

Teaching Preaching in a Time of Cultural Change: The Forgotten Story of John J. A. Proudfoot, Knox College

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ON December 10, 1889, after a dispute with his congregation lasting just over six months, the Reverend Dr. John J. A. Proudfoot resigned from his post as minister at First Presbyterian Church in London, Ontario. In and of itself, there is nothing particularly noteworthy about a minister falling out of favour with his congregation. What was unique in this case was that the minister in question was the son of the renowned missionary and founding pastor of the congregation, William Proudfoot. Furthermore, for more than 20 years, the younger Proudfoot had been concurrently serving as a lecturer in homiletics, pastoral theology, and church government at Knox College. In the struggle to remove Proudfoot from his pulpit, some of the parishioners even suggested that Proudfoot's preaching threatened the continuing viability of the congregation: it was felt that his sermons no longer communicated to the young people. While his preaching was thought to be a congregational liability in London in 1889, Proudfoot would continue to teach homiletics to candidates for ministry in the Presbyterian Church in Canada for the next 12 years at Knox College.

In this paper I intend to explore this fascinating case of an esteemed homiletics professor who was removed from his pulpit in the effort to determine the role that Proudfoot's preaching proficiency, or lack thereof, contributed to the souring of his relationship with the congregation. The first part of the paper will provide a biographical sketch of John J. A. Proudfoot. The middle part will examine Proudfoot's *magnum opus*, *Systematic Homiletics*. The concluding part will return to the events surrounding Proudfoot's resignation. I will attempt to interpret the events in light of insights gleaned from the biographical and homiletical sections in the effort to determine the role that Proudfoot's preaching played in his ultimately being forced from his pulpit.

The Life and Times of John J. A. Proudfoot

John J. A. Proudfoot had a long and distinguished career as a pastor and as a professor, yet he is often relegated in the literature studying the period to a few passing sentences or, occasionally, to a brief paragraph, if mentioned at all.¹ Among his contemporaries, Proudfoot tends to be eclipsed by his fellow Divinity Hall graduate and United Secession Presbyterian churchman, William Caven. Even the chronicler of the first century of ministry at First Presbyterian in London is not immune from this tendency, telling us that William Proudfoot "trained a score or more of men for the ministry, among them his own

¹ For example, Proudfoot receives not a single mention in such works as Centennial Committee of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, *Enkindled by the Word: Essays on Presbyterianism in Canada* (Toronto: Presbyterian Publications, 1966); Neil Smith, Allan L. Farris, and H. Keith Markell, *A Short History of the Presbyterian Church in Canada* (Toronto: Presbyterian Publications, n.d.); John Webster Grant, *A Profusion of Spires: Religion in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988); and Michael Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century: College and Creed in English Canada from the Great Revival to the Great Depression* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991).

son, John J. A. Proudfoot, and William Caven, the latter becoming one of the outstanding figures in the Presbyterian Church in Canada.”² Taken together with the way the brief chapter on Proudfoot in the same work is sandwiched between glowing reports on the ministry of both his successor and predecessor at First Presbyterian, it is clear that the author does not consider John J. A. Proudfoot to be among the outstanding figures in the history of the Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Perhaps one reason the homiletician has been relegated to relative obscurity is that he is not even the most prominent pastor to bear the name Proudfoot. His father was one of the most significant personalities in early Presbyterianism in Canada. William Proudfoot set out for Canada in the summer of 1832 as one of the first three missionaries commissioned by the United Associate Secession Church.³ By the spring of 1833, he had founded a congregation in London, Ontario. The senior Proudfoot was a dedicated evangelist firmly committed to proclaiming the central reality of the cross.⁴ He travelled tirelessly and wrote voluminously,⁵ helped to organize and administer a presbytery,⁶ was the founding editor of *The Presbyterian Magazine*,⁷ and established and served as the sole professor of the Divinity Hall which trained candidates for ministry within the Secessionist United Missionary Synod.⁸ Within the literature, John J. A. Proudfoot never fully escapes from the imposing shadow cast by his father.

John Proudfoot was born on August 21, 1821, in Perthshire, Scotland.⁹ He was the fourth of 11 children born to William and Isobella Proudfoot.¹⁰ He came to Canada with his father in 1832 and set to work alongside his father in clearing and tilling the 200 acre farm that would provide a vital supplement to the senior Proudfoot’s meagre ministerial salary.¹¹ He received his theological training at his father’s Divinity Hall in London and was ordained on July 19, 1848.¹² Shortly thereafter, he was inducted as the minister for the congregation of Downie and Blanchard in southwestern Ontario, near London.¹³ In

² Fred Landon, *A History of the First Hundred Years of the First United Church, London, Ontario (Formerly the First Presbyterian Church) 1832–1932* (London: [s.n.], 1932), 15.

³ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴ Stewart D. Gill, *The Reverend William Proudfoot and the United Secession Mission in Canada* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 196.

