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Morrison and Antigonish: Private Troubles and Public Issues

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Review Essay:

There are now some eleven doctoral dissertations about the Antigonish Movement and its outcomes,¹ and several monographs, numerous scholarly articles and countless popular writings. The literature, in fact, is so dense that the historiography has its own history, one that is both sophisticated and contentious.

The latest contribution to these debates is the important new monograph by Peter Ludlow on Archbishop Morrison. He provides a competent, often engrossing, biography of Morrison’s life which adds considerably to our understanding of Morrison. In this rich narrative account of Morrison’s life, Ludlow has provided us with the tools to grasp the formative influences which shaped Morrison and the contextual analysis required for the reader to assess why Morrison acted as he did. The monograph might properly be called revisionist: Ludlow is attempting to recast our understanding of the role of the Catholic Church in the genesis and development of the Antigonish Movement.

The monograph builds on Ludlow’s own M.A. thesis (2004) and his subsequent CCHA Historical Studies article (2006). I begin by reviewing the substantive work, and proceed to show its importance in providing a deeper framework for assessing the “Tompkins Exile” and “Cape Breton Labour Problem” debates of recent years (Michael

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¹The number varies according to where the boundaries are set. The eleven dissertations identified in this case are Alexander (1985), Dennis (2015), Dutcher (2001), Hogan (1986), Laidlaw (1958), MacInnes (1978), Mifflen (1974), Neal (1995), Sacouman (1976), Schirber (1940), and Sowder (1967).
Welton, 2005; Jacob Remes, 2010; MacAulay, 2002; and Ludlow, 2013).

Narrative Structure

The biographical narrative follows a classical trajectory: formative influences in Chapter 1, knowledge and skill development in Chapter 2, mature authority in Chapters 3 and 4, and old age and decline in Chapter 5, all surrounded by short introductory and concluding chapters. A trajectory of rise, action, and fall.

Significantly, the rising phase is of much the longest duration from Morrison’s birth in 1861 to the end of WWI in 1918 (when Morrison was 57 years of age), followed by the action phase covering the organizing and dissemination periods of the Antigonish Movement from 1919 to 1938 (when Morrison was 77 years of age), and the falling phase from 1939 to his death in 1950 (when Morrison was 89 years of age). In short, the dramatic structure of the biographical narrative about Morrison has been fitted to the chronological structure of the social narrative about the Antigonish Movement.

The affiliation of Morrison’s life-course with the dynamics of social organization reminds one of the concepts of generational entelechy – “the expression of the unity of its [a generation’s] ‘inner aim’ – of its inborn way of experiencing life and the world” – and the non-contemporaneity of the contemporaneous – different generations living at the same time in qualitatively distinct subjective eras – as discussed by Mannheim (1952: 283).

What Mannheim succeeds in doing with these concepts is to relate changes in objective conditions to the reception of different imaginaries and generational traditions. So, we can understand the joints which Ludlow articulates for Morrison as the social joints of his generational entelechy.

Morrison Rising

I think it is fair to say that the discussion of Morrison’s early life presents the largest amount of newly published material, and perhaps the deepest insights into his character. In contemporary life, it is hard to appreciate how upright rural living was in the Maritimes in the late nineteenth century. Shaped by poverty where much of the economy was conducted through barter and reciprocal exchange, and
an ascetic religious discipline, even the Scottish Roman Catholic sensibility shared some of that Presbyterian rectitude.

