

“We Are Too Scotch”: The Reverend William Proudfoot and the United Secession Mission to Canada

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One of the chief spokesmen in Canada against the Scottish character of the presbyterian churches was the Reverend William Proudfoot of London, Upper Canada. A missionary of the United Secession Church, he was concerned with his own denomination's attitude towards Scottishness on two levels. First, at the congregational level where there was often a genuine desire on the part of a congregation for a Scottish-born minister and, where there were highlanders, perhaps a Gaelic-speaker.¹ Second, as clerk of the first Canadian missionary presbytery and the first synod he was concerned with the relationship between the Scottish and Canadian churches. In particular, he attempted to prevent Scottish problems from migrating overseas and infecting the colonial church. It is the latter issue that this contribution will by and large deal with.

Proudfoot was born on 23 May 1788 in Manor parish near Peebles and was educated at Lanark grammar school, Edinburgh University, and in 1807 commenced theological training under George Lawson of Selkirk. Lawson's influence on his students was great and through his teaching and publications he ushered in a new era in the life of his denomination by a more liberal approach to the standards of the secession while vigorously encouraging the adoption of a voluntarist position in church and state relations.² After spending four summers at Lawson's school, on 6 April 1812 Proudfoot was licensed to preach what he called the “Glorious Gospel” by the Associate Presbytery of Edinburgh. In August 1813, he was ordained and inducted into the charge of Pitrodie in the Carse of Gowrie. A year later he married Isabel Aitchison of Biggar.

In 1820 the “new light” secessionists of the burgher and antiburgher synods united to form the United Associate Synod of the Secession Church or the United Secession Church. The “new lights” rejected the views of a group, the “auld lights”, within the

¹ S. D. Gill, “A Scottish Divine on the Frontier of Upper Canada”, *The Bulletin of Canadian Studies* (Winter, 1984/85).

² Woodside, *The Soul of a Scottish Church or the Contribution of the United Presbyterian Church to Scottish Life and Religion* (Edinburgh, n.d.), 131, 132. J. MacLeod, *Scottish Theology in Relation to Church History Since the Reformation* (Edinburgh, 1974), 237, 238.

Original Secession Church which held that the civil magistrate had a duty to impose the true faith on the people. During the period 1820 to 1830 the new church began to perceive a greater need for missions and extended its fund and workers in that area. First, in April 1829, the synod decided to extend its outreach in home missions and by 1831 it had resolved to get involved in another foreign field.³ Since the mid-eighteenth century secessionists had been involved in missions to the North American colonies and Nova Scotia. The country chosen in this case was Canada composing Upper and Lower Canada, present-day Ontario and Quebec, and a committee was formed and a call put out for suitable missionary candidates. The Reverend William Proudfoot of Pitrodie, the Reverend Thomas Christie of Holme, Orkney and the Reverend William Robertson of Cupar, Fife, applied and were selected having been judged to have the qualities necessary to be missionaries in Canada. The former two were to shape the face of the secession mission in Canada while the latter died of cholera shortly after his arrival in Montreal.

On 6 July 1832, the Proudfoot family set sail for Canada from Greenock. Proudfoot's knowledge of Canada was limited to three sources. First, he prepared himself for the mission ahead by reading "Pickering's Canada and one of the books by the Society for propogating useful knowledge".⁴ Secondly, he gained some insight into the spiritual life of the Canadian settler through reading the reports of the Glasgow Colonial Society, which had been set up under the prompting of the evangelicals in the Church of Scotland "for promoting the moral and religious interests of the Scottish settlers in British North America". While he was critical of the Society's approach to their mission as being too Scottish, he also obtained information as to where there was greatest need for ministers. In derogatory terms he entered in his diary:

"The impression produced upon my mind by the perusal (of the reports) is that the Society is much inclined to set up the *Kirk* in the Colony as to make Christians. Such is the tenor of the information published by the Society. The account of the labours of their missionaries is poor indeed."⁵

Finally, he obtained his most forthright description of conditions in Canada from correspondence with the Reverend William Brunton of Lachute, Lower Canada, formerly a minister from Dundee.⁶ Brunton recommended Upper Canada as a suitable field for

³ J. McKerrow, *History of the Secession Church* (Edinburgh, 1841), 711.

⁴ University of Western Ontario [U.W.O.], Regional Collection, Proudfoot Diary, 19 July 1832.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 27 July 1832.

⁶ Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives [P.C.C.A.], Proudfoot Letters, William Brunton to William Proudfoot, 5 June 1832.

Proudfoot's labours but also warned of the great privations that dissenting ministers had to face with no government support.

What struck Proudfoot most about the situation in Canada was the diversity and the divisiveness of presbyterian groups keeping up divisions that had little or no relevance in North America. When he arrived in Upper Canada in the late summer of 1832, there were already four major presbyterian groups at work. The Church of Scotland had been active since 1829 through the work of the Glasgow Colonial Society.⁷ Their intervention, by and large, had come about as a response to requests sent to the society for a supply of Scottish ministers. The second group was the United Synod of Upper Canada, which came about as a reaction against the conditions in Upper Canada. The ministers who made up this second group were all from secessionist backgrounds and created the synod and even entered into negotiations for union with the Church of Scotland in order to counter the unpresbyterian trend towards congregationalism created by the lack of presbyteries and synods on the frontier.

With less of a lasting impact upon the religious tradition in Upper Canada were two American groups both in the Niagara district. Missionaries of the Associate Church of North America organised three congregations in the area as early as 1824 and formed them into the Presbytery of Stamford in 1836.⁸ A second and larger presbytery was formed in 1833, the Presbytery of Niagara, based upon the work of Daniel W. Eastman, an American Associate Presbytery minister who had settled in the Niagara district in 1801.