⁵ John S. Moir, *Enduring Witness: A History of the Presbyterian Church in Canada*, 3d ed. (Burlington: Eagle Press Printers, 2004), 85.

⁶ Gill, *William Proudfoot*, 72–73.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁸ Moir, *Enduring Witness*, 117.

⁹ Landon, *History of the First Hundred Years*, 19.

¹⁰ Gavin McGregor, “The Reverend William Proudfoot: An Auld Acquaintance” (2011), 21, accessed April 2017, <http://www.fsaunited.com/PDFs/Miscellaneous/proudfootstory.pdf>.

¹¹ Landon, *History of the First Hundred Years*, 11, 19.

¹² Moir, *Enduring Witness*, 118; Landon, *History of the First Hundred Years*, 19. Several curiosities emerge in the literature at this point. First, Masters dates Proudfoot’s ordination as occurring in 1847. See D. C. Masters, *Protestant Church Colleges in Canada: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966), 47. Second, Landon describes the younger Proudfoot’s ordination as occurring at the hands of his father (*History of the First Hundred Years*, 19). However, I’m not sure how this description squares with Presbyterian polity or the actual practices of the day. In his lectures on church government, John Proudfoot describes the moderator of the presbytery presiding over ordinations (*Outlines of Lectures on Church Government: Delivered in Knox College* (Toronto: Press of the Canada Presbyterian, 1895), 36). However, William Proudfoot held the position of presbytery clerk for most of his life (Gill, *William Proudfoot*, 73).

¹³ “Finding Aid: Records of The Rev. William Proudfoot and Family,” 3. Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives, Toronto.

November 1850, William Proudfoot suffered a heart attack.¹⁴ After his death on January 16, 1851, John Proudfoot published a poignant reflection upon his father's final days in *Missionary Record of the United Presbyterian Church*.¹⁵

Following the death of the elder Proudfoot, the Canadian Church met in Synod and decided to search for an eminent person from Scotland to occupy Proudfoot's teaching post at Divinity Hall. Only one minister in attendance recorded his dissent to the decision: John Proudfoot.¹⁶ At this point, the younger Proudfoot may have been reflecting his father's convictions surrounding the need for the church to shed its Scottishness and become a truly Canadian church, or perhaps he simply saw himself as the logical heir to head up the theological college.¹⁷ Whether Proudfoot desired to follow in his father's footsteps as a professor at Divinity Hall is unclear; however, he did succeed his father as the minister of the congregation in London. Proudfoot was inducted as the minister of First Presbyterian on May 28, 1851, going on to serve the congregation for 38 years.¹⁸ Following the example of his father, he was a consummate Presbyterian churchman, acting as the clerk of the presbytery from 1851 to 1861. He was also the secretary of Home Mission work from 1851 to 1876¹⁹ and was elected moderator of the Synod of the Canada Presbyterian Church which assembled in Toronto in June of 1867.²⁰

Although Proudfoot's opponents at the end of his ministry depicted him as man out of touch with the times and his congregation, an examination of the breadth of his ministry reveals that he was, strictly speaking, neither a conservative nor a traditionalist. While little has been written about the day-to-day realities of Proudfoot's ministry among the people of First Presbyterian, several significant congregational developments during his tenure suggest that he was open to innovation. At the head of this list was the introduction of an organ into the congregation's worshipping life. Proudfoot's father, like most Presbyterian ministers of the time, was staunchly opposed to the use of musical instruments in worship and preferred the unaccompanied singing of the Psalms.²¹ However, it was during the younger Proudfoot's ministry in the latter half of the 1850s that a small reed organ was first installed.

This development horrified the Secessionist Presbytery, which sent representatives to remove the organ in 1858. Proudfoot successfully appealed the matter at the following General Assembly, which granted him permission to reinstall the organ.²² At the time of the formation of the Canada Presbyterian Church in 1861, in a concession to the Free

¹⁴ Gill, *William Proudfoot*, 207.

¹⁵ *Missionary Record of the United Presbyterian Church*, April 1851, 52, quoted in Gill, *William Proudfoot*, 207–8.

¹⁶ Gill, *William Proudfoot*, 130.

¹⁷ For a discussion of William Proudfoot's interest in and efforts towards "Canadianization," see the chapter titled "We Are Too Scotch: Attempts at Canadianization in the 1840s," in Gill, *William Proudfoot*, 111–47.

¹⁸ Landon, *History of the First Hundred Years*, 19. Another discrepancy emerges in the records at this point, as "Finding Aid: Records of The Rev. William Proudfoot and Family" dates Proudfoot's installation as occurring in 1852.

¹⁹ Kenneth L. Draper, "Finishing Badly: Religion, Authority, and Clergy in Late-Victorian London, Ontario," in *The Churches and Social Order in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Canada*, ed. Michael Gauvreau and Ollivier Hubert (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), 161.

²⁰ *Minutes of the Seventh Session of the Synod of the Canada Presbyterian Church, Held in Toronto, June 4–13* (Toronto: Lovell and Gibson, 1867), <http://presbyterianarchives.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/CPC-Minutes-1867.pdf>.