Ludlow provides a detailed picture of Morrison’s youth, growing up in Savage Harbour, P.E.I., and traces the family relations and their activities in farming and fishing, showing how they intertwined with Morrison’s schooling and religious upbringing in a very traditional community setting. Morrison’s life was tranquil and fairly comfortable, but quite austere. Following high school, Morrison worked as a teacher for four years to save enough money to go to college, did two years of undergraduate work at St. Dunstan’s College in Charlottetown, and was then off to Urban College in Rome for seminary and graduate work. Morrison received his doctorate in philosophy in 1886, his doctorate in sacred theology in 1887, and was ordained priest there in late 1889. He returned to Charlottetown and held various posts in or near Charlottetown and in the Diocesan office, until he was appointed as Bishop of Antigonish in 1912. This chapter plays a pivotal role in the monograph as it gives us a deep understanding of Morrison’s personality and character, and is sprinkled with insights into the Catholic temper of the times, Morrison’s religious socialization, and his clerical apprenticeship. In other words, Ludlow provides the necessary background to interpret Morrison’s intentions, albeit we gain a better understanding of Morrison’s personality and characterological structures than his cognitive structure.

In the first phase of Morrison’s Antigonish leadership, there is a lengthy period of stock-taking and knowledge-development between 1912 and 1918. During much of this period, WWI concerns related to the military enlistment of men from the diocese, and the provision of ministry and support to the armed forces, occupied centre stage. These matters involved a new level of negotiation and logistics in working with the federal government and national and regional institutional systems. By the end of this period, Morrison was 57 years of age, and probably had the deepest range of administrative and organizational experience of any Catholic cleric in the diocese.

**Mature Action**

From 1919 to 1938, Ludlow reviews Morrison’s role in the organizing and dissemination periods of the Antigonish Movement. In the first
of the two chapters covering this period, Ludlow engages with the two major scholarly issues regarding the organizing period of the Antigonish Movement: the “Tompkins Exile”; and the “Cape Breton Labour Problem”. In the second of the two chapters, Ludlow discusses Morrison’s involvement with the dissemination period of the Antigonish Movement, but does not break any new ground, perhaps because it would have required a much stronger analysis of intellectual history. In the remainder of this section, therefore, I limit my remarks to Ludlow’s analysis of the Tompkins problem and the Industrial Labour problem.

As already noted, the Tompkins problem has received considerable recent attention. Father Jimmy Tompkins was the visionary-organizer of the adult education movement (in contrast to Coady, who might be said to be the visionary-organizer of the co-operative movement). Tompkin’s “Antigonish Forward Movement” and “People’s Schools” were one expression of his early efforts; his interest in the Carnegie proposal to amalgamate universities in Nova Scotia was another. Both of these organizing efforts should be understood as part of the pre-history of the Antigonish Movement. The amalgamation proposal was not acceptable to Morrison and after its defeat, Morrison moved Tompkins out of his position at St.FX University to an appointment as rector in Canso parish, something Tompkins and others regarded as a fog-filled community at the extremities of diocesan civilization.

The early historiography of the Antigonish Movement saw the exile of Tompkins as the defeat and punishment of a hero, only rescued by his own undaunted spirit, to successfully re-establish the movement in a new form at the end of the 1920s. This early historiography uses the “epic” or “heroic” dramatic form to describe the history, and tends toward hagiography. In contrast, recent historiography (Welton, 2005; Remes, 2010; MacAulay, 2002) has used various forms of critical theory to assess the same material. The new story holds that the progressive educational reforms which Tompkins championed – both the People’s School and University Amalgamation – were opposed by a reactionary Catholic hierarchy led by Morrison:

Tompkins’ exile cannot be reduced to a personality conflict, or to

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2 For a relatively neutral statement of the facts, see Cameron (1996).
3 See Fowler (1938) and Ward (1939).
the specific question of the merger. Morrison was seeking to block the new social philosophy from gaining the upper hand in the Diocese (Welton, 2005: 132).

In Act I, a reactionary Morrison stands in the way of Father Jimmy Tompkins’s academic reforms at St. Francis Xavier University. At the climax of that act, at the end of 1922, Morrison exiles Tompkins to distant Canso and soundly defeats the reforms (Remes, 2010: 58).

