the formation of a French Canadian Protestant church at Grande Ligne. Montreal evangelicals were only marginally involved at the outset, but soon came to recognize Grande Ligne as encouraging proof that French Canadian evangelization could be pursued successfully. The burgeoning English Protestant community of Montreal was now inclined toward, and in a position to carry out, a venture of its own. The disturbing rebellions, and general conditions in Lower Canada, added urgency to the task.

## THE VENTURE IS LAUNCHED

A Bible society colporteur visiting the Montreal jail was elated to discover that

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<sup>10</sup>John Moir, *The Church in the British Era* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), 103-104.

<sup>11</sup>Cramp, *Feller*, 110-18.

incarcerated *Patriote* leaders—many of them articulate and educated—were showing an unprecedented openness to evangelical visitors. The Roman Catholic Church’s original stand against armed insurrection had embittered many zealots, whose alienation became complete as the Church excommunicated the rebels. Moreover, *Les Patriotes* and their cause enjoyed wide support in the countryside, so that the Church’s severe opposition to them had eroded its own popularity more generally. Distraught French Canadians in a number of communities were providing welcome receptions to Bible society colporteurs.

James Thomson, agent for the Montreal auxiliary of the British and Foreign Bible Society, was eager to capitalize on this opportunity. In February of 1839 he gathered an interdenominational group of eleven like-minded Protestants to consider their options. The outcome of this and subsequent meetings was the formation of the French Canadian Missionary Society (FCMS) on 8 April 1839. In the words of its constitution, the Society’s “exclusive object” was “to provide means for preaching and otherwise disseminating the Gospel of Christ among the inhabitants of Canada using the French language.”<sup>12</sup> All FCMS members subscribed to a brief and broadly evangelical doctrinal statement. It was impossible to hold to the tenets of this statement with conviction and not sense the urgency of communicating the Good News and pressing for experiential commitment to the Savior. Nothing less than the eternal destiny of French Canadians was at stake. The FCMS always maintained that its prime motive was a “sincere love” for the souls of French Canadians.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>FCMS, “Constitution,” Article 1. All FCMS primary sources cited in this article are in the United Church Archives, Toronto.

<sup>13</sup>FCMS, “Third Annual Report” (1842), 2.



One of the fundamental assumptions of the FCMS was that a true religion contributes to the temporal as well as the eternal interests of its adherents.<sup>14</sup> Genuine religion fosters happiness in both time and eternity: it “secures to its possessors both worlds.”<sup>15</sup> The Society asked rhetorically: “Do you wish the French Canadians to make advances in the things which belong to their happiness in both worlds? . . . You must give them a system founded on the Bible . . . .”<sup>16</sup> The FCMS was confident that the Gospel, genuinely understood and appropriated, would not only assure French Canadians of eternal life, but of a blessed temporal existence as well. The Society then went on to describe this “blessed temporal existence” in a manner that reflected its own cultural values. Such a blessed existence, it said, would involve progress, prosperity, morality, benevolence and democratic liberty. It went without saying that the religion of Jesus always discouraged sloth, encouraged usefulness, and ensured that His followers kept pace with the age.<sup>17</sup>

Since true religion would improve the temporal conditions of its adherents, the triumph of evangelical faith, it was assumed, would improve the prosperity and general quality of life of the entire province.<sup>18</sup> The Canadian supporters of the FCMS naturally stood to benefit from such an eventuality. But British supporters also stood to gain, as the FCMS was quick to point out. It reminded its British support base that a large French Canadian population, once invigorated by

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<sup>14</sup>FCMS, “Fourth Annual Report” (1843), 3.

<sup>15</sup>FCMS, “Tenth Annual Report” (1849), in the FCMS’s *Missionary Record* 8 (February 1849): 9.

<sup>16</sup>FCMS, “First and Second Annual Reports” (1841), 9.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 2; see also FCMS, “Tenth Annual Report” (1849), 9.

Protestant truths and character traits, could be expected to generate a good deal of prosperous trans-Atlantic trade. Moreover, it suggested pointedly, such French Canadians would be both “able and willing to pay their debts.”<sup>19</sup> Such statements obviously possess the flavor of self-interest, but this does not discredit the FCMS’s claim to benevolent evangelistic motivation. The Society saw no conflict at this point. Evangelization was simultaneously an act of obedience to God, a gesture of benevolent service to one’s neighbor, and an activity that furthered the evangelist’s own interest. The Gospel blessed all parties concerned.