²¹ Gill, *William Proudfoot*, 204; McGregor, "William Proudfoot," 23.

²² Landon, *History of the First Hundred Years*, 46.

Church, the United Presbyterian congregations that had installed organs agreed to abandon using them. In 1871, First Presbyterian in London petitioned the General Assembly of the Canada Presbyterian Church to reintroduce organ music in its worship. This petition led to what Moir has termed “the moment of truth on the organ question” at the General Assembly of 1872.²³ The Assembly approved the request of Proudfoot’s congregation. While individual congregations would debate the merits of organ music for several more years, the die had been cast and Presbyterian worship in Canada would never be the same.

A new church building was constructed during John Proudfoot’s pastorate. This construction project was necessitated by a fire in December 1859 that destroyed the original structure. The cherished organ was saved, and Proudfoot managed to rescue his horse and buggy from his stable before flames consumed them.²⁴ In 1861–62, a new building was erected on a new site at the cost of about \$5600. A vestry and Sunday school room were added a few years later in 1865.²⁵ At the suggestion of the church treasurer, First Presbyterian became one of the first congregations in its area to introduce a weekly voluntary envelope system of giving.²⁶ Landon, in his account of the history of the congregation, observes that “in the first three years of the weekly offering system the debt on the church was cut in half.”²⁷

While Proudfoot’s pastorate was marked by a significant building project and innovations such as the introduction of an organ and offering envelopes, it was also a period of reorganization, as the congregation moved from being a missionary start-up into the next phase of its life. During this period, more than 200 of the geographically dispersed members left the congregation to start new congregations closer to their own homes. Although the planting of several new congregations could be viewed as a missionary success, there were undoubtedly some who looked upon the remaining congregation of 200 members and wistfully longed for the larger crowds of previous years.²⁸

Proudfoot’s appointment as lecturer in homiletics, pastoral theology, and church government at Knox College in 1867 would have significant implications on the shape of his ministry. From 1867 until his resignation from First Presbyterian in 1889, Proudfoot would spend the weekdays of the fall term each session lecturing in Toronto.²⁹ When his courses were in session, he would return to London in time for the Friday night prayer meeting, conduct weddings as needed, give an occasional public lecture, and preach twice on Sunday before returning to Toronto.³⁰

Over the years, this itinerary began to place great stress on the relationship between the congregation and its pastor. Landon suggests, “The work of the church would probably have been seriously handicapped by the pastor’s absence but for the fact that the women of the church organized and did much of the visiting, a faithful group serving in this way

²³ Moir, *Enduring Witness*, 133.

²⁴ McGregor, “William Proudfoot,” 23.

²⁵ Landon, *History of the First Hundred Years*, 19.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁸ There seems to be a hint of this in Landon’s presentation of this period, even though he acknowledges that the geographical dispersion of the initial congregation made such a development virtually inevitable (*History of the First Hundred Years*, 20–21).

²⁹ Brian J. Fraser, *Church, College, and Clergy: A History of Theological Education at Knox College, Toronto, 1844–1994* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995), 70, 75.

³⁰ Landon, *History of the First Hundred Years*, 21; Draper, “Finishing Badly,” 161.

for many years.”³¹ At the time of the controversial end to his ministry, among the complaints of the disaffected parishioners published in the *London Free Press* were the charges that “the minister neglects the social duties of his office, and the distance he lives from the city renders his oversight of the flock almost impossible.”³²

Following his resignation from First Presbyterian, Proudfoot continued to teach at Knox College for 12 more years.³³ The eminent Presbyterian historian John Moir has described Proudfoot as an “outstanding scholar,”³⁴ and in 1871, Proudfoot received an honorary doctor of divinity degree from Monmouth College.³⁵ Proudfoot was one of the four faculty members when Knox College took its place in 1875 as one of six colleges of the newly formed Presbyterian Church in Canada. Brian Fraser has described Knox College as a key battleground during this period in the emerging conflict between the older confessional approach to the Reformed tradition and an emerging progressive evangelical orthodoxy. Proudfoot’s colleagues William MacLaren and William Gregg were, according to Fraser, “staunch defenders of confessional orthodoxy.”³⁶ On the other hand, Proudfoot’s fellow Divinity Hall alumnus William Caven was “cautiously open to a different approach.”³⁷ According to Fraser, Proudfoot stayed out of these debates.³⁸

While that assessment may be true at the formal level, Proudfoot’s participation in the Conference on Christian Unity, a gathering of leaders from the Presbyterian, Methodist, and Anglican churches to discuss church union, suggests that if forced to choose sides, he would likely lean towards that of his old friend, Caven. At the conference, Proudfoot spoke quite congenially of the possibility of church union, imagining that if union were to come about, “the moral power of the Church would be felt in the politics of the Dominion.”³⁹ Although Proudfoot described his participation in the conference as rousing “kindlier feelings in my heart towards these sister Churches than I was ever able to feel or express before,”⁴⁰ this receptiveness did not stop him from at one point employing fiery rhetoric reminiscent of his father to express concern about the authority of prelatric bodies to proclaim binding rites and ceremonies giving rise to “Popish Saints Days.”⁴¹ When one considers that the opening section of Proudfoot’s lectures on church government consisted of a polemic against prelacy, this brief outburst in the midst of otherwise convivial participation in the conference is not entirely surprising.⁴²

Proudfoot’s final remarks at the conference most clearly support my contention that he would be found in Caven’s camp. In the dialogue surrounding “the Creeds,” Proudfoot

³¹ Landon, *History of the First Hundred Years*, 21.