In his 2013 article, and again in this monograph, Ludlow provides a radically different interpretation:

The papers of Fr. Tompkins and Archbishop Morrison illustrate a congruity of purpose from 1912 to 1921, a willingness to cooperate, and a belief in the centrality of St. FX as the jewel of Catholic intellectual life in northeastern Nova Scotia. Contrary to the dominant theory that the university and diocesan hierarchy showed “little interest in the ideas and agitations of Tompkins,” Morrison actively engaged with the conceptions of the priest (Ludlow, 2013: 104).

The prevailing canon of the Antigonish Movement suggests that Morrison “opposed Tompkins’ reforms from his position as the priest’s ecclesiastical superior.” But the archives suggest quite a different narrative. In fact, Morrison’s defence of Fr Tompkins in 1915 was but one early example of their congruity of purpose, willingness to cooperate, and conviction in the centrality of St. F.X. within the diocese (Ludlow, 2015: 101).

For the most part, the facts of the matter don’t seem to be in dispute.\footnote{Ludlow introduces new archival evidence from the Antigonish Diocese Archives, but this cannot in itself resolve the disputed interpretations. The theoretical structures can always be adjusted with supplementary hypotheses to account for the new data.} How then do we resolve the conflicting interpretations? Let me make a few comments about the questions regarding the Industrial Labour Movement in Cape Breton before turning to this question.

During the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, industrial development became an important economic engine in Cape Breton, centred on coal mines and steel. Union militancy at the coal mines became particularly strong during the 1920s with the
“labour wars” focusing on union recognition and better living standards. Bitter strikes were fought in 1922, 1923 and 1925, with these three strikes accounting for more than “two million striker days” (Frank, 2014). Morrison’s leadership and the Catholic Church’s role in the “labour wars” is considered by Remes and other labour historians to be negative:

The bishop’s unchanging objective was to undermine working-class radicalism. Morrison wanted the men working at all costs, consistently trying to prevent strikes and other disruptions (Remes, 2010: 59).

Similarly, labor historians mention the Catholic Church, usually as just one of the many enemies faced by unionist coal miners (Remes, 2010: 59).

While Morrison’s opposition to communism was consistent with orthodox Catholicism, a negative position – not wanting something to happen – is notoriously difficult to justify as a motivating intention for social action, let alone as the impetus for an entire social movement. Remes does his best to articulate the meaning of the negative position for Morrison – the problem of dangerous radicals “who threatened to mislead his flock into Godless communism and create needless strife and suffering” (p. 82), but does provide a mention of self-interest as an additional positive factor:

The Church also had an institutional interest in workforce stability, since parish finances were dependent on contributions deducted from miners’ wages. The check-off system was a long-standing feature of mining: rent for company housing, union dues, and donations to churches and hospitals all came out before a miner saw his pay ... Despite this structured giving, many parishes were in debt, and the industrial area parishes, and with them the diocese, depended on working men to fill their coffers (pp. 66-67).

MacAulay (2002), however, with a critical sociological analysis, is not so circumspect as Remes in his attribution of self-interest as the key motivating factor:

The two factors, then of the material self-interest of the ideal middle-class leaders of the Movement and the dismissal of those
most marginalized by capitalism, the “down and outers,” as actors in the creation of a middle way, suggest a strong orientation towards finding a way to reinforce capitalism, rather than create a system truly in the middle of capitalism and socialism. The ideology of the Antigonish Movement ... helped to solidify capitalist hegemony (p. 62).

While Remes and MacAulay’s accounts of the industrial workers provide considerable narrative detail, their analytical account of the relations with Morrison and the Catholic Church remains thin. Neither does Ludlow’s analysis of Morrison’s behaviour significantly advance our understanding, although he adds further detail. No doubt, the difficulty in articulating a strong analysis is in part because Morrison and the Cape Breton priests struggled so much to incorporate industrial activity into their social imaginary of rural sustainability, as Remes suggests. Their own behaviour seemed to lack coherence and grace. Indeed, it is possible to see the ultimate failures of the Antigonish Movement to have had its origins in the theoretical problems already in evidence in the weak handling by Morrison of the “Cape Breton Labour Problem” during the 1920s.

