

The Early Presbyterianism of Quebec under Dr. Spark

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BY

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When the city was captured by General Wolfe, the population of the province was about 70,000, nearly all of whom were Roman Catholic. In 110 rural parishes there were only 19 Protestants. General Murray reported the Roman Catholics to be frugal, industrious, moral and religious, but very ignorant. Of the Protestants he said: "I report them to be in general the most immoral collection of men I ever knew, of course, little calculated to make new subjects enamoured with our laws, religion and customs, and far less adapted to enforce those laws which are to govern them." It may truly be said of these men, that they were rather infidels than Protestants, because their religion did nothing to elevate their characters or to render useful their lives.

With the fall of the city, came a new era, as a new element was at once introduced into the life of the province. The Scotch and British regiments brought men not only of different speech, but also of different religions, and having with them their chaplains. Protestant services were held within the city immediately after the conquest.

The first service of the Presbyterian church was conducted by the Rev. Mr. McPherson of the Fraser Highlanders, in his official capacity as Chaplain of the regiment. Soon after the conquest a congregation was organized in the city, and was granted the privilege of worshipping in an apartment of the Jesuit's College. The Rev. George Henry became the first pastor of the congregation in 1765, and thus was the first settled minister of the Presbyterian faith in

the province. Mr. Henry was an able minister of the gospel, and in a godly life of benevolence and goodness aided much to call the Protestant elements of the city to a higher standard of living.

The real founder, however, of Presbyterianism in Quebec was the Rev. Alexander Spark, D.D. In a growing city, or in a new country, blessed is the church who has a leader with all the qualities of noble leadership. In the declining years of the Rev. Mr. Henry Alexander Spark was a tutor to the children of Sir John Caldwell at Belmont. In him some of the members of the congregation saw one who would, if the promises of his youth were fulfilled, ably fill their pulpit and represent their denomination in the city. So he went back to Scotland, was ordained and returned and took up the work in 1785.

Upon the new Minister fell the duty of attending to the needs of his own people amidst the trials, temptations and discouragements of a new land; but this was only a small part of what he gave to the community. Like all Scotchmen of his day he was conscious of the power of education and identified himself with every movement to obtain for the children a better system of schools. He willingly gave of his time to render assistance to any ambitious youth striving towards a college course, and never missed an opportunity to impress upon the public in general the necessity of giving marked attention to the improvement of the means to provide schools for all.

As a member of society, Dr. Spark took an active part in the public life of the city and whether upon the platform or in the social function he was called on to represent his denomination he could be trusted to do it in such a way as not to give offence to the most critical.

In his sermons (many in manuscript form are in the possession of relatives) he showed himself a fine classical scholar, a good exegete and a fair logician. He was somewhat metaphysical at times, yet frequently became very practical, demanding the results of Christian belief in honesty, truthfulness and charity. His diary shows he had a love for science and twice each day he recorded the readings of the thermometer and barometer, this being even done on the day of his death.

In our day of tolerance and good feeling we can scarcely realize how far we have travelled since those days of beginnings, when the argument was keen and the fight bitter in all religious questions. The strong ever sought to dominate the weak, and the weak to plot against the strong. It was not uncommon for even "members of the cloth" to finish a wordy dispute with the fists. Through all this Dr. Spark carried himself with the dignity of the Christian gentleman not as a weakling but as a strong, fair fighter for what he honestly held to be the rights of his denomination.

One of the things essential to the prosperity of a denomination in any place is to have a house of worship of its own. Realizing this, Dr. Spark endeavoured to secure a lot of land upon which to erect a church. In 1802 a petition bearing 148 signatures was addressed to King George III. In the same year letters patent were issued, granting a lot of ground on Anne street, for the erection of a place of worship. Eight years later, on November 3rd, the new building was opened and dedicated under the name of St. Andrew's Church, the congregation before this having been known as the Scotch Church. After the opening of the new church the congregation increased rapidly and became one of the strong influences for better morality in the city.

During these years there had been settlements of Highlanders made along the St. Lawrence. These were ever in the heart of Dr. Spark. He knew how they longed for the word of life and how bravely they struggled to keep the fires on the family altar glowing; but he also knew that unless some one could be found to minister to them, the time would come when they would fall from the faith of their fathers. The religious struggles among these settlements were pathetic and heart breaking. Here was the new-born infant and no man of God to give it the sacrament of Baptism. There lay the young maiden in the cold arms of death and no comforting voice to bring the consolation of Heaven and commit the body to the grave with sacred rites. Fathers gave their daughters to the men who had won their love, without the performing of the marriage ceremony, exacting the promise that they would be wedded the first time a minister should come to the settlement. From time to time Dr. Spark applied to the old land for men to man these places; but all to no purpose. At different pe-

riods he himself went down the River, baptized the children and married couples who had been living together for years. But gradually, what he had foreseen happened. The Priest was human and offered consolation to the afflicted, and in zeal for his church, coupled with the pity of his heart for the people who were destitute of religious service, he did his best. At first they kept him at arm's length, viewing him with suspicion; but at last, almost reluctantly, they accepted his services until their descendants spoke the French language and worshipped according to the Roman Catholic faith. From the fate of these settlements and the warnings of Dr. Spark and others, the Presbyterian Church learned a never-to-be-forgotten lesson, and is striving to-day, with all its energies to follow her sons and daughters into every corner of the great settling West.

At the early age of 57, Dr. Spark was called from the scene of his strenuous labours to his eternal reward. He preached in the morning, and having attended a funeral service, he was ascending the hill to the afternoon meeting in the church. Before he reached the top he was stricken, and thus was spared the frailties of age or the languishing of long illness.

A loving people have placed a tablet in St. Andrew's Church, which gives in brief outline the history of his life. A grateful church looks back to him as one of its great pioneers and returns thanks to God for the mighty men who stood in the hard places and failed not.





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