

GEORGE BRYCE,
MANITOBA SCIENTIST, CHURCHMAN AND HISTORIAN
1844 - 1931

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Department of History

by

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Winnipeg, Manitoba

April 1983

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ABSTRACT

Rev. George Bryce (1844-1931), Presbyterian educator, churchman, scientist and historian, came to Winnipeg to found Manitoba College in 1871. As a member of the elite group of businessmen and professionals who came to dominate Manitoba society after 1870, he participated in the creation of many of the basic social and cultural institutions of the Province. Using his history books, pamphlets, sermons and papers, this thesis analyzes his attitudes, mores and convictions in an attempt to reconstruct his worldview. Since this was a worldview shared with others of his class, this study is intended to be a contribution to the social history of the Winnipeg elite, 1871 - 1920.

Bryce's personality was characterized by a pragmatism which imposed a certain order on his values. Progress, both material and spiritual, was the ultimate value. The order and stability which were the necessary preconditions of progress could only be assured by a strong Protestant church, a strong public school, British values and institutions. Science and technology were seen by him as the best tools for speedy advancement. This belief gave him a powerful incentive to set aside his religious qualms with regard to the Darwinian theories and the new science.

British values and British people as the carriers of those values were the heroes of Bryce's history. The Hudson's Bay Company was cast in the role of guardian of British interests, law, order and morality in opposition to the moral and social anarchy of the fur-trade life. Later in his life, Bryce would champion British imperialist sentiment as the touchstone of a Canadian identity.

"AND THERE WERE GIANTS IN THOSE DAYS."



This is the man whom you all know to be
The father of the University,
A man in every faculty so keen
That he's the very "pulse of the machine."
Politician, soldier, educator
And like the earth, he's largest at th' equator.
Of his great deeds the half hath not been told
How he kept the Fenians back in the brave days
of old.

Full well we laugh with counterfeited glee
At all his jokes (for he hath two or three).
Him all the students love and praise and bless,
And pray his shadow never may grow less.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writing of a thesis is a gruelling undertaking not only for the writer but for friends, family and co-workers. Without the help and encouragement of these people, I could not have finished this project. Although extending thanks here seems lame repayment indeed, I do not want to miss the opportunity of acknowledging their support.

I have been fortunate to receive advice on the project itself from many people. I am indebted to Dr. Gordon Harland for useful information about the relationship of George Bryce to John Mark King. Rev. Bob Haverluck suggested a number of apt sources for background reading. Mrs. Phyllis Gibson, Bryce's niece, provided background information on the Bryce family that could not have been obtained from the written record. I am especially indebted to my adviser, Prof. Gerry Friesen, who has been unfailingly patient and encouraging.

My co-worker, Margaret McPherson, typed drafts for most of the ensuing chapters and gave valuable editorial advice. I could not have done without her typing skills or her friendship during the past two years. -

My husband has become a surprisingly cheerful expert on the care and feeding of the thesis writer. While professing firm confidence in my skills, he wisely refused to read any drafts until the final copy. His belief in my ability has given me the confidence to complete this project. For this and many other things, I am deeply grateful.

PREFACE

Recent developments in the historical discipline have made historians more conscious of methodological concerns than ever before. Pirating concepts, frameworks and research methods from the social sciences has become an accepted parlour game. In approaching the mind of George Bryce, I have drawn on a diverse assortment of concepts from the sociology of knowledge, literary criticism and social theory. This background reading is not always explicit in the text and, therefore, I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge some intellectual debts.

For reasons outlined in Chapter one, the thought of George Bryce does not lend itself to the traditional methodology of the history of ideas. An intellectual history of a non-intellectual is as useless as it is paradoxical. For this reason I turned to the sociology of knowledge whose main and, indeed, only undisputed insight is that consciousness is, in some way or in some degree, determined by the social milieu.

My approach to this problem has been greatly influenced by the work of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, notably their The Social Construction of Reality.¹ According to Berger and Luckmann, everything that passes for knowledge in society is the legitimate province of the sociology of knowledge, especially the "taken for granted" thought of the man in the street.

This is a particularly fruitful approach to Canadian intellectual history since Canada has produced few intellectuals of international calibre. Canadian intellectual history, if it is to be done at all, must concentrate on the crucial conjunction of consciousness and social context. This is the kind of intellectual history advocated by Brian McKillop in his article, "Nationalism, Identity and Canadian Intellectual History".² McKillop encourages would be intellectual historians to stop bemoaning the limits placed on their subject matter by the colonial mentality and to devote themselves to an analysis of the everyday mental framework of Canadians. It is only in this way that real insights about that elusive bug-bear, the Canadian identity (or identities), can be gained.

