

“Your ringing testimony to the cause of truth”: Machen and the PCC’s Andrew Grant in a 1925 partnership to save “true evangelical Christianity”

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As the ninetieth anniversary of Church Union is being celebrated Presbyterians have a different narrative to that of commemoration and jubilation. Ours is a story of disruption and heartbreak, a sense of loss and sorrow. We were the spoilers of a grand vision. In trying to understand the complexities of events swirling around 10 June 1925 no one is better equipped to help us understand what happened than Home Missions Secretary A. S. Grant. This paper sets about to seek to understand a complex man, a Canadian icon, whose passion provides insight as to what was going on. We shall look at his vision of the continuing Presbyterian Church in Canada lensed through his partnership with J. Gresham Machen, the doughty Princeton Seminary contender of the faith.

For Andrew Shaw Grant the summer of 1925 was like none other in his life. His time on the Klondike during the Gold Rush was nothing in comparison to the pressure he was under to continue a Presbyterian denomination that, it was thought, would be going into oblivion on 10 June as it merged with the Methodists and the Congregationalists. Ironically the union ceremony that day was presided over by Charles William Gordon, whose best-selling novels appeared under the sobriquet Ralph Connor. Gordon had made A. S. Grant a household name for his exploits in the Yukon as a “sky pilot” a quarter of a century earlier, characterizing him as one of “these heroic missionaries to that remote and perilous field.”¹ Now A. S. Grant was doing all in his power to challenge the work that was so dear to the heart of Ralph Connor.

Knox College Professor the late Allan Farris titled his seminal (but sadly neglected) chapter on church union “The Fathers of 1925.” A. S. Grant was definitely a father of 1925, unique among the senior PCC pre-Union leadership in his opposition to church union.. He settled in Toronto after ten years in the Yukon and, at the invitation of the General Assembly, served for seven years first as General Superintendent for Home Missions of the Presbyterian Church in Canada and then as well chair of the Finance Committee of the denomination He submitted his resignation at the 1914 Woodstock General Assembly. “I asked”, he wrote the *Toronto Star* ten years later², “to be relieved of all official positions as constructive plans for aggressive work were impossible owing to the divided opinion on the question of union.”

Grant was a humble and self-effacing man. Always known as “Dr Grant” he actually had never qualified as a medical practitioner in spite of taking medical courses while he was an undergraduate at the University of Toronto. He turned down the offer of two D.D.’s, one from his *alma mater* Presbyterian College, Montreal, the other from Queens University. He disarmed with a humorous aside the anticlericalism of some continuing Presbyterian laity at the first post-Union

¹ Gordon, C. W. *The Life of James Robertson D. D.* Toronto: The Westminster Company, 1909. 378.

² “Organic Church Union” undated newsclipping in the Grant Papers file (1973-5003-2-9) PCC Archives.

General Assembly on 11 June 1925 by saying “the fact that I may not be able to preach is not why I should be classified as a layman.”³ Grant left no *corpus* of his writing, none of his sermon manuscripts survive, and aside from a small archive deposited with the PCC by his daughter in 1973 little survives from the decade after church union when he was such a vital participant in the rebirth of the Presbyterian Church in Canada. It is ironic that the largest collection of Grant correspondence from the immediate post-Union years survives in Philadelphia in the archives of Westminster Theological Seminary. A few documents, some undated press clippings, and photo albums mostly of the Yukon, were presented to the PCC archives by his daughter Caroline in 1973. There are also a few letters from the time he was Home Missions Secretary 1907-14 period in the UCC Archives.