The FCMS strongly opposed Roman Catholicism, considering it responsible for all the deficiencies and weaknesses it perceived in the French Canadian population. Given the FCMS’s conviction that true religion fosters eternal and temporal benefits, the effect of Roman Catholicism in the temporal realm was a reliable test of its claims regarding matters of faith.

The Christian religion was instituted by its Divine Author, not as a speculative theory, but as an unfailing means of reforming the world, and of advancing man in all those acquirements which are the elements of human greatness and happiness;—and if any system professing to be from heaven, after a fair trial, fails to produce upon society those results, it may be safely called a counterfeit, and ought therefore to be put down.<sup>20</sup>

The FCMS was always ready to identify the flaws in French Canadian character—flaws, of course, for which the Roman Catholic Church was considered directly and exclusively responsible. The French Canadians’ greatest defect was that they were unprogressive, a condition brought on by their alleged illiteracy, ignorance, superstition and lack of motivation. Another

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<sup>19</sup>FCMS, *Brief Account of the FCMS* (n.p., 1860), 2.

<sup>20</sup>FCMS, “First and Second Annual Reviews” (1841), 7.

serious deficiency, in the FCMS's estimation, was their low standard of morality, and particularly outrageous was their common abuse of the Sabbath. The Society also deplored their chronic negligence in benevolent acts and contributions to charitable organizations.

## THE FCMS AND LORD DURHAM'S REPORT

The breakdown of constitutional government, and the general dissatisfaction smoldering in Lower Canada at the end of 1837, prompted the British government to invest Lord Durham with full powers in the Canadas and a mandate to analyze the problems there and propose solutions. His task, begun in 1838, was completed early in 1839, and its major recommendations legislated into law over the next few years. Durham expected to find a typical struggle between oligarchic power and democratic aspirations; he was shocked to discover, in his famous phrase, "two nations warring in the bosom of a single state." This statement indicates that the French Canadians were not the only ones complaining. The English were also frustrated with what they regarded as the French Canadians' outdated institutions and recalcitrant elected representatives, both of which seemed to hold back progress and prosperity. When the capitalistic English Canadians made the painful comparison between their own level of prosperity and that of the nearby United States, they naturally concluded that the French Canadians were an albatross around their neck.

Durham held the view (parallel to that known in the United States as Manifest Destiny) that the settlement and exploitation of the potential of the North American continent was the destiny of the English people. English expansion was divinely-ordained and inevitable. Anglo-Saxon domination could not be stopped, driven as it was by "superior knowledge, energy,

enterprise and wealth.” He also observed that it was not only in Britain that this sense of destiny existed; it was already embedded in the hearts of the English minority in Lower Canada.<sup>21</sup> He concluded that a number of serious obstacles existed to the realization of this destiny, and most, if not all, of them could be blamed on French Canadian culture. The French Canadians, he reported, were locked into the equivalent of sixteenth-century French society, whose institutions were especially “calculated to repress the intelligence and freedom of the great mass of people.” The ancient institutions perpetuated in French Canada were an “ill-organized, unimproving and repressive despotism.”<sup>22</sup> In summary, Durham assumed that the English were destined to dominate North America. The French Canadians and their culture, because they were opposed to such “progress,” were the problem. The problem lent itself to no superficial solution, since it was rooted in the French Canadians’ very character. The only adequate solution was to obliterate the French identity by political reform and common educational institutions.

The text of the Durham Report was being circulated in Lower Canada just as Thomson and others took the first step towards the formation of the FCMS. There can be little doubt that its founders held many of the views and attitudes reflected in that document. Some of Durham’s key points and illustrations—even extensive quotations—were reproduced in early FCMS publications.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the two differed on significant counts. They differed first how they identified the root of the defective features of French Canadian life. The FCMS did not single out culture or nationality, but religion—the Roman Catholic religion—as the root. Durham, by contrast,

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<sup>21</sup>Lord Durham, *Lord Durham’s Report*, ed. & abr. Gerald M. Craig (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1963), 20, 50.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>23</sup>See, for example, FCMS, “First and Second Annual Reports” (1841), 8.

perceived Catholicism as one of the very few positive forces in an otherwise hopelessly inferior and doomed culture. The FCMS, however, was convinced that religion was never peripheral to culture, but stood at the very center of any society's beliefs, values and way of life.