³² Draper, “Finishing Badly,” 161, quoting “First Presbyterian Church,” *London Daily Free Press*, May 21, 1889.

³³ John Thomas McNeill, *The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1875–1925* (Toronto: General Board, Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1925), 79.

³⁴ Moir, *Enduring Witness*, 189. From the relatively little Moir has to say about Proudfoot in the book, the basis for this compliment is not entirely clear.

³⁵ Landon, *History of the First Hundred Years*, 21.

³⁶ Fraser, *Church, College, and Clergy*, 71.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁹ *Report of the Conference on Christian Unity, Held in the City of Toronto, April 24th and 25th, 1889* (Toronto: C. Blackett Robinson, 1889), 18.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 32. Gill discusses William Proudfoot’s suspicions of churches ruled by hierarchies in *William Proudfoot*, 212.

⁴² Proudfoot, *Outlines of Lectures on Church Government*, 3–11. In the same lectures, Proudfoot does later affirm, “Visible unity should be kept in view and aimed at” (17).

acknowledged his understanding of the provisional nature of the confessions: "If you adopt a confession of such a kind that it shall be subject to no change, then, of course, you place it on a level with the Word of God, which I entirely deprecate."⁴³ Rather, "the Church's creeds must change, not because the Word of God changes, but because the creeds come between the Word of God and the prevailing errors both in doctrine and polity."⁴⁴

Although stern in appearance and demanding in expectations, Proudfoot is remembered by his students for his enthusiasm for his subject and his generous heart.⁴⁵ In his lectures on church government, Proudfoot engaged in extensive biblical exegesis, alongside of measured historical reasoning, as he played the role of apologist for the superiority of the Presbyterian form of government.⁴⁶ Although lecturing on church government and pastoral theology were among his continuing responsibilities at the college, it was homiletics that captured his attention and energies.⁴⁷ It is interesting to note that the first four of Proudfoot's successors in the pulpit at First Presbyterian in London were all among his homiletics students at Knox College.⁴⁸ Proudfoot retired from his teaching responsibilities at Knox College in 1901.⁴⁹ He died in London, Ontario, on January 14, 1903.

Proudfoot's *Systematic Homiletics*

When John Proudfoot retired from Knox College in 1901, he intended to devote his remaining years to preparing his homiletics lectures for publication.⁵⁰ Ill health, followed by his death in 1903, led to this responsibility falling to his associate examiner at Knox College and his family pastor.⁵¹ Proudfoot's *magnum opus* was posthumously published in November of 1903. McNeill has observed that Proudfoot's *Systematic Homiletics* was one of the few technical studies from the field of pastoral theology produced by Canadian Presbyterians in the nineteenth century.⁵² Homiletician Stephen Farris has suggested that Proudfoot's work is the earliest Canadian textbook on preaching.⁵³

The pages of *Systematic Homiletics* are filled with many eminently practical insights into the ministry of preaching that remain fresh and timely today. Included among them

⁴³ *Report of the Conference on Christian Unity*, 42. Proudfoot sounds a similar note in his *Outlines of Lectures on Church Government*, 56.

⁴⁴ *Report of the Conference on Christian Unity*, 42.

⁴⁵ Landon, *History of the First Hundred Years*, 21; A. J. MacGillivray and J. A. Turnbull, preface to J. J. A. Proudfoot, *Systematic Homiletics*, ed. J. A. Turnbull and A. J. MacGillivray (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell, 1903), 9.

⁴⁶ Proudfoot, *Outlines of Lectures on Church Government*.

⁴⁷ Fraser, *Church, College, and Clergy*, 75. In an undocumented claim, Fraser suggests that Proudfoot referred to his discipline as "sacred rhetoric" (75). However, in *Systematic Homiletics*, Proudfoot is openly critical of those who refer to homiletics as "sacred rhetoric," as he believes that this perspective obscures the fact that "if rhetoric is the science of persuasion, there can only be one rhetoric" (40).

⁴⁸ Landon, *History of the First Hundred Years*, 22.

⁴⁹ McNeill, *Presbyterian Church in Canada*, 79; Fraser, *Church, College, and Clergy*, 103.