Grant’s final two decades were profoundly shaped by the death on 13 June 1916 of his son Captain Oswald Wetherald Grant, M.C., in the Ypres salient. A machine gunner in the Canadian Infantry, First Battalion, he was headed for Osgoode law school after a brilliant academic and sports career at the University of Toronto from which he graduated in 1914. In a letter to his mother, found on his corpse on the battlefield, he wrote: “Good-bye everybody, and know this, you should be as glad as I that I have gone this way. It is by far the best way, and I am trusting in God to see me through.” It is significant that at the end of the war Grant travelled to France and was involved in demobilisation arrangements. Oswald’s death gave him a pastoral edge, a softness in debate, a pastoral capability to deal with the student ministers who would come under his care. The muscular Grant of the Yukon had been metamorphosed into a gentle giant of a man, more formidable in debate as a result. And he and his opposite in the uniting Presbyterians, A. E. Armstrong could work amicably together as they sorted out the tangles of votes, property, and related acrimony.

Grant’s own attitude toward church union developed over two decades of negotiation. As he described his view:

“It appears to me that if the great majority of members in the Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational churches were are one mind in matters of doctrine and church policy and also one in spirit, that in the face of organized opposition within the Presbyterian Church, it might have been wise to seek some plans of cooperation in missionary and educational work so that, with the lapse of time by united efforts in the great field of missionary enterprise, these bodies would work together.

However the majority has decided otherwise, and as majorities go over they acted regularly and with due deliberation and in the light of the future, it may be shown that they acted wisely, but in the meantime we are face to face with a divided church, All things lawful may not always be expedient.”

He concluded:

“Since there is still to be a Presbyterian Church and since the necessity has arisen for ministers to declare themselves, my decision is to remain with the Presbyterian Church. I am not connected with any organization, pro or con, and this statement carried with it no official authority.”⁴

On 19 July 1924 The United Church of Canada Act received royal assent and the countdown to union started. One week before Christmas massed rallies in twelve different non-concurring churches across the city were called for

“Presbyterians in Toronto who love their church, who have pride in its great history and traditions, and who want to maintain its virility and independence. On this night loyal

³ Quoted in Fraser, Brian. *The Resistance to Church Union in Canada*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 1985. 193

⁴ “Organic Church Union” undated clipping from the *Toronto Star* circa summer 1924 PCC Archives

Presbyterians will rally throughout the City of Toronto and demonstrate by their numbers and enthusiasm this is already of their convictions, the unabated combination of their fathers ...These impressive gatherings will consolidate our forces and inspire new devotion to the cause. Their spontaneous enthusiasm will echo throughout Canada, giving assurance to Presbyterians in all parts of the Dominion that their Church will be preserved and kept as the active, potent influence it has always been in world-wide affairs. Let nothing prevent you being there.”

On the programme there was a listing of names for a “Provisional Presbyterian Advisory Council for the Presbytery of Toronto.” At the top there appeared the name of Andrew Grant. The Committee was “to confer and advise on the many important problems that will face congregations after the taking of the [congregational] vote. Non-concurring congregations will then appoint representatives to Council.”⁵ Professor Thomas Eakin of Knox College was the only other minister included.

The “Presbyterian Advisory Council for the Presbytery of Toronto,” as it was designated consisted of fifteen members with A. S. Grant the designated Chairman and J. A. Milne the Secretary-Treasurer. Its task was a daunting one. With the majority of clergy going into church union many non-concurring congregations were left without pastoral leadership. The possibility was always there that, without a minister, congregations might change their minds and drift into union and, if not as congregations, parishioners would, and Unionists would be vindicated and non-concurrenents humiliated. The need, particularly in the Maritimes, was acute. Though Prince Edward Island had stood firm, New Brunswick had been decimated by Church Union, as had the greater Halifax area. But Pictou Presbytery and the two Cape Breton presbyteries, where there had been almost open warfare, were in a perilous state before Grant stepped in to try to fill the gap. So he approached the American seminaries and specifically Princeton. There Professor J. Gresham Machen was the defender of Biblical orthodoxy and a favourite among the students at the Seminary. Grant and Machen bonded over the next year.

