Introduction

Religious conversions have, in the past, actually occurred; peoples’ lives have apparently been profoundly and permanently changed—sometimes gradually and sometimes suddenly and traumatically. Conversions still take place and so do and so have religious revivals—spiritual awakenings often involving large numbers of men, women and children. In fact, since the 1770s, tens of thousands of Canadians have been deeply affected by the religious revivals which have frequently, like epidemics, swept through communities, sometimes through entire regions and once or twice through whole provinces. Conversions and Awakenings, it should be stressed, were key components of evangelical Protestantism. This movement had its theological roots in the creeds of the early church and the confessions of the Reformation, with special stress being placed upon the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It emphasized that there must be a conscious response to the grace of God, and that all who had thus experienced conversion were to be active witnesses concerning Christ. Clergy who participated were to be eagerly involved in furthering this evangelical gospel. Itinerant evangelists, who had appeared from time to time in the history of Christianity and who were increasingly called revivalists, were particularly prominent in this widespread movement.

The evangelical movement had several major pulsations and a number of minor ones from the second quarter of the eighteenth century until the twentieth. It began in what is now Germany, the United Kingdom and the American colonies, having an impact on almost all of Protestantism. This movement also affected a strong minority of Anglicans, a majority of Presbyterians, most of the Congregationalists and almost all of the Baptists, while Methodism was itself a product of the movement.

Yet, despite the frequency and intensity of some of these revivals over a two-hundred-year period in what is now Canada, and despite the remarkable number of Canadians touched directly or indirectly by them, surprisingly little has been written about the revivals by Canadian religious scholars. It is as though the revivals and the revivalists who have
helped coax these often large-scale social movements into existence have been ruthlessly and unceremoniously relegated to some dark and distant corner of historical oblivion by the shapers of the Canadian historical tradition. It is understandable, perhaps, why so many secular historians have been, and are, either indifferent or hostile to the Protestant revivalist tradition and all that it represents. Looking at the Canadian past largely through a secular lens carefully ground both by a suspicion and opposition to most things religious, they see what they want to see and what seems especially relevant to them today. A significant secular bias, it may be argued, shapes their research methodology and their results as they try to trace the roots of what appears to them to be especially relevant today back into an earlier period. Working-class scholars and feminists, for example, as well as Marxists, Socialists, Liberals, Conservatives, Anglophiles, Francophiles, “ethnics,” regionalists and out and out cynics drill into the past in order to try to explain some contemporary obsession or concern. Furthermore, they are encouraged to do so by granting agencies preoccupied with what the Canada Council and the SSHRCC (Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada) proudly refer to as “the social relevance” of financially supportable research.¹

The secular bias of so much recent Canadian historical research and writing as well as that of the major granting agencies have, without question, turned serious scholarly interest and concern away from Canadian religious history in general and from what may be called the evangelical tradition — especially revivalism — in particular. According to one scholar, the distinctive elements of the North American evangelical tradition since the eighteenth century have been a heavy emphasis on the “intense conversion experience, fervid piety” and “Biblical literalism.”² Each of these characteristics, it may be argued, is seen by our new secular priests as embarrassing relics from a pre-modern age. The “evangelical tradition,” moreover, seems to have far too much in common with contemporary fundamentalism, especially its peculiar American TV variant, and few Canadian scholars want to be found guilty by any kind of association with such a movement, with good reason. To study the evangelical tradition and revivalism seriously, objectively and with empathy is often viewed as a closed-minded acceptance of the fundamentalist position and an irrational betrayal of all that is good, progressive and open-minded — in other words, what is perceived to be scholarly.

One can understand but not necessarily condone the secular bias of so much recent Canadian historical writing, but the question still remains, Why is it that those few scholars who regard themselves as evangelicals or
at least sympathetic to the evangelical position are apparently so indifferent to the evangelical historical tradition, and especially revivalism? Are they merely indifferent to the past because they feel almost intuitively that it has nothing of value to contribute to the present? Or are they, for some reason, suspicious of the past, fearing that it might, in fact, embarrass them? Or is it that they, for some reason or other, have little real historical sense and therefore lack the necessary scholarly skills to scrape into the deep recesses of past events and personalities? Or is it that their simple providential approach to history — what some of their critics unfairly call the “Showers of Blessing Approach” — really makes serious historical writing basically redundant? There may be other reasons as well — a conviction that “conservative” biblical scholarship is far more important in protecting the pristine evangelical faith than is historical writing about what to many is an irrelevant evangelical historical tradition. Moreover, according to at least one influential Canadian evangelical, H. H. Budd, the president of Briercrest Bible College, true evangelicals in Canada are — as he once cogently put it — “much busier in making history than in writing it.”

In other words, they want to devote their time and their energy in bringing about conversions rather than in researching, for example, some obscure and largely forgotten eighteenth- or nineteenth-century evangelist or religious revival.

What seems quite evident within the Canadian context, therefore, is that the evangelical community has, for a variety of reasons, surprisingly little real historical interest. It is as though the past does not exist for many of these people, who remain preoccupied instead with the present and the future — especially the future. They are apparently not afraid to close their eyes to lessons to be learned, especially from past mistakes, but also from past successes. Moreover, as they slide into the future, they evidently see no need to locate themselves within changing society by glancing backwards at certain firm Canadian historical co-ordinates. Also, despite the fact that their actual influence within Canadian Protestantism has increased in recent years, they nevertheless like to give the impression that they remain a besieged minority desperately fighting merely to survive.