Both groups initially gained acceptance among the Scottish settlers in the Niagara region although they had traditions that were at variance with the Scots. Revivalism, temperance, Isaac Watts' hymns, and voluntaryism were all intrinsic elements in their *modus operandi*. Scottish secessionists and Kirk men adopted some but never all of these elements; however, they could never reach an accord with the Americans. With the arrival of churchmen in the Scottish tradition and the growth of anti-American feeling after the Rebellion of 1837, when Americans supported the rebels in Upper and Lower Canada in their fight against the government, the fate of the American churches was sealed and by 1850 the Presbytery of Niagara was no longer in existence.

The period of the 1830s was a time of rapid population growth

⁷ The Glasgow Colonial Society papers are in the United Church Archives, Toronto. An edited version is being prepared for publication by the Champlain Society.

⁸ T. Beveridge, "An Account of the First Mission of the Associate Synod to Canada West", *Ontario History* (Spring 1958), 101-111.

in Upper Canada especially in the south-west of the province.⁹ Proudfoot, in discussions with Thomas Christie, decided that the best field for the mission would be in the south-west “where the people are the most destitute of the means of religious instruction” and where they could avoid direct competition with the Presbytery of York (the United Synod of Upper Canada) and with the Kirk.¹⁰ This view, that the mission would prosper best in the western part of the province, was also in accordance with their unrealistic mandate from the committee on missions of the United Associate Synod that they should not consciously “multiply the religious divisions of the church” but should instead “coalesce with them”.¹¹ Proudfoot settled in London and Christie established several preaching stations in the Dundas area.¹²

The decision to concentrate their efforts in the south-west of the province appeared to be confirmed within the first year as they were joined by seven additional ministers, five from Scotland and two from Nova Scotia. As a consequence of this rapid growth, the Canadian missionaries met in Toronto on Christmas Day in 1834 and erected a presbytery under the designation of the Missionary Presbytery of the Canadas in connection with the United Associate Synod of the Secession Church in Scotland.

It was determined at the first meeting that it was important to examine the religious state of the upper province and the way in which the presbytery could most effectively marshal their resources in order to promote the cause of the gospel. To that end, Proudfoot, the clerk, and Christie, the moderator, were delegated to tour the country and compile a report on its various parts. The emphasis was to be put upon the upper province to the neglect of Lower Canada. Proudfoot had perhaps been influenced by Brunton’s report of Lower Canada as a province in the grip of “Popery” in contrast to the upper province where “gospel ministers are much needed”.¹³ Consequently, the new presbytery consciously committed itself to serve Scottish settlements, especially the new ones between Lake Ontario and Lake Huron, and rejected any idea of a mission to all the peoples of British North America. It was a path which the church found difficult to break even when Proudfoot recognised the dangers of exclusiveness

⁹ G. M. Craig, *Upper Canada: The Formative Years, 1784-1841* (Toronto, 1977), 228.

¹⁰ U.W.O., Proudfoot Diary, 20 October 1832.

¹¹ J. McKerrow, *History of the Foreign Missions of the Secession and the United Presbyterian Church* (Edinburgh, 1867), 260.

¹² For a full account of the problems that Proudfoot faced in settling in London see S. D. Gill, “A Scottish Divine on the Frontier of Upper Canada: The Reverend William Proudfoot and the United Secession Mission” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Guelph, 1984), 31-77.

¹³ P.C.C.A., Proudfoot Letters, Brunton to Proudfoot, 5 June 1832.

for the church during the 1840s as new immigrant groups flooded into the upper province.

The presbytery was formed at the very time when Upper Canada was entering a severe economic depression which was to result finally in the outburst of popular uprisings in 1837. Supposed religious discontent also played its part in the disturbances and especially disrupted the work of the new presbytery which was perceived by the colonial government and "established" churches as radical and non-conformist. It was not until 1840 that the presbytery could again look optimistically to a period of growth. Before the mission would once again start to grow the church faced two problems. First, the difficulty of recruiting and educating enough ministers to fulfil the needs of the mission and, secondly, the fear that Scottish theological debates and schisms would further divide the Canadian church. Proudfoot was the leading light in attempting to solve both problems for the mission.

Reports from Canadian missionaries to the home synod during the 1840s were on the whole optimistic. They reported that with the regular administration of the gospel many were being won to Christ. Efforts were hampered, however, by an infrequent supply of missionaries from Scotland. This was partly due to the adverse publicity given the mission during the problems of 1837 and 1838, but was also due to an apparent lack of interest on the part of the Scottish synod.

The synod did not directly condemn the Canadian mission or discourage support for it, but there was a concern that it drew too deeply from the Scottish purse as they repeatedly suggested that the mission should become more self-sufficient.¹⁴ The principal effort in overseas missions appeared to be directed towards Jamaica which absorbed over fifty per cent of the overseas budget every year. The mission to the Caribbean was perceived as to a foreign and "heathen" race as could be seen by the difference in colour between the deliverers and receivers of the gospel, and they could not be expected to be self-sufficient. The church in British North America, on the other hand, was treated like an extension of the Scottish body and indeed it was seen as a mission to the destitute Scot. A similar attitude was shown towards a mission to South Australia in 1841.¹⁵ As such the Canadian congregations were expected to behave as did the Scottish home missions and move towards financial independence as quickly as possible.

William Proudfoot had his own views on what was the best solution for the shortage of supply. These were reflected in the Presbytery's eventual decision to open their own independent

¹⁴ *Report on the Home and Foreign Missions of the United Associate Synod for 1839* (Edinburgh, 1839), 7.