⁵⁰ At the Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives, I examined an earlier version of Proudfoot's lecture notes published for the use of his students in 1896. The structure of the lectures and, for the most part, the wording is identical with the posthumously published work. See John J. A. Proudfoot, *Substance of Lectures on Systematic Homiletics: Delivered in 1896* (Toronto: Press of the Canada Presbyterian, 1896).

⁵¹ J. A. Turnbull and A. J. MacGillivray, preface to Proudfoot, *Systematic Homiletics*, 7. Interestingly, the copy I read was a digital reproduction of the volume held in the library of the renowned Princeton theologian B. B. Warfield.

⁵² McNeill, *Presbyterian Church in Canada*, 193.

⁵³ Stephen Farris, "Preaching in Canada: The Absence of Constitutive Narrative and the Problem of Identity," *Consensus* 31, no. 1 (2006): 74.

are the following: gestures should be natural and slightly precede the sentiment that is verbally expressed;⁵⁴ fear of physical suffering is to be distinguished from godly fear;⁵⁵ those who step into the pulpit would do well to remember that “the Gospel is the most interesting thing in the world”;⁵⁶ preachers should consult the text in its original language;⁵⁷ “Preaching should be as full, rich and varied as the Bible itself”;⁵⁸ if the place of religious experience is completely ignored, a spurious form of religious experience will find its way into the life of the congregation;⁵⁹ don’t preach systematic theology, but rather discuss doctrines rhetorically as they appear in Scripture;⁶⁰ “Preaching should be suggestive, leading the people to think and study for themselves”;⁶¹ in recounting biblical narratives, the emphasis must fall upon God’s action;⁶² give the results of your exegetical research — don’t recap the process or name commentators;⁶³ excessive efforts to refute an argument can further strengthen the erroneous view within the congregation;⁶⁴ great care and skill must be used in crafting transitions;⁶⁵ pastors should prepare their prayers as seriously as they prepare their sermons;⁶⁶ and, finally, pulpit announcements should be kept as short as possible.⁶⁷

Proudfoot also introduces some evocative metaphors and elegant turns of phrase that serve to further illumine the work of preaching. The memorable analogies and sayings include these:

- Proudfoot asserted that the preacher who pays no heed to the form or organization of his sermon is akin to a host who offers a great feast for his friends, piling “in confusion on his table, fish, and great joints of meat, and vegetables of all kinds — some parts of the food burnt almost to a cinder and other parts raw — and say[s], ‘there is abundance of good food for you.’”⁶⁸
- He counselled that, just as athletes running a race must keep their eye on the goal, preachers must remain focused and not stop to gather flowers from beside the path.⁶⁹
- He reminded preachers constructing their sermons that, “[i]n an elegant frame house

⁵⁴ Proudfoot, *Systematic Homiletics*, 48.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 206. This is a word of challenge and advice that I think contemporary preachers of all stripes would do well to heed and reflect upon. For a couple of my own efforts to address the anthropologically driven character of much of contemporary preaching and recover a truly theological vision of preaching, see Robert J. Dean, *Leaps of Faith: Sermons from the Edge* (Eugene, OR: Resource, 2017), particularly the introduction (xvii–xxi); and Robert J. Dean, “A Tale of Two Stanleys, or, Why We Need More Pointless Sermons from Hauerwas,” in Stanley Hauerwas with Robert J. Dean, *Minding the Web: Making Theological Connections* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 292–309.

⁶³ Proudfoot, *Systematic Homiletics*, 224.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 247.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 315.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 319. This emphasis on the brevity of pulpit announcements garners Stephen Farris’s hearty “Amen!” Farris, “Preaching in Canada,” 74.

⁶⁸ Proudfoot, *Systematic Homiletics*, 82.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 199.

it is not necessary to make the posts, sleeps and the joists appear.”⁷⁰

- He offered this aphorism: “He who trusts in anecdotes is the first to run out.”⁷¹

While the twenty-first century reader will find many discrete tips that remain insightful and relevant, on the whole, the experience of entering into the pages of *Systematic Homiletics* is akin to traversing a foreign landscape. This sense of dislocation is partly attributable to Proudfoot’s many dialogue partners whose influence, for the most part, remains below the surface as they are rarely named and not one footnote appears in the book. Fraser suggests, “The master rhetoricians in Proudfoot’s mind were George Campbell and Hugh Blair, both prominent preachers and educators in the Moderate party in the Church of Scotland during the latter part of the eighteenth century. They sought to follow a middle way between the dogmatism and emotionalism of the evangelicals and the rationalism of the deists.”⁷² On top of the obscurity of Proudfoot’s sources for the contemporary reader, some of his deepest homiletical convictions run against the grain of some of today’s most influential homiletical understandings. Farris suggests that Proudfoot’s preference for the abstract over the concrete places him squarely at odds with the “New Homiletics” which dominated homiletical theory at the end of the twentieth century.⁷³