The first letter from Grant to Machen now extant is dated 17 April 1925, though there must have been earlier communication. “We appreciate very much,” Grant writes Machen “the work you have done and the care you have taken in selecting the best type of men, and we have authorized them by telegraph and letter to make arrangements for securing and placing of these students on the terms set forth in your letter.” He reassures Machen that the forthcoming (and first) General Assembly of the continuing church will honour the contracts for the fifteen students involved. Then he identifies himself with Machen’s theology: “We appreciate very much what you have done and also to know that we have the sympathy and co-operation of our brethren across the line in this struggle for existence. You will be pleased to know that we are to be a strong active body and that in our pre-Assembly Congress that we are calling, we will have delegates from every part of our dominion representing the congregations that are remaining and also the minority groups that have lost their churches.” He concludes by asking for the names of “outstanding men” who could speak at the pre-Assembly conference.

In this same letter he referred to Donald MacOdrum⁶ as someone “acting with the full authority and knowledge of our Provisional Home Missions Board.” MacOdrum had lost his pulpit

⁵ Scrapbook of clippings related to Church Union, PCC Archives.

⁶ Donald MacOdrum (1863-1938) served in Marion Bridge, CB, NS; Moncton; Pembroke ON; Halifax and Brockville. He was moderator of the General Assembly the year of his death. He visited all the mission fields of the church in his lifetime and had three sons in ministry, one of whom (Max) founded Carleton University.

when St. Andrew's Halifax had voted to go Union and was at the time the organizing pastor of the minority groups from St. John's and Sharon churches in Stellarton, a mining town in Pictou County. MacOdrum was the temporary point person for the mostly rural churches in Pictou Presbytery that had stayed out of Union and were presently without a minister. He soon went to Ontario and his role was taken by Robert Johnson⁷ who followed him there shortly afterwards. Meanwhile on 5 October 1925, PTS graduate Woodbridge O. Johnson⁸, an MK from Korea, was inducted into the new First Church Stellarton on 5 October 1925, only to leave less than a year later. Several other so-called "Machen's men" settled in Pictou County, such as McAllister Griffiths⁹, but none stayed long.

In Cape Breton Grant had the towering figure of 1891 PTS graduate William McCulloch Thomson¹⁰ who had returned from Trinidad and subsequent study at Yale and Columbia to gather the remnants of Presbyterianism in Sydney where the three PCC congregations had all gone into Union. "This is today one of the strongest Presbyterian congregations in the eastern provinces" the *Continuing Presbyterian Church in Canada* broadsheet crowed in the summer of 1925. With 439 communicants at Easter communion that was indisputable. But after McCulloch retired the church ran through five ministers in just over a decade and a half so toxic did the mix of minorities prove.

Meanwhile the communication between Grant, his three Maritime henchmen, and Machen continued that Spring of 1925. A telegram from Grant to Machen on 5 May¹¹ states that he is awaiting the final applications for students and that their ticket arrangements were on their way with instructions and concluded with two words that summarized all the acrimony of the time: "no Methodists."¹² As the students were leaving Princeton no detail escaped the professor that they loved so much and affectionately called "Das." To one student, a man by the name of Dyett who seems (from his lack of a subsequent consistent career) to have been unsure of his vocation he wrote on 14 May: "if Mr. Grant (or Dr. Grant) will supply you with transportation direct from Buffalo [his home] to Stellarton, please return the present ticket before the expiration of its limit to him, As I have done in the case of the other men, I am enclosing \$15 to cover your berth and meals on the way to Stellarton. This is my personal contribution to the cause."¹³

Though the patrician Machen was comfortably placed financially, that \$15 in 1925 which he gave every student appointee was a significant investment, representing \$203 in today's currency.