¹⁵ *Report on the Home and Foreign Missions of the United Associate Synod for 1854* (Glasgow, 1842), 30.

theological college for the training of native ministers. This was neither novel nor revolutionary as the Anglicans, Church of Scotland, and Methodists had voiced similar concerns about theological education in colonies and had reacted by setting up their own institutions.¹⁶ While Scottish ministers were more acceptable to Scottish colonial congregations, a feeling of superiority among some of Scotland's ministers and theologians had persuaded them that the proper training for the ministry could only be obtained in a Scottish university.¹⁷ For reasons of distance and economics this idea was considered impractical by most colonial clergymen. Within a month of arriving in the province Proudfoot had recognised the importance of a good education for a minister as a means of combating the ignorance he found. He recorded in his diary:

“The only legitimate way of curing the evil (as far as I can see) is to educate a race of ministers so far above the common level as that they shall give a tone to the public mind and thus by the goodness of the article beat out of the field all half-bred adventurers.” [The Methodists.]¹⁸

It was not until May 1844, at the meeting of what was now the missionary synod, that the mission's committee of education finally recommended the creation of a Canadian divinity hall. Proudfoot was appointed as the first professor but it was not without some misgivings that he accepted the task. He believed, however, if he did not take up the challenge when offered, that the opportunity of creating a theological hall would be lost perhaps indefinitely.¹⁹

In justifying the hall to the Scottish church, Proudfoot resorted to biblical precedent, quoting the example from the New Testament church where the apostles and evangelists ordained a native ministry including elders and deacons in every city they visited.²⁰ Moreover, he added an appeal for the broadening of the mission, something to which he was to return repeatedly. “The sooner, therefore, we strip our church of its exclusive character”, he wrote, “the better will it be for our success; and one of the most direct ways of doing this is the employment of a native ministry”.²¹

While situated in London there were never more than four students enrolled in the school at any one time, and consequently, it could not fill the requirements of the growing mission. It is obvious from a letter Proudfoot wrote in 1846 that at least in the short term

¹⁶ Letter from John Jennings, Toronto, 23 December 1844, *Ibid.*, April 1845.

¹⁷ G. Patterson, *History of the County of Pictou* (Montreal, 1877), 343.

¹⁸ U.W.O., Proudfoot Diary, 19 September 1832.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 22-24 May 1844.

²⁰ “Circular from the Missionary Synod of Canada respecting their Theological Seminary”, *The United Secession Magazine* (January, 1845), 67.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

the effect of the new hall did not provide a satisfactory solution to the shortage of supply.

He wrote to David Anderson, a commissioner from the Scottish church:

“I should not be surprised if you return home without knowing that Canadians have a national character of their own. England, Ireland and France, and the United States have each contributed a portion of its own national character to the Canadian, and the compound made of these elements is unlike them all. Now to full efficiency in Canada a minister must be Canadian. An imported teacher is a foreigner, and never will enlist in his favour the sympathies of the general community.

It has been a great hindrance to our success that we have kept up the Scottish character. We are too Scotch — our habits, our brogue, our mode of sermonising are all too Scotch. The thistle is everywhere seen; we have effected no lodgement in the public mind. . . . As at present constituted our mission is a foreign affair. And it will be so till we employ the country-born, divest it of Scotch character and make it Canadian.”²²

This early articulation of a perceived Canadian “identity” to the Scottish commission had one immediate effect. It pricked the conscience of the Scottish Church and resulted in the sending, in 1847, of five Scottish ministers into the Canadian field.

As the Canadian secession church’s first professor of theology, Proudfoot was particularly concerned that the courses taught should be suited to Canadian conditions, but at the same time reflect the rich heritage of the secession’s beliefs. He wrote to the mission committee of the home synod that the curriculum of the divinity hall “is a peculiar one, suited to our circumstances”.²³ He was particularly conscious of the comparison that would be made with the Scottish system of theological education and he remarked to a commissioner sent from the Scottish church that, based upon his own theological training in Scotland, the new hall provided as good as, if not better, education than that given anywhere including the home of the secession.²⁴ Whereas most Scottish scholars would enter into theological studies after spending some time at, if not graduating from, a university and most certainly would have some knowledge of classical literature, languages and philosophy that would allow immediate entry into the study of theology, the Canadian had few, if any, of these pre-

²² P.C.C.A., Proudfoot Letters, Proudfoot to David Anderson, 13 July 1846.

²³ Letter to Proudfoot, London, 10 July 1844, *Quarterly Record of the Missions* . . . (October, 1844), 550.

²⁴ P.C.C.A., Proudfoot Letters, Proudfoot to David Anderson, 13 July 1846.

requisites. What one author calls "the pragmatic philosophy of the frontier" influenced Proudfoot as to the method of teaching and to a different perspective on priorities from his Scottish counterparts.²⁵ He thought that it was important that a Canadian student be as familiar with a plough and livestock as with a Greek or Hebrew lexicon. While the latter might be used to prepare sermons, it was likely that it would be by the former that a student would survive as a frontier minister.

The curriculum for the hall and the method of teaching was, however, based upon the Scottish system. Proudfoot had the students live with him and was thereby able to look after their moral, spiritual, and educational needs. As most of the ministerial candidates came from an agricultural background they already had considerable practical experience at survival. Proudfoot consequently was left with the rôle of fulfilling the requirements of a university as well as a seminary professor.