I have tried to take his advice as well as that of S.R. Mealing in his 1965 article, "The Concept of Social Class and the Interpretation of Canadian History".³ Here Mealing advances a plausible explanation for the neglect, on the part of Canadian historians, of class as a conceptual tool, and a hope that his colleagues would, while ignoring the extremes of social determinism, integrate class as a factor in their analysis.

In this spirit, I have assumed Bryce's middle-class status to be of fundamental importance in analyzing his worldview. Following Berger and Luckmann, I have proceeded from the premise that most of Bryce's social attitudes had the covert purpose of legitimating the status quo and, by extension, his own position in the status quo.

CHAPTER I

BIOGRAPHICAL INTRODUCTION

Judged by the quality of his historical writing, modern scholars have been amply justified in their neglect of Rev. George Bryce. Yet his nine full-length books and over forty-five pamphlets as well as his sermon manuscripts afford a unique insight into a set of values, attitudes and mores that he shared with a whole generation of canny angloceltic protestant entrepreneurs in the late nineteenth-century Canadian West. These largely Ontario-born businessmen dreamt of Winnipeg as the hub of a vast industrial and agricultural hinterland. Beginning in 1870, they very quickly gained a dominant position in Manitoba in terms of economic opportunity, political power and cultural influence.

Ministers along with other professional groups were very much a part of this elite. Although there were traditional Presbyterian strictures forbidding ministers to engage openly in commerce, Bryce and others of his clerical brethren took part in discreet real estate investments and other financial schemes to supplement their often meagre salaries. Their close ties to businessmen through church, fraternal associations, cultural and philanthropic work and friendships are easy to document. That Bryce and other

ministers worked so well with the commercial men through all these associations is evidence of the shared nature of their vision of the future and of the kind of society that ought to be created in the West.

Although some scholarly work has been done, notably by Alan Artibise¹, to identify this elite and document its hegemony of Winnipeg society in the post 1870 period, not much attention has been paid to the content of their view of the world. The values, social attitudes and mores which informed their daily lives, taken together, provided the rationale for their behaviour. The stolid virtues of the Ontario farm, the belief in progress through technology, and the conviction that they knew what was best for society, Bryce and his colleagues brought with them from Old Canada. They were soon in a position to press western Canadian society into the mold of these values.

This thesis represents, through an analysis of the worldview of George Bryce, a contribution to the social history of the Winnipeg elite of the period 1871-1920. It will document not only the sources and interrelationships of his ideas, but the way in which these ideas found expression in his work as a science teacher and promoter, churchman, and, especially, as a historian of the western region. It is understood that Bryce's ideas and his actions formed a closely related whole from which neither part should be artificially abstracted.

Born 22 April 1844 on a farm near the village of Mount Pleasant in Brant County, Ontario, George Bryce was the eldest of four sons. His Scottish parents, George and Catherine Bryce, had come to Ontario from Dunblane, Perthshire in 1843. Little is known about Bryce's parental home. His father must have been well regarded in the County, having been appointed Justice of the Peace. It would appear that the family was neither desperately poor nor comfortably prosperous.

His parents had at least an elementary education and instilled in their sons a love of learning that was to pay off in their future lives. Their household was supplied with a sober array of books on Scottish theology, travel, Christian biography, and english literature. When the time came, money was found to send George and his younger brother Peter to university; George in Arts and Theology and Peter in Medicine. Alec later inherited the family farm and Robert became a partner in a Winnipeg dry goods firm.

After spending his early years in local schools and the Brantford High School, Bryce entered University College of the University of Toronto in 1863. A high achiever throughout his school career, he was the winner of numerous medals, prizes and scholarships, including the university silver medal in Natural Science. He was elected President of the College Metaphysical Society and President of the College Table. He was also secretary of the Natural Science Club

and a keen football player. In 1867 he graduated with a B.A. and in 1868 with an M.A. In 1868 he spent a term as a teacher and school inspector in Scotland, Ontario.

It was during his university career that he would experience his only taste of military action. In 1866, as a member of the Queen's Own Rifles, the militia regiment of the University of Toronto, Bryce was present at the Fenian raid at Ridgeway. As ensign of the regiment, he was responsible for compiling the list of wounded and dead. This raid was a miserable comedy of errors in which the Canadian military staff parlayed lack of preparedness and errors of judgement into a complete retreat at the hands of the Fenians.

One might have expected a veteran of this skirmish to view it with a jaundiced eye. It is, perhaps, a measure of Bryce's romantic nature that he would relate the event to his students, painting it in such stirring martial colours that the students could have been forgiven for assuming it to have been a resounding Canadian victory. He had a more candid view of the raid, as he showed by fictionalizing it in his novel, but he grew more nostalgic about it as the years passed.