Contemporary assumptions of a dichotomy between the sacred and the secular make it difficult to appreciate the integrated perspective of the FCMS. Religion was not an alternative consolation to substantial, material benefits. With historic Calvinism, the FCMS assumed that true Christianity transforms culture.

Durham proposed assimilation as the solution to the problems of French Canada. The FCMS's proposed solution, the one for which the Society labored, was the overthrow of Catholicism and its replacement by evangelical Protestantism. French Canadians must first abandon Popery, and then experience a personal religious conversion which would manifest itself in changed attitudes and improved moral behavior. There was no need to eradicate the identity of French Canadians. True, the members of the FCMS were proud to be Anglo-Saxon and believed that the distinctive features of their culture included superior intelligence, enterprise and power. But these characteristics were not innate; they could all be attributed to the Bible's influence. The FCMS concluded that "with many invaluable traits of national character, the Bible can do the same for those whose welfare we seek."<sup>24</sup> In a public letter drafted on 12 April 1839, just four days after the Society's establishment, the FCMS summarized its motivation as including both a "civil aspect" as well as a "religious aspect." The latter sought to promote the

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<sup>24</sup>FCMS, "Tenth Annual Report" (1849), 9. Very similar views were espoused by American evangelicals who were facing other social challenges at the same time. See Clifford Griffin, *Their Brothers' Keeper: Moral Stewardship in the United States, 1800-1885* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1960), x. A helpful guide to further reading on this "social control theory" may be found on pp. 51-59 of *Fides et Historia* 11 (1979).

“spiritual and eternal welfare” of French Canadians, and “it is to the religious aspect of the case,” the letter emphasized, “that your attention is most solemnly and urgently entreated.”<sup>25</sup>

## A LEADERSHIP PROFILE

James Thomson, the Society’s prime initiator, was an international evangelical activist with a driving personality.<sup>26</sup> At the time he represented the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) in Montreal. Before this he had served as BFBS agent for the West Indies, and had earlier been instrumental in securing wider Bible distribution in Peru, Columbia and Mexico. Through Thomson the FCMS was exposed to the Bible Society as a model for its own strategy, organization and interdenominational character. It was considered desirable by such voluntary societies to procure a wealthy and influential patron, who would contribute generously and lend name recognition and credibility to their operation. The FCMS was no exception to this pattern. It obtained as its president Lt.-Col. Wilgress, a prominent citizen and veteran of the Peninsular Wars who had acquired extensive property in the Montreal area

The actual achievements of the FCMS, however, must be credited to a group of about thirty officers and committee members who were re-elected year after year to undertake the Society’s tasks. These leaders, most of them laypersons, served without remuneration. For the most part, they came from five Montreal churches: the Wesleyan Methodist, the Congregational, the American Presbyterian, the Secession Presbyterian and (within a few years) the Côté Street

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<sup>25</sup>FCMS, “Circular” (1839), 1.

<sup>26</sup>For a summary of Thomson’s larger career, see Kent Eaton, “Translation Was Not Enough: The Ecumenical and Educational Efforts of James ‘Diego’ Thomson and the British and Foreign Bible Society,” in *The Challenge of Bible Translation*, eds. G. Scorgie, M. Strauss & S. Voth (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 213-33; cf. Spanish-

“Free” Church which emerged from the Canadian Presbyterian Disruption of 1844. Montreal Baptists were never represented in large numbers, since they had their own commitments to Henrietta Feller’s Grande Ligne mission. There were also one or two representatives of the Church of England.

Even among these selected persons there existed a still smaller nucleus of activists. Fewer than ten persons normally attended the monthly committee meetings and shouldered the responsibilities distributed at these sessions. This core remained quite stable, changing only slightly due to deaths and relocation. From 1839 to 1850 it included three clergymen: Congregationalist Henry Wilkes, Secession Presbyterian William Taylor and American Presbyterian Caleb Strong. While relatively little information is available on Strong, Henry Wilkes must be considered one of the significant figures in Canadian church history. His life was so intimately connected with the history of Canadian Congregationalism that his biography can pass for a denominational history. Taylor was the founding minister of the Secession Presbyterian Church in Montreal and the first editor of the *Canada Temperance Advocate*.<sup>27</sup>

Along with these ministers the FCMS nucleus included a larger number of laypersons, most of whom were leading individuals in Montreal’s English-speaking community. Free Churchman John Redpath, for example, was a leading Canadian industrialist whose reputation was established in sugar manufacturing and by constructing the Lachine Canal on the St. Lawrence River. He was a director of the Bank of Montreal, the city’s leading financial

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language Arnaldo Cancilini, *Diego Thomson* (Buenos Aires: Asociacion Sociedad Biblica Argentina, 1987).