He divided the curriculum into three parts and attempted to provide the general liberal education of a university with the specialised theological studies of a divinity school. The students commenced their studies with the classical languages and literature, especially Latin, Greek and Hebrew, as a preliminary to understanding the doctrines of the Bible in its original language.²⁶ Second, Proudfoot included a perusal of philosophical literature, both logic and moral philosophy, and probably the teaching of Thomas Reid, Dugald Stewart, and the Scottish "common sense" school.²⁷ As the Canadian historical philosopher, A. B. McKillop, has observed this latter view dominated Anglo-Canadian thought in the mid-nineteenth century.²⁸ "The Common Sense philosophy", he writes, "adapted for use in Canada sought to establish clearly the natural connection between God and Mind".²⁹ Finally, Proudfoot taught theology which he defined as "the opinions of those who have been eminent for their scripture knowledge".³⁰ As with all levels of education he believed that it was more important to teach the methods of acquiring knowledge

²⁵ J. D. Wilson, "Foreign and Local Influences on Popular Education in Upper Canada, 1815-1844" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Western Ontario, 1970).

²⁶ P.C.C.A., Proudfoot Papers, "Report on Education made to the Missionary Presbytery of the Canadas"; "Circular from the Missionary Synod of Canada respecting their Theological Seminary", *The United Secession Magazine*, (January, 1845), 68.

²⁷ P.C.C.A., Proudfoot Papers, "Report on Education made to the Missionary Presbytery of the Canadas".

²⁸ A. B. McKillop, *A Disciplined Intelligence* (Montreal, 1879), 24.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁰ P.C.C.A., Proudfoot Papers. "Report on Education made to the Missionary Presbytery of the Canadas"; "Circular from the Missionary Synod of Canada respecting their Theological Seminary", *The United Secession Magazine*, (January, 1845), 68.

rather than merely providing a list of facts. True education existed for him in stimulating the student to ask questions and to create an environment which would lead to an inquiring mind.

In 1850, the hall was moved to Toronto in order to take advantage of the newly-established university. This move did not bring with it a hoped for increase in enrolment, nor was there in the long term, as demonstrated in the session of 1855 when there was only one fourth-year student, two of the third, three of the second, and four of the first.³¹ By comparison with the Church of Scotland's college, Queen's, which only produced fifteen ministers in twenty-five years, the hall was successful, graduating twenty-six students in the period 1844 to 1861.³²

After Proudfoot's death in 1851, the Canadian church met in synod and decided that he should be replaced as professor of theology, not by one of their own number, but by appointment of "an influential person" selected by the Scottish synod.³³ The motion was moved by two of Proudfoot's oldest colleagues, the Reverend Thomas Christie and the Reverend Robert Thornton, who had between them almost forty years' experience in Canada, but who nevertheless felt that no one had the appropriate experience and education in the Canadian mission to fill the professorship. The spirit of independence that had flowed so freely through Proudfoot and his vision of an independent church obviously had failed to touch his associates. The motion being put was carried by a very large majority.³⁴ The one minister to record his dissent in the minutes was the Reverend John Proudfoot, William's son.

In 1860, one year before the secession church united with the Free Church in Canada and their hall was absorbed by the Free Kirk's college, the synod was still discussing the recruitment of Scottish ministers. The mission committee reported to the synod:

"... the Church in the Province does not appear to have arrived at such a state of Christian fervour and devotion as to be able or disposed to furnish from her own ranks, men of talent, piety and education to occupy the watch towers on Zion's walls".³⁵

³¹ R. Small, *History of the Congregation of the United Presbyterian Church from 1733 to 1900*, i (Edinburgh, 1904), 164; *Minutes of the Nineteenth Session of the Synod of the United Presbyterian Church in Canada, Appendix II*, (Toronto, 1855), 153.

³² J. S. Moir, *Enduring Witness* (Toronto, 1974), 117.

³³ *Minutes of the 12th and 13th Sessions of the Synod of the United Presbyterian Church in Canada held at Hamilton, 2 April and 4 June 1851* (Hamilton, 1851); J. McKerrow, *History of the Foreign Missions . . .*, 213.

³⁴ *Minutes of the 12th and 13th Sessions. . .*

³⁵ United Church in Canada Archives [U.C.C.A.], "Report of the Mission Committee, 16 June 1860"; *Minutes of the Synod of the United Presbyterian Church in Canada for 1860*.

It is obvious that even on the eve of becoming part of the Canada Presbyterian Church at least the clergy and probably the eldership, as the synod's decisions appear to suggest, were Scots-centred, not Canadian-centred, in their thinking.

The second area in which Proudfoot had an influence upon the church was through his publications. In January 1843, the first edition of *The Presbyterian Magazine* appeared as an expression of the Canadian church's views at the instigation and under the editorship of William Proudfoot. The editor was eminently qualified for the rôle having had experience of writing editorials for a number of newspapers in the south-west, including *The London Inquirer* which printed the new magazine. Proudfoot's new effort tended to follow the format of *The United Secession Magazine* published in Scotland with articles of a theological nature or the reports from presbytery and synod. As an outline of the beliefs of the mission in Canada, it is a good source for the study of Proudfoot's theology which will be looked at in greater detail later.

The appeal of the magazine was limited probably because of the nature of the articles which tended to range from theological treatises on baptism to reports on what was happening in the Church of Scotland. Articles were reprinted from the Scottish press, but they tended to appertain to church affairs, as for example, "The Political Position of the New Secession from the Church of Scotland" from the *Wigtonshire Free Press*.³⁶ Such entries were hardly likely to encourage a large readership amongst the laity. Moreover, the clergy was not large enough to support their own paper and it was not likely to appeal to other denominations especially when it was in competition with those of other religious groups in the province.

By December of 1843, the editor of *The Presbyterian Magazine* put away his pen and the presses ceased printing. Proudfoot wrote to the Scottish mission committee the following explanation:

"I am sorry to have to inform you that our Magazine was given up in December, owing to the dilatoriness of the subscribers in paying for their copies. It is exceedingly difficult in this country to get payment for Magazines or newspapers. I hope to see it soon revived, — but under a different editor. I have had my share."³⁷

The disillusioned and disgruntled ex-editor added in his diary: "It was too dear, and many of the articles were too heavy".