Having decided on the Presbyterian ministry as his vocation, he entered Knox College in 1869. He continued to impress as a student, taking five out of the six prizes open to him in the final year. One of his student mission fields

was the town of West Gwillembury, where he met the descendants of those Selkirk settlers who had left the Red River Colony in 1814. It was a prophetic meeting for his subsequent historical interests.

On his graduation, he was sent to be assistant minister at Chalmers Church, Quebec City. He had hardly arrived when a directive came from the General Assembly in August of 1871 that he was to go to Winnipeg to found a college among the settlers at Kildonan.

For all his attainments, he had not been the first choice of the Assembly. Rev. John Thompson, an older more experienced man had first been approached.² Thompson declined the appointment leaving the Assembly to turn to Bryce. At just 27 years of age, Bryce was a surprising second choice. However, it was probably felt that he could sustain the tough physical demands of starting and administering a college, teaching, and taking part in home missions ministry.

The Assembly's decision to found a college in Manitoba at this time is equally surprising. The Canada Presbyterian Church was not noted for bold initiatives in outreach. It is true that Rev. John Black and a delegation of Presbyterian settlers had pushed hard for this scheme at the Assembly and had done so for several years prior to 1871. Black, who had arrived at Red River in 1851 had the traditional Presbyterian conviction that education, both

spiritual and secular, was the responsibility of the churches. One of his first acts was to set up a primary school at Kildonan where the children of Presbyterian settlers, who had hitherto attended the Anglican schools, would obtain the basics of elementary education as well as instruction in the Presbyterian faith.

By the 1860s it became obvious that secondary education was a necessity. On application to the General Assembly of the Canada Presbyterian Church, David Whimster was sent to teach preparatory courses. In 1869, with change in the air and contact with the outside world growing, Black began to solicit support for a college in Manitoba. He was aware of the future need to prepare men for the professions and wanted Presbyterians to be in the forefront of post-secondary education. The fact that the Anglican College of St. John's had been involved in higher education, albeit fitfully, since 1849 aroused Black's denominational jealousy.

Nonetheless, it is hard to imagine John Black, even backed by the wealthiest settlers of Kildonan, having much influence at the General Assembly when it came time to contemplate the expense of raising a college among a sparse population with dubious prospects for growth. It is possible that the Canada Presbyterian Church, whose numbers had a strongly marked tendency to support the liberal party, had been swayed by the expansionist rhetoric of George Brown's Globe. It is, perhaps, also true that the college

Bryce was sent out to found was more in the nature of a high school with the equivalent of two years of university study tacked on. This would explain why the relatively callow Bryce could be seen as an acceptable candidate to head such a school. It is regrettable that the earliest records of the College have been lost and can not, therefore, shed any light on the intentions of the founders.

The Manitoba that Bryce found in 1871 was picturesque enough to suit even his romantic temperament. It was a society in transition from fur-trade economy to agricultural hinterland. The often fractious elements that had comprised that older society--english and french Métis, Kildonan settlers, Hudson's Bay Company officers and employees--still retained their factional character though they were being tugged and pulled by the increasing number of Ontario-born and British settlers. The gradual erosion of these factions, with their delicate alliances and fragile coalitions, took place through the 1870's. As Gerald Friesen has rightly pointed out, "The era of the fur trade and cart trail and buffalo hunt did not end as suddenly as the Riel Provisional Government because the habits of a half-century changed very slowly."³

As he went about the difficult task of finding classroom space, recruiting students, and finding text-books in the late fall of 1871, Bryce became fascinated by the vestiges of this culture. He spent the little spare time

available to him talking to old settlers like Andrew McDermot and ingratiating himself with the Hudson's Bay Company officers. The St. Andrew's Society was founded shortly after his arrival and he became an enthusiastic member. This Society allowed him to meet with both the older Scottish settlers and with fellow Ontario-born honorary Scots like J.F. Bain. Information gleaned from conversations during these early years provided much background material for his later histories.

The next thirteen years of his life afforded little time for the writing of history. College administration, teaching English literature and natural science, preaching on Sundays, convening the Presbytery Home Missions Committee, helping to set up the Winnipeg school system, and participating in the founding of the University of Manitoba and the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba took up all his time. The catalogue of his activities during this period is all the more remarkable in that much of his time was spent outside the Province on fund raising expeditions on behalf of the College. As if this were not enough, he somehow found time to read externally for a Bachelor's degree in Law at the University of Toronto which he obtained in 1878. Although he never joined the Manitoba Bar, he was able to use his legal knowledge to good advantage as financial agent for the College and the Home Missions Committee. On at least one occasion, as well, he