How then can me adjudicate between the very different recent interpretations of the “Tompkins Exile” and the “Cape Breton Labour Problem”? In the next section, I outline the significance of intentions in making an adjudication, and use that as a basis to assess the literature.

**Intentional Explanation**

The Antigonish literature I have been discussing is organized around strong narrative structures and the intentions of Morrison and the Antigonish Movement leadership are appropriately highlighted. As Jerome Bruner has noted, intention is the primitive of the human sciences:

Narrative deals with the vicissitudes of intention. I propose this not only because it leaves the theorist with a certain flexibility but because it has a “primitiveness” that is appealing. By primitive I mean simply that one can make a strong argument for the irreducible nature of the concept of intention (Bruner, 1986: 17)
As such, the understanding of human action requires an account of their reasons for acting. While Bruner speaks from his work with George Miller as the progenitor of cognitive psychology in the late 1950s, this is the same position which was upheld by R. G. Collingwood, Gilbert Ryle, William Dray, Peter Winch, and the “small red book historicism”. The argument made was that human actions and physical events are distinct concepts: where events need causes, actions need reasons.

In this light, though, the critical theoretical explanations offered are straw men. What is missing from the critical theory and neo-Marxist analyses of Morrison (and the Antigonish Movement) is a sufficient understanding of the theological and moral pre-requisites of the religious intention actually in operation. If the secularism of these critical perspectives rules these pre-requisites as “out-of-order” in principle, as epiphenomenal, or as unintelligible, then how would it be possible to make sense of Morrison’s actions.

The value of Ludlow’s monograph lies mainly in the first three chapters where he slowly builds up a deep picture of Morrison’s personality and character, and provides contextual detail which allows us to understand the ambiguities of interpretation, and uncertainties which accompany the conflicting goals held by Morrison. As I indicated earlier, a greater attention to the cognitive structure of Morrison’s thought, and the intellectual history of the Antigonish Movement, would provide additional important information for assessment.

In light of these comments, we must welcome Ludlow’s contribution as moving us past the hypothesis-sketches of Remes, MacAulay and Welton.

**Conclusion**

The literature on the Antigonish Movement is voluminous. Much of the early literature, though, was hagiographic or movement-inspired. By the 1970s, once the movement was in decline, a more careful scrutiny developed, but it was greatly influenced by the different

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5 There remains a vigorous psychological inquiry into intentions and meaning. See, for instance, Malle (2001, 2004).
6 Sandis (2015). For larger histories of two of the major lines of philosophical debate, see D’Oro and Sandis (2013) and Kogler and Stueber (2000).
7 I don’t have the space here to further outline the debate about intentional explanation, particularly how it developed after Davidson’s intervention, but do so in a paper now in progress.
structuralisms of that period (see, for instance, Sacouman, 1976) and the academic secularism which dominated the university mind. The linguistic turn in the social sciences, however, laid the groundwork for subsequent developments in cognitive psychology, philosophy of action, and moral philosophy, and the even later recovery of church history and the sociology of religion.

It is no longer reasonable, if it ever was, to offer hypothesis-sketches of historical narratives, such as we find with Welton, Remes, and MacAulay. Davidson’s (1963) demand that an explanatory narrative must offer not just reasons for, but reasons why, established the gold standard for historical accounts. Such an account requires a coherent account of the intentionality of the action at issue. The monograph which Ludlow has given us significantly advances the “recruitment of context and background presuppositions” (Bruner [1995] 2014: 12) and leads us to a much improved understanding of Archbishop Morrison and the origins of the Antigonish Movement.

References


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8 Although his particular commitment to causal accounts is much disputed.


MacAulay, Scott. (2002). “The Smokestack Leaned Toward Capitalism: An Examination of the Middle Way Program of the