<sup>27</sup> John Wood, *Memoir of Henry Wilkes* (Montreal: Grafton, 1887); *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, s. v. “William Taylor.”

institution, and for years served as a Montreal alderman. On one occasion he was elected to address both houses of the Imperial Parliament in London.<sup>28</sup> Redpath was also known for his philanthropy. Deeply touched by the evangelical awakening in Scotland, he was an active churchman. He helped form the Montreal Sabbath Observance Society; presided over the first public meeting held in Montreal on behalf of foreign missions, and for ten years led the mission organized as a result. He established the Protestant House of Refuge and Industry, and led the board of governors of the Montreal General Hospital. The Redpath Library of the McGill University is a present-day monument to another expression of his liberality.

Other prominent members of the FCMS nucleus include James Ferrier, a director of the Grand Trunk Railway, president of a Montreal insurance company, and eventually a Canadian senator. John Dougall founded and subsequently edited the *Montreal Witness*, an immensely successful newspaper which, in Dougall's own words, "advocated, from the first, the claims of Evangelical religion . . . ." Andrew Fernando Holmes, a physician, helped found what would become McGill University's medical faculty, and served as its dean. William Lyman was a pioneer in the Canadian pharmaceutical industry. Joseph Mackay, the owner of a substantial wholesale dry goods firm, was also founder of the Mackay Institute for the Protestant Deaf Mutes.<sup>29</sup>

The leadership of the FCMS was a cross-section of Montreal's, indeed Canada's, most prominent English-speaking citizenry. Most of them came from Britain in the early stages of the

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<sup>28</sup>*Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 9, s. v. "John Redpath."

<sup>29</sup>*Macmillan Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, s. v. v. "James Ferrier," "John Dougall" & "Andrew Fernando Holmes"; *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 10, s. v. "Benjamin Lyman"; *Standard Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 1, s. v. "Robert Mackay."



1820-50 wave of immigration, and so were able to establish themselves and then profit from the development that followed so quickly their arrival in the Canadas. They became bankers, industrialists, politicians, publishers, businessmen, professionals, military officers and clergy. It would be an error to dismiss their combined efforts in French Canadian evangelization as an eccentric and insignificant phenomenon in the history of Canada. The core members of the FCMS were nation-makers, and the FCMS was an important expression of themselves and their vision for their adopted land.

#### EUROPEAN SUPPORT AND RECRUITS ENLISTED

The two obvious needs of the newly-formed FCMS were financial support and missionary recruits. It was taken for granted that the tiny Protestant community in British North America, and in Lower Canada in particular, was incapable of shouldering alone the financial burden of the fledgling missionary society. Eyes instinctively turned to Britain, and especially to Scotland, from where so many in the English-speaking community in Lower Canada had emigrated in the previous two decades. At the same time, the FCMS concluded that suitable missionary candidates must be obtained from French-speaking Europe. This area of the Continent had already produced Feller, Roussy, the Oliviers and others. The FCMS was hopeful that with its encouragement more workers might be forthcoming. The Society realized that its needs could not be sufficiently impressed upon these two European groups through correspondence alone; it would be necessary to present the claims of the FCMS in person. Two men were appointed to represent the FCMS on this European assignment: William Taylor, a clergyman, and James Court, a layman. Taylor would handle “the higher duties of the mission,”

and Court “the pecuniary matters and general details.”<sup>30</sup>

The delegation left Montreal in October 1839 and arrived in Scotland well before year-end. Taylor and Court hoped to do more than simply solicit a one-time collection for the FCMS; they intended to establish self-perpetuating organizations (corresponding or auxiliary societies) which would operate in concert with the Montreal-based FCMS. They began in Glasgow, where they encountered hearty support in both Church of Scotland and Secessionist Presbyterian ranks. The FCMS’s first corresponding committee was founded there in December 1839.