This preoccupation with survival has meant, among other things, and the point needs to be emphasized, that they have discouraged the writing of the venturesome and the probing studies. It may be argued that the rigid mind set established by the compulsion to protect a religious identity within what is regarded as a hostile secular environment has, for evangelicals, significantly narrowed the spectrum of theological debate and directed it away from the Canadian historical matrix towards otherworldly
concerns. On those few occasions when Canadian evangelicals — and particularly Canadian fundamentalists — glance back to the immediate historical past, they are interested not in Canadian events and personages but in American ones.

There is, and this point needs to be emphasized, a great need in Canada for evangelical scholars to realize not only how important their historical tradition actually is but also how important it is for them to make all Canadians aware of this richly textured heritage. This is particularly the case in the area of Canadian revivalism — a scholarly field which is certainly “white unto harvest.” Whatever is written would be groundbreaking since there is little historical work to revise. Apart from a handful of monographs, most of them authored by non-evangelicals, relatively little of importance has been published during the past fifty years about the revivalist tradition in Canada. Among the handful are S. D. Clark’s seminal, yet flawed, Church and Sect in Canada (Toronto, 1948); M. Armstrong’s The Great Awakening in Nova Scotia 1776-1809 (Hartford, 1948); G. French’s Parsons and Politics (Toronto, 1962); Gordon Stewart and George Rawlyk, A People Highly Favoured of God: The Nova Scotia Yankees and the American Revolution (Toronto, 1972); J. Burnsted’s Henry Alline 1748-1784 (Toronto, 1971); L. Stanley’s The Well-Watered Garden: The Presbyterian Church in Cape Breton 1798-1860 (Sydney, 1983); and G. A. Rawlyk’s Ravished by the Spirit: Religious Revivals, Baptists and Henry Alline (Montreal, 1984). It is apparent that apart from Clark’s book and the last chapter of Ravished by the Spirit, none of the other studies goes beyond 1860, and four of them virtually stop with Henry Alline’s death in 1784.

Obviously, there are many good reasons why there has been so little serious historical research done about the revivalist tradition in Canada and why so much — so very much — still needs to be done. An important part of the evangelical tradition, and one that has in recent years particularly interested me, has been revivalism. In my writing about Canadian religious revivals and revivalists, as any careful analysis of my recent work will clearly show, I have been significantly influenced by three American scholars — Anthony Wallace, Victor Turner and George Marsden. Wallace and Turner are influential social anthropologists, and Marsden, without question, is one of the leading American religious historians.

This book is based upon a series of essays originally written during the 1979-1987 period. The title, Wrapped Up in God, was the phrase often used by Henry Alline and his followers to describe their conversion experience. The book, it should be stressed, does not in any way attempt to
provide a general historical overview of all aspects of Canadian revivalism from the eighteenth century to the present, nor does it endeavor to examine the revivalist tradition in all of the Canadian Protestant denominations. Rather, particular emphasis is placed upon the Baptists and to a lesser extent the Methodists of the Maritime provinces, especially during the years 1776 to 1830. These essays are basically preliminary historical probes; they are impressionistic and not definitive, and they probably raise more questions than they answer.

For the past twenty-five years my own particular historical research has focused on the Maritime provinces of Canada, especially in the pre-Confederation period. And, consequently, it should not be surprising that four of the six chapters of this book should deal with pre-Confederation revivalism in Nova Scotia. Moreover, during the past decades I have been particularly interested in the Baptist experience in the Maritimes, and this, together with my own Baptist background, should help to explain the Baptist emphasis in my work. This biographical material is referred to not because of any defensiveness I may feel but because it helps to explain the essential nature of my preliminary work on Canadian revivals and revivalists.

In each of the rather different revivals I have looked at, whether they have occurred in Nova Scotia or what is now Ontario, or whether they took place in the 1770s, 1850s or 1920s, I have emphasized the crucial role played by “charismatic preachers.” They are people who are widely perceived as having simple and direct answers for often complex personal and theological problems. They have their greatest impact when they direct people who are experiencing serious problems with personal and group relationships to a personal relationship to Jesus Christ — the perceived Son of God. This personal relationship with Christ, often triggered by a traumatic conversion experience, seems to solve, at least for a time, all problems arising from disintegrating and disintegrated relationships. The ecstasy of conversion, supplemented by Christian love and a sense of community provided by the revivals, creates an atmosphere for further conversions.

Despite the real trauma of conversion and of revivals, there are few manifestations of emotional excess. There were often tears and sobbing, and sometimes people would be “struck by the Spirit,” but in all of the revivals I have examined, I have yet to come across one which can be characterized as being wild and frenzied. This is not to suggest that there were not any in what is now Canada. We know that there was “barking” and “babbling in tongues” and powerful physical convulsions, the so-
called “jerks” and “works” in the McDonaldite revivals on Prince Edward Island in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{5} There were similar occurrences in many Methodist camp meetings in what is now Ontario and Quebec in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Yet the evidence is overwhelming, when all of the revivals are taken into account from the 1770s to the 1920s, from Newfoundland to British Columbia, that they were remarkably well-ordered. It was as though the Canadian obsession with “peace, order and good government” also shaped the country’s revivalist tradition.

I have also emphasized the role of women and children in the revivals, especially in my attempts to understand the revivals from the inside out and from the bottom up, and in my treatment of the First and Second Awakenings in Nova Scotia I have also endeavored to explain the role of exhortation in the revivalistic culture as well as that of “hymns and spiritual songs.”\textsuperscript{6}

There are still, of course, many unanswered questions relating to Canadian revivals and revivalists. It is my hope that this study will encourage others — others which are more discerning and more sophisticated. When this is done, it will then be possible to write a definitive yet empathetic study about Canadian revivals and revivalists. I expect that such a book will be published by the end of this century — if not earlier. It is desperately needed.