Although he was a professor of theology and editor of the denomination's journal, Proudfoot had no original scheme of

³⁶ *The Presbyterian Magazine*, i, no. 11 (November, 1843), 275-277.

³⁷ Letter from Proudfoot, London, 10 July 1844, *Quarterly Record of the Missions* . . . (October, 1844), 550.

theology, and he wrote no great treatises on doctrinal subjects. On doctrinal and theological issues, the Bible was his source of inspiration. Like Augustine, Luther and Calvin, Proudfoot believed that all teaching had to be measured by scripture and that all controversies about the nature of man, his sin, and his salvation must be settled by exegesis of scripture.

Writing in the late nineteenth century, William Blair wrote that the secession had an important position in the eighteenth century "as the defender of sound doctrine and Christian life among the people, unhampered as their brethren were within the Church".³⁸ Blair was no servile apologist for the early saints of the secession. "Our fathers", he wrote, "were surely overburdening the conscience in straining things that were subordinate as if they were essential, in pressing within the terms of communion the Scottish Covenant that had been left behind a full half century before, and in staking the interests of the Church upon a peculiar reading of the Burgess Oath."³⁹ The United Presbyterian Church had all but given up the conservative theology of its ancestors by the second half of the nineteenth century and for Blair, as a minister of that church, the old theology was of no more than antiquarian interest. The roots of the new softer theology were to be found in the changes that took place between the union of 1820 and that of 1847 with the Relief Church. The two major controversies that had important repercussions throughout the church were on voluntaryism and the extent of atonement.

In the light of the theological changes that took place within the United Secession Church during the first half of the nineteenth century one must ask what effect they possibly had on the North American mission. Proudfoot believed, like all secessionists, that the church should not look to the state for financial support. Voluntaryism probably enhanced the success of the mission as it suited frontier conditions and was compatible with the theology of other dissenting sects on the mission field.

In 1844, with the creation of the Canada Presbyterian Church (Free Church of Scotland) Proudfoot decided that it was to work against the interests of the gospel for two evangelical presbyterian bodies to remain separate and in conflict with each other especially in the colonial situation. At the first meeting between the two synods in 1844, Proudfoot led a delegation which was generally well received except, as Robert Thornton pointed out, by those ministers recently arrived from Scotland who did not like the secession's voluntarist views or principles.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, despite

³⁸ W. Blair, *The United Presbyterian Church: A Handbook of its History and Principles* (Edinburgh, 1888), 39.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴⁰ Letter from R. H. Thornton, Whitby, 23 October 1844, *The Quarterly Record* . . . (January, 1845), 65.

opposition, the Free Church synod decided to appoint a union negotiating committee to meet with the United Secession's delegation. In 1846, the Reverend Alexander Gale, as convener of the Free Church committee, reported to the synod that the main stumbling block to union appeared to be the voluntary principles to which the United Secessionists adhered.⁴¹ The Free Church's position was that Christ was King of the nations and as such they looked towards the state for financial support but non-interference, while the secessionists believed that there should be no link between church and state. Although by separating from the Kirk the Free Church had also excluded itself from state financial support and a share in the Canadian clergy reserves, it could not tolerate the denial of Christ's headship of the state. To do so, the leadership of their synod argued, would be tantamount to creating Canada as a godless state.

On the occasion of Gale's report, Dr Robert Burns of Knox Church, Toronto, formerly secretary of the Glasgow Colonial Society, poured out a fiery tirade upon the idea of union with the United Presbyterians as the Secession Church was called after 1847. It was a tirade which was eventually dampened and extinguished by the laity of the Free Church who led the move to a voluntarist position. The leader of this movement was ironically George Brown, an active member of Burns' own congregation.⁴² A Canadian secessionist noted in 1844:

"It is a remarkable fact, that the great bulk of the Free Church people here are voluntary, and though those ministers who have come off would like to try for a picking of one of the reserve bones, along with the Methodists, the people will not do so. The Free Church people are decidedly our length — in fact, in liberality many of them are before us, but the clergy are behind, and the people know this, and already talk of having a union with the secession."⁴³

George and Peter Brown led the fight for voluntarism through the pages of their paper, *The Banner*.

With most of the laity in favour of voluntarism the older

⁴¹ A. F. Kemp, *Digest of the Minutes of the Synod of the Presbyterian Churches of Canada* (Montreal, 1861), 278-279.

⁴² On Brown see J. M. S. Careless, *Brown of the Globe: The Voice of Upper Canada* (Toronto, 1959), George Brown (1818-1880) and his father, Peter, were Scottish immigrants who arrived in Canada via New York in order to publish a weekly paper, *The Banner*, on behalf of the Free Church. Brown's chief interest lay, however, in politics not religion, and he commenced publication of *The Globe*, a paper which advocated reform. During the 1850s and 1860s he was leader of the Liberals and is considered as one of the "Fathers of Confederation" in 1867.

⁴³ Letter from John Jennings, Toronto, 24 July 1844, *Quarterly Record of . . .* (October, 1846), 551-552.

ministers could not hold the flood gates of non-existent state support against them. In 1854, *The Canadian Presbyterian Magazine* announced that the Free Church was now completely voluntary. Dr Ian Rennie has suggested that perhaps George Brown was converted to voluntarism because of his relationship with William Proudfoot.⁴⁴ Undoubtedly, the principal reason for his move over to voluntarism was his fear of the Oxford Movement, perceived as popery, possibly spreading from England. Nevertheless, as far as union negotiations were concerned, the importance of Brown's link with Proudfoot cannot be completely dismissed.