At this point, it would be helpful to briefly survey the shape of the argument of *Systematic Homiletics* before turning to some issues that are of heightened significance for our investigation into the events surrounding the end of Proudfoot’s preaching ministry. Proudfoot defines *homiletics* as “*the application of its [rhetoric’s] principles to religious discourse.*”⁷⁴ Effective preaching will have a different aim and subject than public speaking, but it will embody the same rhetorical principles, for “rhetoric is a formal science, which has no matter of its own and lends itself as easily to preaching the Gospel as to the discussion of matters pertaining to the common weal and the affairs of domestic life.”⁷⁵ All rhetorical discourse must have a practical aim and a definite subject; in this preaching is no different.⁷⁶ The practical aim of preaching is the conversion of the sinner and the sanctification of the believer.⁷⁷ Such an impact can be achieved only if the preacher has a proper subject which can be applied to the whole mind of the believer, informing the understanding, exciting the affections, and moving the will.⁷⁸ A sermon must be united by

⁷⁰ Ibid., 224.

⁷¹ Ibid., 279.

⁷² Fraser, *Church, College, and Clergy*, 76.

⁷³ Farris, “Preaching in Canada,” 74. For further comparison between the inductive turn represented in the work of the New Homiletics and the earlier deductive approach to preaching, see O. C. Edwards Jr., *A History of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 799–802.

⁷⁴ Proudfoot, *Systematic Homiletics*, 43 [italics original].

⁷⁵ Ibid., 22.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 18.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 233.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 14, 233. There is great resonance at this point with one of the earliest textbooks on preaching, *De Doctrina Christiana*, in which Augustine, reflecting the influence of Cicero, emphasizes that a truly eloquent speaker must speak so as to teach, delight, and persuade (IV.12.27). Augustine writes, “It is the duty, therefore, of the eloquent churchman, when he is trying to persuade people about something that has to be done, not only to teach, in order to instruct them; not only to delight, in order to hold them; but also to sway, in order to conquer and win them.” Augustine, *Teaching Christianity: De Doctrina Christiana*, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1996), IV.13.29. Proudfoot, however, never explicitly references Augustine when he is discussing how preachers must satisfy the understanding, excite emotion, and influence the will.

a single subject; it is “the germ of the discourse; the whole must come out of it as the oak tree comes out of the acorn.”⁷⁹ The subject must not be confused with the scriptural text. In fact, although most sermons will have texts, a text is not, strictly speaking, necessary for a sermon.⁸⁰ When a text is utilized, “the preacher should find his subject in the specific and most important idea in his text.”⁸¹ Although Proudfoot holds the scholastic preaching-style of the Puritans in derision, his emphasis upon a single subject emerging from the text reflects an enduring Puritan influence, perhaps mediated to him through the rhetorical writings of Hugh Blair.⁸²

The preacher should be able to express his subject in a terse, well-crafted single sentence.⁸³ Quoting Cicero, Proudfoot suggests that the process of invention involves “genius, method and diligence.”⁸⁴ Having invented a subject, the preacher must now utilize method to cultivate all of its persuasive power, and rhetorical development is employed to stimulate greater depths of feeling and conviction. Proudfoot explains:

Method indicates the manner in which the subject is presented to the understanding by explanation and proof; rhetorical development is for the purpose of excitation and persuasion. It is easy to see that these two processes must be combined in religious discourse. We have no right to excite without the instrumentality of truth presented to understanding. On the other hand, we have no right to address the understanding without exciting feeling and thus influencing the will.⁸⁵

Rhetorical movement is achieved through the proper arrangement of parts in a natural order or in increasing strength so that the subject is kept in contact with the mind of the hearer, contributing to an increase in interest until the climax of the sermon is reached.⁸⁶ Finally, Proudfoot highlights the significance of preachers being able to adapt their messages to their audiences.⁸⁷ Commending the work of Jonathan Edwards, Proudfoot maintains that the work of adaptation requires the knowledge of the “fourteen pure moral or religious affections available for persuasion.”⁸⁸ “Without a knowledge of the nature of religious affection,” Proudfoot maintains, “a preacher or spiritual adviser must work in the dark.”⁸⁹ Furthermore, it is essential that the preacher adapts himself to both his subject and his hearers. He must (1) “be influenced by warm affection toward his hearers,”⁹⁰ (2) “have confidence in the Gospel as the means, and only means, of saving sinners,”⁹¹ and (3) “be affected by his subject precisely as he wishes his hearers to be affected by it.”⁹²

⁷⁹ Proudfoot, *Systematic Homiletics*, 32.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 77. When encountered by Proudfoot’s use of gender-exclusive pronouns, it is important to recall that, at that time, only men were considered to be viable candidates for ordination in the Presbyterian Church in Canada.

⁸² W. J. Clyde Ervine and John A. Vissers, “True Preachers Preaching Truly: The Goal of Preaching in the Reformed Tradition,” *Didaskalia* 15, no. 1 (September 2003): 36; Edwards, *A History of Preaching*, 596.

⁸³ Proudfoot, *Systematic Homiletics*, 69.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 155–56.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 236.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 257–86.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 261.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 262–63.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 287.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 289.