⁷ Robert Johnson (1876-1947) an Ulsterman, called to St Andrew's Halifax where he ministered during the Explosion of 1917, next year called to the United Presbyterian Church (later Westminster) New Glasgow and subsequently Knox Ottawa in 1927. "During the Church dispute no one stood more loyally by the church of his fathers and Robert Johnston did much to maintain the cause of Presbyterianism in the Maritimes." (A&P 1948)

⁸ Woodbridge Odlin Johnson (1900-1975), PTS 1925, cousin of Charles Woodbridge PTS 1927, alternated between parish and teaching until setting into 19 years (1946-1965) as professor, Park College, Parkville, MO.

⁹ Hall McAllister Griffiths (1900- 1957) PTS 1925[6]; was ordained in 1925 by CB Presbytery, supplied First Church, New Glasgow 1926; at West Branch, Pictou Presbytery, 1927-9; returned to Philadelphia; editor and pundit, *Christianity Today*; 1935 founded *Presbyterian Guardian*. Split with Machen the year after to establish the Bible Presbyterian Church but later parted from its founder Carl McIntire. Died in NYC at the age of 57.

¹⁰ William McCulloch Thomson (1862-1957) born and died in Durham, W River, Pictou Co. ; served Greyfriars Church, Port of Spain, Trinidad, 1908-1920; in Sydney 1924 - 1932. (See J. M. Cameron. *Enduring Trust: First Presbyterian Church, New Glasgow, Nova Scotia, 1786-1986*. Self-published, 1985. 103-107.)

¹¹ A.S. Grant to J.G.Machen, 5 May 1925 (WTS Archives, Machen Papers).

¹² There should have been more empathy because Grant was a strong teetotaler.

¹³ J.G.Machen to E.G.Dyett, 14 May 1925 (WTS Archives, Machen Papers). Some uncertainty about whether it was "Dr Grant: or "Mr. Grant" persists in the correspondence and remains to this day an uncertainty.

By 28 April there were eleven appointees, six from the Junior or first year and five Middlers¹⁴. Machen refused to single out any of them but indicated the Middlers would have had more experience. He also stated that “It has been a great handicap not to have knowledge of the individual fields.” Board and room were provided with \$15 salary and transportation included. As the summer wore on the inevitable question arose as to what the pastor-less churches would do come autumn and winter “and your people are led to fall out of the ranks and go into the United Church” as he wrote Grant on 3 August. Several were under pressure not to return to Seminary as the need was so great.

Machen strongly demurred. “It is not merely that this plan of interrupting the study of theology seems to me to be a very bad one – but the situation at Princeton is such that I should be particularly sorry to have these men stay away. Last year there was a real and very much needed evangelical movement among our students; these men, some of them at least, took the lead in it.” And he concluded apocalyptically: “The entire character of our institution is at stake, and unless the matter is settled rightly now, we shall in the future be able to help neither you nor anyone else.” Four years later, as a result of the recommendation of a report of a commission appointed by that year’s General Assembly, he was out of a job and Princeton Seminary was forever changed.

At its June 1925 meeting the new Presbytery of Cape Breton passed a resolution of appreciation for Machen’s services to the PCC. In a letter of response to McCulloch Thomson, dated 11 July 1925, he expressed forcibly his identification of the struggle he was engaged in within the Presbyterian Church (USA) with that of the continuing Presbyterian Church in Canada.

“The cause which your church represents is, I am convinced, the cause of true evangelical Christianity throughout the world. In the United States just as clearly as in Canada, the attack upon the Christian faith is coming through an ostensibly evangelical but really compromising and I’m really skeptical interdenominationalism: and in our battle we rejoice in the encouragement which your ringing testimony gives to the cause of truth.”¹⁵

To what extent were Machen and Grant theological bedfellows? We know little about Grant’s theology but we can make some deductions. He studied under Donald Harvey MacVicar when Presbyterian College Montreal was called “the Princeton of the North.” He went on to study for a year in Scotland but we know little of his instructors or classes there. His work in the Yukon suggests a man with a heart for evangelism as he challenged the prospectors “to be a man and follow the Christ” but that muscular Christianity, popularized in the novels of Ralph Connor, was very popular at the time. His opposition to Church Union does not appear to have been solely on theological grounds. A clipping from the Orillia papers of his sermons on the 82nd anniversary of the Orillia church, two years before his death, is all we have to go on. “Stirring Messages of Faith at Presbyterian Anniversary” is the headline for an almost verbatim account¹⁶ of his morning and evening sermons taken from his notes given the reporter.