The subject which caused greatest concern for the United Secession during the first half of the nineteenth century was not voluntarism, around which they were united, but the extent of Christ's atonement. The burghers and antiburghers in 1820 clearly established the doctrine of redemption with Christ as "the surety of his people". This doctrine was central to the Testimony of 1828 which stated implicitly that "Christ died for the elect to secure their redemption".⁴⁵

In order to reinforce this linchpin of their confessional theology the United Secession synod of 1830 dealt specifically with the subject of atonement. They warned ministers that, while it was only to the elect that the call of the gospel becomes effectual, the message of salvation should be broadcast to all as it was "founded on the all-sufficient virtue of Christ for the salvation of guilty men without exception".⁴⁶ They followed therefore in the tradition of Thomas Boston and the marrow men by marrying the principle of predestination to the idea of the great commission seeing no inconsistencies in such a wedlock.⁴⁷

The Reverend James Morison of Kilmarnock was the interpreter of the heresy of preaching universal atonement in the United Secession.⁴⁸ Morison fell into the category of being a postredemptionist and when he was suspended by the synod in 1841 he broke away completely from the United Secession to found the Evangelical Union.

Morison was particularly concerned with the effectiveness of evangelism in an overseas mission situation if limited atonement was preached. In his most famous work he voiced the following concern:

⁴⁴ I. Rennie, "The Free Church and the Relations of Church and State in Canada, 1844-1854" (M. A. thesis, University of Toronto, 1954), 130-132.

⁴⁵ W. Blair, *The United Presbyterian Church . . .*, 66.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 66, 67.

⁴⁷ J. Walker, *The Theology and Theologians of Scotland, 1560-1750* (Edinburgh, 1892), 94.

⁴⁸ See A. R. Stow, *History of the Atonement Controversy in Connexion with the Secession Church from its Origin to the Present Time* (Edinburgh, 1846).

“If it were not true that Christ died for the heathen pray, what gospel is the missionary to preach when he lands on a foreign shore? Is he to tell them that God loved a few men scattered somewhere or other throughout the world, and that therefore, for ought that he could know, there may happen to be some of these favoured ones among them, and for these Christ died? . . . Men need not go to heathen lands with the doctrine of limited atonement in their creed; or if they go with it, they must hide it, and preach in a manner practically contradictory to it.”⁴⁹

It appears that he had been impressed by the reading of accounts of revivals in North America and was especially affected by Charles Finney’s *Revivals of Religion*.⁵⁰

Proudfoot had very decided views on the place of theology and theological debate on the mission field. He wrote of historical theology:

“The missionary spirit of the church seems to have died with the Apostles and their immediate successors. Instead of considering themselves as debtors to both Greeks and Barbarians, to bond and free, her ministers spent their time in inventing new doctrines and systems, and in quarrelling about delicate points of Casuistical Ideology. Many good men there were, for God has never left Himself without a witness in the world. But, these were men, whom God raised up to stem the corruption of their own age and warn his people from time to time. Their efforts were directed to purge the temple to which they belonged: the impurity within was too great while it remained, little could be done in the great work of evangelizing the world. This purgation was accomplished at the glorious era of the Reformation. From the dark mass of Popish Inquisition, the true Church arose in all her primitive simplicity and burning with Apostolic zeal. (Then had she been alive to her true interests, she would have borne from land to land, the torch of truth, which had been kindled by a Luther and Calvin). But, she soon sunk into apathy. It was deemed sufficient to have marked the boundary between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism and to have defined the doctrines of each. To maintain these doctrines, mighty intellects were engaged; and the most talented Dons of the Church instead of being sent forth to [battle?] them, were brought forth as ecclesiastical gladiators. Had half the breath

⁴⁹ J. Morison, *The Extent of the Propitiation; or the Question for whom did Christ die? Answered* (London, 1847), 156.

⁵⁰ A. L. Drummond & J. Bulloch, *The Scottish Church, 1688-1854: The Age of the Moderates* (Edinburgh, 1973), 219.

spent in controversy been spent in telling the simple story of the Cross, much happier results would have followed.”⁵¹

This lengthy excerpt on Proudfoot’s views provides perhaps the clearest insight into his theological opinions.

Proudfoot appears to denigrate doctrinal debates as wasting the time and energy of men and creating divisions within Protestantism itself rather than facing up to their Roman Catholic adversaries and preaching the gospel. He expressed this more clearly in a letter to a minister friend in the United States by warning him against the tendency of American churches to become involved in overseas missions while their own western frontier was languishing “in sin”.⁵² “Look at the vale of the Mississippi,” he wrote, “swarming with the very offscourings of the human family — and there left in a great measure to the papists to be converted into subjects of the Man of sin”.⁵³

James Morison had raised the question in 1841 of whether a missionary should preach a doctrine of limited or universal atonement to the heathen.⁵⁴ The atonement controversy did have relevance in the Canadian mission field especially with its proximity to the New England states where the whole idea of postredemptionism and universal atonement were born in North America. Moreover, some congregationalists and American presbyterian groups appear to have been smitten with such a view but the United Secessionists in Upper Canada seem to have remained immune. Proudfoot immediately recognised that the revival phenomenon in Scotland, as it had been in America, was at the centre of Morison’s unorthodoxy.⁵⁵ According to Proudfoot revivals were to be avoided on the grounds that they were manufactured more by human hands than coming from God, and consequently the United Secession mission appears to have remained aloof from the atonement controversy. While the Scottish church became more liberal theologically the Canadian remained entrenched in the orthodoxy of Calvinism.

Throughout the 1840s, Proudfoot was kept abreast of the events taking place in Scotland centering on the atonement debate. As early as 1842, he received a letter from a minister friend in Inverness outlining the main issues.⁵⁶ The Reverend Daniel Munro predicted that Morison’s arminian views would infest the whole church and that many of the burghers would follow him.