The title of John Proudfoot's *magnum opus*, *Systematic Homiletics*, bears the indelible imprint of modernity with its systematizing impulse. This modern impulse is particularly evident in the introductory chapter to the work. There Proudfoot criticizes crude empirical methods that simply attempt to emulate the characteristics of great preachers from the past. This, he believes, locks preachers in the past and curtails their creative power.⁹³ Instead, employing some of the watchwords of the modern age, Proudfoot insists that logic and psychology should be drawn upon to provide a "scientific basis" for rhetoric or homiletics, in which ministers should aspire "to acquire the greatest possible efficiency."⁹⁴ Proudfoot does seem to envision a type of universal applicability for his system, observing, "It is clear, then, that *only one rhetoric is possible*. Its principles never can become different unless a change takes place in the constitution of men's minds — in their intellectual and active powers."⁹⁵ On this basis, Proudfoot has no hesitations about criticizing the discourses of both Augustine and John Chrysostom. The sermons of these two giants — the former who was a professor of rhetoric before his conversion to the Christian faith and the latter who was given the name "golden-mouthed" on account of his eloquence — Proudfoot tells us, "are not constructed on sound rhetorical principles."⁹⁶ Along similar lines, while describing his method for logically dividing and explaining texts, he later asserts that "[s]ome may consider this a stiff method of discussion, but it is not so. It is in *perfect accord* with the laws of thought."⁹⁷

Conclusion

Over the course of my investigation into the life and times of John J. A. Proudfoot, I came across several photographs of the preacher and professor. In observing these photos, I couldn't help but be struck by how Proudfoot appeared to be a man from a different era. In the Knox College graduating class photo of 1883, while all the other men are either clean-shaven or sporting moustaches or thick beards, Proudfoot appears with large sideburns joined to a chin-strap beard.⁹⁸ His snow white hair is as conspicuous as the fact that he is one of only a few men not looking at the camera and the only one with his arms crossed. One garners a similar impression from glancing at the photographs of the first five ministers of First Presbyterian Church in Landon's history of the congregation.⁹⁹ In both facial hair and dress, Proudfoot more closely resembles the appearance of his mid-nineteenth century missionary-pastor father than the men who come after him.

A similar sensation occurs when moving from the photos to the written page. In April 1891, one of Proudfoot's students published an essay in the *Knox College Monthly*, which appears to have been an attempt to introduce the major contours of Proudfoot's approach to homiletics to a broader audience.¹⁰⁰ Although the essay was published 12 years before the appearance of Proudfoot's *Systematic Homiletics*, it has a much more contemporary feel and is written in a style far more engaging and accessible to the contemporary reader.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 27–28.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 185 [italics mine].

⁹⁸ The photograph appears in Fraser, *Church, College, and Clergy*, 91.

⁹⁹ Landon, *History of the First Hundred Years*, 18.

¹⁰⁰ J. A. Macdonald, "The Text, the Subject, the Sermon," *Knox College Monthly* 13, no. 6 (1891): 291–98.

In attempting to determine how the contents and convictions of *Systematic Homiletics* may have affected the closing years of Proudfoot's ministry at First Presbyterian, the historian is confronted with the significant dilemma of dating the contents of the book. After all, *Systematic Homiletics* was published some 14 years after the conclusion of Proudfoot's pastoral ministry. The printed version of his lectures that Proudfoot made available to his students in 1896 reveals that the shape and content of the posthumously published book were already in place at this time.¹⁰¹ Given that Proudfoot had been teaching homiletics since 1867, it is not unreasonable to think that his material had been assembled for some time before the version of the lectures he produced for his students in 1896. The essay by his student J. A. Macdonald, published in *Knox College Monthly* in April 1891, suggests that Proudfoot's "system" was well in place by this time. However, any attempt to suggest a date before 1891 would be mere speculation on my part. As a result, when one encounters Proudfoot's criticisms of those who "put forth their utmost efforts to amuse and attract the young,"¹⁰² it is not clear as to whether this may have been an established mindset during his ministry that led him to overlook the importance of communicating to younger generations or whether these are the words of one reacting to the charges raised against him at the end of his ministry. In a similar way, although one cannot be sure of the dating, Proudfoot's assertion, "If he [the preacher] preaches well the elders will not take any liberties with him,"¹⁰³ takes on an ironic hue in light of how his ministry came to an end at First Presbyterian.