In early January the deputation proceeded to Edinburgh where it encountered an already-existing committee for the evangelization of French Canadians. This “Edinburgh Committee” had been frustrated by its inability to recruit French-speaking missionaries for the work in British North America. Taylor and Court recognized the necessity of proving that missionary recruitment was possible before it could expect to make headway in the Scottish capital. Consequently they set out immediately for the Continent. Empowered with letters of endorsement from the London-based secretaries of the British and Foreign Bible Society, the Religious Tract Society, and the Reformation Society, they traveled on to France and Switzerland in search of supportive Continental evangelicals.<sup>31</sup>

Taylor and Court eventually arrived in Geneva, where Robert Haldane had made such a key contribution to *Le Réveil* in the 1810s. The deputation was fortunate enough to make its appeal to a Genevan constituency characterized by intense piety, a devotion to prayer and evangelistic zeal. The response of Genevan evangelicals to the Canadian deputation was

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<sup>30</sup>James Court to Captain Anderson, 24 September 1839.

<sup>31</sup>FCMS, “First & Second Annual Reports” (1841), 14-16.

enthusiastic and overwhelming. Through an interpreter Taylor addressed audiences in L'Église de la Plesserie and in L'Église de L'Oratoire. In response to his earnest appeals for laborers in French Canada, no less than a dozen persons immediately "proposed to take this step, if found agreeable to the Lord's will."<sup>32</sup> Immediately a corresponding committee was organized with a mandate to appoint FCMS missionaries and channel them to Montreal. All of the officers, and some of the members of this committee (including César Malan) were associated with the Evangelical Society of Geneva.

Following these momentous events, Court sailed for Montreal while Taylor returned first to England and then to Edinburgh with proof of missionary commitment on the Continent. Another corresponding committee was soon organized in that city with the aged Robert Haldane as its president. Archibald Bonar, a member of a prominent family of ministers, served as the committee's treasurer. This achieved, Taylor followed Court back to Montreal. The deputation had been very successful, having organized four corresponding committees and established contact with many influential leaders and prospective missionaries. It had also recruited a number of collection agents in Britain and established a favorable image among European evangelicals before its actual operations had even begun.

The deputation's experience proved that the FCMS's aspirations struck a common chord with Scottish evangelicals in particular. It also indicated that such enthusiasm was not confined to the British, but extended to French-speaking Protestants as well. For the French and Swiss supporters of the FCMS, the Society's proposed activities were neither unique nor innovative. The FCMS simply represented an extension to North America of the evangelistic enterprise

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 18.

already being undertaken in French-speaking Europe. Thus the FCMS had established links with two other points on what was now an awakened trans-Atlantic triangle. It was not necessary for persons to be English-speaking in order to participate in the international evangelical fraternity.

#### GROPING FOR A TOE-HOLD IN FRENCH CANADA

The response of the Geneva Corresponding Committee to the FCMS's appeal for workers was as prompt as it had been enthusiastic. By the end of 1840 five Swiss had arrived in Montreal. With this small contingent of agents the Society's evangelistic enterprise began in a spirit of enthusiasm and confidence. The FCMS Committee believed that these plain yet zealous colporteurs were ideally suited to launch the initial assault of the Word on French Canada. After all, it was such colporteurs as these who were so successfully challenging the Catholicism and rationalism of France as they boldly intruded into homes and communities where few Protestant ministers dared to venture.<sup>33</sup> Possessing a thorough knowledge of the literal contents of Scripture, they had an aptitude for debate and were gifted with the salesman's knack for striking up conversations with strangers. They read Scripture to the illiterate, sold or loaned portions of it to those sufficiently interested, and took every opportunity to expound with fervor the Gospel contents of the Bible and tracts they carried with them. In isolated communities their visits generated as much interest as the arrival of itinerant peddlers.<sup>34</sup>

It soon became apparent that the colporteurs' task would be more difficult than had first

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<sup>33</sup>FCMS, "First & Second Annual Reports" (1841), 32.

<sup>34</sup>Compare Rieul-P. Duclos, *Histoire du Protestantisme française au Canada et aux États-Unis*, 2 vols. (Montreal: Librairie Evangelique, 1913), 1:173 ff.

been hoped. The work was discouraging and slow at best, due in part to political and religious developments in the province. On the basis of Lord Durham's recommendation, the two British provinces of Upper and Lower Canada became one through an Act of Union in 1840. The undisguised rationale for this merger was to drown, without any direct violation of democracy, the voice and ultimately the identity of French Canada. One of the first acts of the United Parliament was to pass a Public School Act, which reflected Durham's strategy of using public education as a further means of French Canadian assimilation. Needless to say, these overt threats to their cultural identity made French Canadians extremely defensive, and must partly account for the hostile reception received by FCMS colporteurs in some parishes.