Grant’s text for that morning was Acts 1:8, the familiar “Ye shall receive power after the Holy Ghost is come upon you.” He added “The weakness of the Christian church to-day is that it does not realise and recognise that the promise and the power of the Holy Spirit is as available now as It was at Pentecost. Possessed with the power of the Holy Ghost the Church instead of being fearful, would have power to carry on and vigorously press the work of the Divine mission to preach the gospel to every creature.” He drove his point home that year Hitler came to power in Germany: “We are living

¹⁴ For details see my “Theological Renewal and the Princeton Seminary Class of 1927/8” paper read at the Presbyterian (USA) Scholars Conference, Wheaton, IL, 22 May 2015, on my website adonaldmacleod.com.

¹⁵ J.G. Machen to McCulloch Thomson, 11 July 1925 (WTS Archives)

¹⁶ “Stirring Messages of Faith at Presbyterian Anniversary” undated newsclipping from the *Orillia Packet and Times*, PCC archives.

in a difficult age, and the forces of evil are strong against us. But our weapons of warfare are spiritual not carnal. Christ has opened up to us the way of access to God and His power.”

His evening message was on faith healing, using as his text John 5:7 "Sir," the invalid replied, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me." "The great heart of God is manifested as Christ goes out in compassion to sick and sinful men, and Christ is in the world today working with more wonderful results than in the days of His flesh,," The reporter noted with incredulity: "The speaker said he believed in Divine Healing and he believes in miracles." He admitted however that "He is a forceful preacher, direct in his message and powerful in his appeal. He is always heard with great acceptance by the Orillia congregation."

So the summer of 1925 ended. "I think it is particularly important" Machen wrote Robert Johnson¹⁷ "that the men should be given facility for being back in Princeton on time at the opening of the term on September 29th. We in Princeton who represent the principle that your Church represents have a reputation to maintain and if we do not maintain it the fact will be used vigorously not only against us but against the cause."

The friendship between Grant and Machen developed. Machen was invited to 25 Cluny Drive, Grant's Rosedale mansion, when he spoke at the Knox Spadina anniversary in March of 1926 but he was unable to accept the offer as hotel arrangements had already been made by his host congregation¹⁸. Machen, in turn, reciprocated with an offer of hospitality at his Princeton club as they went over the list of the 1926 appointees but Grant did not travel out of Canada. As the summer began one appointee was late and broke but between Grant and Machen Alexander MacLeod PTS 1927 was sent off to Sussex NB¹⁹ to general relief because he had served the Unionists in Saskatchewan the summer before. Enough was enough.

"Your ringing testimony to the cause of truth": Machen's early impressions of the continuing Presbyterian Church in Canada was coloured by what was going on in Princeton Seminary at the time. After the summer of 1926 there were no further drafts of PTS students. Americans who accepted calls in Canada could easily become disillusioned and PTS students and graduates found the culture of Atlantic Canada an adjustment. Faced with rancor after narrow votes and regrouping minorities Machen's acolytes would correspond and share the challenges of their first congregation and the shaky coalitions of the continuing church. But at their best "Machen's men" filled a real gap and ensured that the burning bush would never be consumed, at least in the summer of 1925

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¹⁷ Machen to Johnston, 3 September 1925 (WTS Archives).

¹⁸ See my "Knox College and Knox Church: Going Separate Ways after Church Union" CSPH papers (2012), 35.

¹⁹ Machen to Grant 18 June 1926: "I wonder whether Mr. MacLeod was placed. I telegraphed about him when you were at the General Assembly, and do not know whether that first telegram got into your hands." WTS Archives