So, was a failure to preach well a contributing factor to the misunderstandings that plagued the end of Proudfoot's pastoral ministry? Several passages in *Systematic Homiletics* suggest that Proudfoot was not completely unaware of the changing cultural tides. For example, at one point he observes that Presbyterians seem to be afraid to choose biblical texts that excite feelings;¹⁰⁴ at another, he criticizes preaching for being too didactic.¹⁰⁵ However, his own approach, while differing from that of his predecessors, remains firmly committed to the assertion that "[p]reaching is the most didactic kind of oratory."¹⁰⁶ As long as preaching endeavours to address the understanding, it will necessarily have some type of didactic quality. Where Proudfoot may have run into problems, though, is with the assumption that his method of proofs and explanations, which appear wooden and burdensome to the contemporary reader, are in "perfect accord with the laws of thought."¹⁰⁷

The universalizing tendency in *Systematic Homiletics* may have prevented Proudfoot from recognizing and responding to the changes in rhetorical tastes bound up with the shifting tides of culture. While Proudfoot stressed the importance of adapting to one's hearers, such adaptation may be hindered if one is under the impression that he or she has discovered the timeless rules of rhetoric. A further factor emerging from the pages of *Systematic Homiletics*, which could possibly have contributed to Proudfoot's falling out with his congregation, is the repeated insistence that it is possible to re-preach sermons.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰¹ Proudfoot, *Substance of Lectures on Systematic Homiletics*.

¹⁰² Proudfoot, *Systematic Homiletics*, 64.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 185.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 307-8.

Although we have no data on how often Proudfoot re-preached sermons, such a practice could easily contribute to a sense of sermonic staleness and pulpit-fatigue amid the congregation.

Finally, Proudfoot asserts that “nothing less than intimate intercourse and acquaintance with persons can enable you to adapt the matter of discourse to them.”¹⁰⁹ It does appear that Proudfoot was, for many years, while he was away from his congregation teaching in Toronto, drawing upon the relational reserves he had built up from his early involvement with the congregation. It is possible that he reached a point where he had both exhausted these relational reserves and was sufficiently isolated from the lives and concerns of the younger generation that he was no longer able to adapt his messages to them. It is possible, too, to see validation for this interpretation in the fact that Proudfoot’s successor at First Presbyterian, William John Clark, a recent Knox College graduate, hit the ground running with his first sermon on the need for enthusiasm in the ministry.¹¹⁰ Congregational historian Brandon Landon asserts that during the pastorate of Clark, “the pulpit of First Church became famous in Western Ontario.”¹¹¹ A comparison of the sermons of Proudfoot and Clark would be quite revealing in this regard. Unfortunately, I am not aware of any extant sermons from Clark’s ministry, while Proudfoot’s surviving sermons remain undated and are written in largely illegible shorthand.¹¹²

Although I think it is possible, perhaps even likely, that Proudfoot’s preaching contributed to the difficulties he encountered at the end of his pastorate, the matter is certainly more complex. It is interesting to note the things that Landon chooses to comment upon in characterizing Clark’s successful ministry. He writes of Clark’s “sympathetic nature” which “made him a welcome and inspiring guest in every home,” his “breadth of view,” and “his clear and sympathetic understanding of the problems which faced the individuals in his congregation.”¹¹³ This assessment lends support to Draper’s argument that Proudfoot was operating from a model which understood the pastor as the learned intellectual in a time when many other pastors were moving in an activist direction. It is worth quoting Draper at length on this point:

The expectations connected with pastoral ministry had changed during his extended pastorate, and Proudfoot had not moved with the times. This was particularly evident when his ministry was compared to that of other clergy in the city. The image of the pastor as scholarly divine delivering the Word twice on Sunday and baptizing, marrying, and burying as called upon was already out of date. The voluntarist church demanded an activist clergy involved in ministering to the poor, supporting missionaries, providing uplifting lectures and entertainment, and, perhaps most importantly, retaining the interest of the young. It was the concern that the church provide the “attractions” that would ensure the incorporation of the next generation that preoccupied church adherents more than any of the others.¹¹⁴

The preacher in Ecclesiastes tells us, “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven” (Eccles. 3:1 KJV). After 38 years in the pulpit, perhaps

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 272.

¹¹⁰ Draper, “Finishing Badly,” 164.

¹¹¹ Landon, *History of the First Hundred Years*, 26.

¹¹² Proudfoot’s sermons can be found in the Proudfoot family fonds in the Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives.

¹¹³ Landon, *History of the First Hundred Years*, 26.

¹¹⁴ Draper, “Finishing Badly,” 163–64.

John Proudfoot's time had passed. As a professor and pastor myself, who, having written a dissertation while pastoring a congregation, knows the intense and sometimes incompatible demands placed upon one by these two callings, I cannot help but empathize with Proudfoot's plight. Even though some of the seeds of the demise of his pastorate may be found scattered throughout his *Systematic Homiletics*, my heart goes out to this dedicated churchman who from all appearances sought to serve God to the best of his abilities in the local church and in the equipping of pastors for service in the Presbyterian Church in Canada.

In light of the events of 1889, Proudfoot may appear to us as a man behind the times; however, we must remember that, at other points in his long pastoral and teaching ministries, he was ahead of his time. Proudfoot served as both a pastor and professor in an important transitional stage in the life of his congregation, his college, and his country. Whether surging ahead or failing to keep up with the times, perhaps the greatest comfort for all pastors and theological educators is that Proudfoot was never outside of God's time.