Thus threatened, the French Canadians sought refuge, as they had in previous crises in their history, in the Roman Catholic Church. The Church, for its part, was eager to facilitate the desired rapprochement. The differences which developed between hierarchy and communicants during the Rebellions were soon forgotten as the Church resumed its traditional role of defender of and spokesman for French Canada.<sup>35</sup> Protestants looked with dismay at what they regarded as the troublesome resurgence of Popery. The FCMS was eventually forced to admit that "Romanism, it would seem, is not in such a state of decrepitude as we have been led to suppose."<sup>36</sup>

In 1841 the FCMS Committee decided that the community of Ste Therese, directly north of Montreal, would be a strategic site for a new mission station. A house and some land were rented from a member of the local "Scotch" church. No sooner had the Society's two colporteurs

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<sup>35</sup>Moir, *Church in the British Era*, 167-68.

<sup>36</sup>FCMS, "Third Annual Report" (1842), 9.

moved in than a group of angry French Canadians vandalized the premises. The presence in the community of *les petit gris*, as the Swiss were nicknamed, was viewed as yet another Protestant, and covertly English, assault on French Canada. It was a frightening ordeal for the colporteurs, and property damage was extensive. The experience appears to have had a shattering effect on one of the FCMS agents who returned to Switzerland, ostensibly for health reasons, two months later.<sup>37</sup>

The FCMS charged that an outrage had been committed against its lawful operations and law-abiding agents, and held the Roman Catholic Church responsible for the incident. The incident seemed to the FCMS to provide conclusive evidence of the nefarious character of Roman Catholicism. The Society's spokespersons argued even more loudly when, not long afterwards, Grande Ligne workers and their French Canadian converts suffered arson and non-fatal stoning at St. Pie.<sup>38</sup> As subsequent events proved, the Ste Therese vandalism eroded the FCMS's earlier resolve to shun direct confrontation with Roman Catholicism.

It was at this critical stage that the FCMS turned with unprecedented energy to the task of educating French Canadian young people. The determined resistance to its other mission strategies almost forced it into educational work. No doubt the FCMS's growing emphasis on education can be partly attributed to the influence of the "Scottish approach to missions" propounded by Alexander Duff, which viewed education as a *praeparatio evangelica*.<sup>39</sup> Still, it

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<sup>37</sup>FCMS Minutes (10 August 1841).

<sup>38</sup>FCMS, "Fifth Annual Report" (1844), 27-31.

<sup>39</sup>*New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, s. v. "Alexander Duff"; also K. S. Latourette, *History of the Expansion of the Christianity*, 7 vols. (New York: Harper, 1943), 6:115-18, 145-46.

seems more than coincidental that these initiatives were taken at the same time as the announcement of Lord Durham's proposed strategy of French Canadian assimilation through public education, and during resurgent French Canadian Roman Catholicism's resistance of this plan and resilience in retaining its own province-wide school system. The Society's commitment to such a program eventually dominated its budget, operations and personnel allocations. Indeed, it came to shape the character of the FCMS itself. This deepened commitment to education began in the Fall of 1843 at the Belle Riviere station. The ever-imaginative James Court proposed a major educational institution that would provide French Canadian boys (later, girls too) with an education which, "while sound and liberal," would also be pointedly practical and evangelistic. The FCMS later phrased these last objectives in scriptural terms: the program would aim to make students wise unto salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, and to equip them for every good work.<sup>40</sup>

Practical training encompassed a number of skills and trades, but focused initially on farming. The FCMS Committee assured its constituency that such educational goals could be pursued without losing sight of the Society's "great object" of evangelization. The graduates of the institute were expected to move out into one of two vocational streams: ordinary lay occupations and Christian service. Yet the two streams were expected to converge: the French Canadian graduates would be "the Oberlins of Canada . . . not only evangelizing the people but being in every respect the instruments of raising them from their low estate."<sup>41</sup> The Society stressed that in education, as in so many other areas, Roman Catholicism was in deadly

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<sup>40</sup>FCMS, "Fifth Annual Report" (1844), 10-12.

<sup>41</sup>Minutes of the FCMS Committee (8 November 1844).

competition with the FCMS. At stake were the province's next generation and its future.