⁵¹ U.W.O., Miscellaneous Proudfoot Papers, Proudfoot’s writings on missions and the church.

⁵² *Ibid.*, Proudfoot to Rev. Alexander Blackie, Livingstone County, New York, 14 July 1841.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ J. Morison, *The Extent of Propitiation . . .*, 156.

⁵⁵ U.W.O., Miscellaneous Proudfoot Papers, Proudfoot to Blackie, 14 July 1841.

⁵⁶ P.C.C.A., Proudfoot Letters, Rev. Daniel Munro, Inverness, 21 May 1842 to Proudfoot.

In July 1843 *The Presbyterian Magazine* reprinted an article on "The Extent of the Atonement".⁵⁷ This was done neither because there was a controversy over the atonement in the Canadian mission nor even as a reflection of the debates going on in Scotland as there was no intelligence on the Scottish debate published in the magazine. It was printed rather as a means of education in order to avert any controversy arising in the missionary church. All sectors of the church, both ordained and unordained, would be educated by the article so as to be able to recognise unorthodoxy and know how best to combat it. To that end the article was couched in a language that all could understand by drawing its arguments not only from theologians but also the general opinions of men. The author insisted that definite atonement:

"... is found also, in the common sense of mankind, as it is embodied in their legal enactments and their commercial regulations. Everywhere, their responsibilities are personal and special; never indefinite. To talk of an indefinite satisfaction for an offence against the laws of the land, or the indefinite payment of debt, is to utter incomprehensible and indefinite folly".⁵⁸

In 1846, while in Scotland recuperating from an illness, the Reverend John Jennings of Toronto wrote to Proudfoot in order to keep him informed of the developments in the atonement debate.⁵⁹ He reported that the Morison controversy was still a hot topic of conversation and reviewed its effect upon the Scottish religious scene. "You may call Dr Brown's [Reverend Dr John Brown] opinions what you please," he wrote, "but one fact is certain that they are in the church everywhere and under the preaching of them real piety is on the increase".⁶⁰ Jennings thought that the Relief Church was in the same tradition of thought as the Morisonians and that the Free Church had been tainted by it and some of its leading men won over to Morison's ideas.

Proudfoot wrote to David Anderson in 1846 to inform him that it was impossible to transfer Scottish problems to Canada as they were regarded as a "foreign affair".⁶¹ He saw the atonement debate as rending the Scottish secession in two and worked hard to make sure that it would have no impact in Canada during his lifetime.⁶²

⁵⁷ *The Presbyterian Magazine*, i, no. 7 (July, 1843), 149-153.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁵⁹ P.C.C.A., Proudfoot Letters, Rev. J. Jennings, Galashiels, 5 August 1846 to Proudfoot.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ P.C.C.A., Proudfoot Letters, Proudfoot to Anderson, 13 July 1846.

⁶² *Ibid.*

He carried to Canada in 1832 a number of testimonies outlining the beliefs of the United Secession Church in order to promote the views of the mission. *The Presbyterian Magazine* was published in 1843 in order to further advance these aims.⁶³ The secession church was presented as being free of all dogmas and human philosophies by the Canadian church at the time when its Scottish matriach was undergoing its most fiercely fought doctrinal debate of the nineteenth century.

Proudfoot argued that the principal problem of each age was that particular doctrines have been promoted by different denominations often working against each other. These creeds were frequently more a reflection of some secular philosophy than “founded in all its leading principles on the New Testament”.⁶⁴ He believed that:

“This monomania — this inability to view the various parts of the Christian System in their relative proportions has at no time been altogether at rest. In its paroxisms — for it has had many such, it has produced in abundance, fanaticism, extravagance and folly.”⁶⁵

The journal was to provide an “unbiased” perspective by bringing to bear the truths as revealed through scripture on the major discussions of the day. “The Church,” it was concluded, “is in the most healthy state when the whole system of Revelation is brought to bear in all its entirety, on the minds and hearts of the Christian people”.⁶⁶

He continued, that with each denomination contending for what they held to be the “truth” sectarian divisions were created between denominations which had previously united to form missionary societies dividing into separate mission boards.⁶⁷ Proudfoot did not advocate any form of organic ecumenism in order to form a “nominal” union, but believed that church union would be achieved only when Christ should return.⁶⁸ He insisted that mankind must be converted and that Christians should be striving for holiness, but that:

“In present times, then, it is best for the Churches to maintain, and contend for, the truths, to which they have attained: and if they be conscientious and spiritual, they will approximate more and more, and circumstances will no doubt occur in the orderings of Providence, which will in due

⁶³ *The Presbyterian Magazine*, i, no. 1 (January, 1843).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 3, 4.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

time, bring together all who love the truth, and remove whatever blindness adhere to them.”⁶⁹

Missionaries should not become involved in theological debates but that did not mean that they were to be uneducated in theology. “The glory of learning,” Proudfoot wrote, “consists not in the display of it, but in its perfect mastery over error, and in the ease with which it can clear out obscurities, disentangle difficulties, and make important truth plain — and for this no small amount of learning is requisite.”⁷⁰ To be sure he saw signs of a particular aspect of the secession’s belief, namely voluntarism, leading towards a form of church unity especially as the actions of the Church of England appeared to push those who believed in church and state separation closer together.⁷¹ A lofty claim was made for voluntarism in the following statement:

“The leading principle which gave birth to the Reformation was ‘Justification by the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone’, and that which is to carry out and complete the Reformation, is the voluntary principle. The one brought in that which gives life to the Christian Church, the other brings us that which gives it its proper form and action. The one principle took out of the hands of Rome that power by which she perverted the Word of God; the other takes out of the hands of the kings of the earth that power by which they have secularized the Church. The Reformation is now in the course of receiving the completing act.”⁷²

In a recent article, Peter Russell has written that “voluntarism was the product of a profound evangelicalism which saw itself as the true and only heir to the Reformation”.⁷³ It appears, however, that the United Secession Church, according to their official magazine, proposed that they were not only the inheritors of the Reformation but the progenitor chosen to carry out the final act. The Reformation that had started out with Martin Luther driving the first nail into the church door in Wittenberg would be completed as the final nail was driven into the coffin of church and state relations on the frontier of Upper Canada.