In 1846 Redpath proposed that the Institute be relocated to Pointe-aux-Trembles, about ten miles east of and down-river from Montreal. He argued that the new location was more accessible and strategic, and the farmland of a superior quality, thus offering better prospects for the development of a model farm. Jean Emmanuel Tanner, who came from France in 1841 as the FCMS's first ordained minister, became the first Director of the Pointe-aux-Trembles Institute. Significantly, the curriculum was taught in French. Meanwhile the FCMS pleaded for persons who would sponsor pupils at the Institute, where they might "enjoy for a year those religious influences which, with the blessing of God, may give a new destiny for life, and what is for every Christian infinitely more important, a new destiny for eternity."<sup>42</sup>

As time went on, the FCMS could not help but compare the extent of its own operations and success with that of the prospering Roman Catholic Church in French Canada. From 1839 to 1850 the Society underwent an emotional and attitudinal change towards Catholicism, viewing it as first an obstacle, then an opponent, and ultimately a threat. By the end of the 1840s it was urging that Protestants could not longer remain "mealy-mouthed" about Romanism's encroachments: it was time to confront and expose "the Harlot!"<sup>43</sup> Yet through all this agitation the FCMS never ceased to stress the importance of evangelical conversion experience as its ultimate goal.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>FCMS, "Tenth Annual Report" (1849), 3.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 52.



## CONCLUSION

Three major factors converged to produce the FCMS: the missionary impulse of *Le Réveil*, the religious and civic zeal of Lower Canada's evangelical Protestant community, and an unprecedented although brief French Canadian receptivity to new ideals resulting from the social unrest surrounding the Rebellions of 1837-38. The Society was led by a small nucleus of prominent Protestant citizens of Montreal. They were leaders in business, politics and ecclesiastical affairs; generous towards charitable causes, and active in the temperance movement as well as other home and foreign missions causes. They enjoyed contacts in Britain, Switzerland, France and the United States, and traveled extensively to maintain these. They succeeded by soliciting help from an international support base and from hundreds of individuals in Montreal itself.

The FCMS must be seen as a Canadian manifestation of the larger international missionary movement of the nineteenth century.<sup>45</sup> It began with triumphal enthusiasm and a seemingly boundless confidence in the power of Scripture to transform French Canada. On the other hand, it lacked a clear evangelistic strategy and had little sensitivity to French Canadian culture or the importance of establishing local churches. Surprised and frustrated by Roman Catholic resurgence, the Society groped rather ineffectively for a toe-hold in French Canada, and turned to the provision of elementary and basic vocational education as the most workable means of achieving its evangelistic objectives. After a few years its vision of the complete conquest of Rome began to fade as the latter manifested resilience and assertiveness. A new element of

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<sup>45</sup>H. H. Walsh, one of Canada's premier church historians, argued that the history of Christianity in Canada, though unique, should always be understood and presented as part of the larger history of the universal church. Walsh, *The Church in the French Era* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1966), 1-9.

uncertainty invaded the Society's outlook, and by 1850 this had prompted a measure of alignment with the international "No Popery" crusade.

Evangelical conviction primarily motivated the FCMS. Its members were spurred to act by their belief that the Roman Catholic faith seriously distorted the truth. They sought the eternal salvation and temporal welfare of their French Canadian fellow-subjects, and treated their evangelization as a special duty devolving upon the British people. This evangelistic zeal, however, was not entirely disinterested. The Gospel, the FCMS believed, would surely transform Lower Canada, and the ensuing social progress and prosperity would be blessings in which the FCMS leaders would share.

Beyond 1850 the FCMS did not collapse, even after its Genevan fountainhead of earnest colporteurs dried up. Eventually some French Canadian churches did emerge, and for awhile at least there was a French Canadian synod in association with Frédéric Monod's confessional Union of Evangelical Churches of France. In the years ahead, anti-Catholic sentiment remained strong through events like the Gavazzi Riots and the polemic crusades of the notorious Father Charles Chiniquy. But for all their limitations, the leaders of the FCMS should be credited on at least two counts. They rejected the widespread assumption of their day that French Canadian assimilation was the only solution to the problems of Lower Canada, and they expressed in tireless activity their conviction that scriptural religion is the means to both eternal salvation and cultural transformation. The French Canadian Missionary Society should not be dismissed as an eccentric and insignificant phenomenon in Canada's history. Its members were nation-makers, and the Society to which they devoted so much energy was an important expression of themselves, their religious convictions and their vision for their adopted land.