Proudfoot particularly abhorred revivals as did many of his Canadian colleagues like William Fraser who had been raised under the secession in the maritimes.⁷⁴ These views affected even the

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 5, 6.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷³ P. A. Russell, “Church of Scotland Clergy in Upper Canada: Culture Shock and Conservatism on the Frontier”, *Ontario History* (June, 1981), 105.

⁷⁴ U.C.C.A., William Fraser Diary, 6 January 1835.

conduct of worship with Proudfoot condemning the singing of Isaac Watts' psalms.⁷⁵ More important, however, were his views on free communion which were probably governed by the Calvinist's perception of election. He condemned those ministers who allowed anyone to sit at the Lord's table without the benefit of examination as to their worthiness.⁷⁶ Such a strict adherence to orthodoxy it might be thought was unlikely to win much support on the frontier except where conviction to secessionist beliefs was already strong, in Scottish or Irish communities.

The events of 1843 in the Church of Scotland reinforced the views of the supporters of conservative theology in Scotland and Canada.⁷⁷ Ministers of the secession in Scotland looked to the new schism as having justified their own principles on church and state relations. Any celebrations by the United Secession at the Disruption were soon forgotten as it was thrown into the atonement controversy centering upon Morison and the Brown case. Meanwhile the ministers of the secession mission in Upper Canada welcomed the arrival of the Free Church as providing them with support in the evangelical cause.⁷⁸ It appears that the Canadian mission preserved the values of an earlier time while the Scottish church began to develop liberal tendencies. This enabled the former to unite with the Free Church which has been represented as the haven of evangelicalism in mid-nineteenth century Scotland and Canada.⁷⁹

A strong-willed and forceful man, Proudfoot had little sympathy with other faiths. He was particularly antagonistic to other presbyterian groups, especially the Church of Scotland, that competed for the souls of the Scottish settlers. At the same time, however, he was a visionary in the sense that he believed that the presbyterians in Canada should be united as the differences which separated them were of Scottish origin. Consequently, when the Canadian Free Church was formed in 1844, Proudfoot, although fearful that union would compromise his own church's views on voluntaryism, led the negotiations for a union. Talks broke down in 1846 over the voluntaryist issue much to Proudfoot's relief as, while he supported the idea of union, he did not want to

⁷⁵ U.W.O., Proudfoot Diary, 2 February 1836; J. S. Moir, *Enduring Witness*, 142.
⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 22 April 1833; 2 February 1835.

⁷⁷ A. C. Cheyne, *The Transforming of the Kirk: Victorian Scotland's Religious Revolution* (Edinburgh, 1983), 66.

⁷⁸ Letter from R. H. Thornton, Whitby, 23 October 1844, *Quarterly Record* . . . , (July, 1843), 65.

⁷⁹ A. C. Cheyne, *The Transforming of the Kirk* . . . , 66.

compromise any of the secessionist's positions.⁸⁰ Any new church, he argued, should sever its ecclesiastical connection with Scotland and remain independent of state connection and aid. In 1861 the two churches merged, and this union commenced the move towards that of 1875 to form one self-governing national church, the Presbyterian Church in Canada.

In terms of its theology, the United Presbyterian Church in Canada was closer to the Free Church than any other. In spirit and ideas Proudfoot had much in common with George Brown. Brown in turn was closer to the United Presbyterians, through his belief in voluntarism, than to his own Free Church which initially at least held to the importance of state support.

Early in January 1851, Proudfoot returned to Toronto from his home in London to commence a new term at the divinity hall. In Toronto, he caught a cold and died because of complications a few days later, on 16 January. His old friend, George Brown, recorded in *The Globe*:

“William Proudfoot was a man of great strength of mind, of clear and acute judgement, calm and resolute in thought and action. His mind was of an order to have achieved for its possessor high eminence in any pursuit. A firm friend, a wise counselor, an upright citizen, a kind parent, and a devoted Christian — there are few such men as William Proudfoot.”⁸¹

Proudfoot's influence pervaded the church beyond his own time as his students took up positions of responsibility in the new church. His son, J. J. A. Proudfoot, and William Caven became the leading lights at Knox College, Toronto, and D. H. MacVicar became a professor in the Presbyterian College, Montreal. While recognising that maintaining a facade of Scottishness would isolate the church from the developing Canadian community, the Reverend William Proudfoot and the United Presbyterian Church maintained on the frontier of Upper Canada their theology and ideas of freedom gained in Scotland. While he himself could not escape his Scottish background, he contributed to Canadian presbyterianism and the Canadian nation through his teaching a vision of a united church and a united state and ensured that his church would enter the mainstream of Canadian presbyterianism.

⁸⁰ P.C.C.A., Proudfoot Letters, W. Barrie to Proudfoot, March, 1845; U.W.O., Proudfoot Diary, 2, 19 October 1844, 16 March 1846, 18 October 1846, 17 November 1846; United Presbyterian Church in Canada, *An Account of the Proceedings of the Committees on Union appointed by the Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Canada and the Synod of the Missionary (now the United Presbyterian) Church in Canada, Containing Minutes of all the Meetings of the Committees, and all the Papers Submitted to them, Explanatory of Their Respective Opinions on National Establishments of Religion and on the Endowment of Churches* (London, 1849).

⁸¹ *The Globe*, 21 January 1851.