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**Reviewer**

**Book Review**

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**Alan Wilson, *Highland Shepherd: James MacGregor, Father of the Scottish Enlightenment in Nova Scotia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015). Xvii + 256pp. Cloth \$55.**

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In our secular age, the historical contribution of people of faith on the development of Canada is increasingly muted. Even among those in the pews that call for “social justice,” there is a flawed conviction that the Churches stood aloof from the economic and educational accomplishments of society. Yet, biographies like Alan Wilson’s new study of the pioneer Presbyterian missionary, Rev. James Drummond MacGregor (1759-1830), clearly illustrates the virtues of religious people, not only as spiritual leaders, but also as architects of social, political, and scientific progress in British North America. MacGregor was, in fact, the father of the Scottish Enlightenment in Nova Scotia.

In the summer of 1786, Rev. MacGregor, a newly ordained Anti-burgher, Secessionist, Presbyterian Minister, was sent to Pictou, Nova Scotia, to minister to the budding Highland pioneer community. Educated at Glasgow University (and not Edinburgh as many assume), MacGregor studied in the birthplace of the “Scottish Enlightenment.” Subject to a pedagogy that sought an understanding of establishments, both civic and religious (p.21), the students had access to some of Scotland’s finest minds. In other words, Glasgow’s curriculum sought answers to questions of human nature, the sources of authority, and civic responsibility. The university, Wilson argues, was a place where students sought the “moral politician.” By probing the links among education, power, governance and progress,

MacGregor found a synthesis that later “fuelled his urge to create a parallel culture in the wilds of Nova Scotia” (p.29.).

Leaving behind a promising career in his native Scotland, MacGregor (like all missionaries) took considerable risk in relocating to British North America, but accepted his fate “in the north of God knows where” (p.6). The decision of European missionaries to sail for the colonies is a captivating story in its own right. Although, like MacGregor, many piously followed “God’s Will,” not all of these men of the cloth were saintly. In some Roman Catholic settlements in this period, for example, a few missionaries were considered the “Riffraff of their [former] dioceses,” and in New Brunswick, “New Dispensationalists,” followers of the “New Light Movement,” engaged in all manner of lewd and bizarre acts.

Wilson makes a convincing case that MacGregor’s religious convictions were authentic. Not long after his arrival in the dense forests of Nova Scotia, only a few days after crossing the vast Atlantic Ocean, he was invited to join a Presbytery of seceder Burgher ministers at Truro. Although the men were quite friendly, MacGregor, a seceder anti-Burgher, declined. Though alone in a primitive foreign land, he was reluctant to sacrifice his theological principles. Yet, not everyone in Pictou was as honourable, and Wilson does a good job dispelling the myth that citizens of the past were more pious or devout than we are today, by showing that MacGregor’s ministry was sometimes interrupted by “disorderly baiters” (p.57) and protests.

MacGregor traversed and ministered in territory from Pictou town to the settlements around the Bras d’Or lakes of Cape Breton. Yet, when he returned from this ministry, he would “scarcely wait to warm himself,” before sitting down to his writing table. From the fireside of his timber-framed pioneer home, he penned “Essay on the Millennial Age,” which was based on scientific accounts of pneumatics and climate change as well as the works of the famous naturalist the Comte de Buffon (p.122). In the cold, wet, Nova Scotian woods, the Glasgow alumnus was “speaking to improvers of all sorts and

affirming a bright future for the New World” (p.123). Books and ephemera arrived from Scotland, and MacGregor’s library would rival most contemporary collections. Almost every act had some scientific purpose, including farming, at which he experimented with the use of fertilizers.

Any reader tackling a history of Scottish Presbyterianism does so with slight trepidation. The different factions, splits, and unions within that denomination are easy to confuse, and Wilson does an admirable job of explaining, in plain language, the variances between Kirkmen, Seceders, Congregationalists, Burghers, and Anti-Burghers. A grasp of these terms is vital in following the story. Most modern historians do not distinguish between adherents of eighteenth and nineteenth-century religious denominations, yet there were major differences within Presbyterianism and Congregationalism. Even within Roman Catholicism during this period, Irish and Highland Scottish believers regularly clashed.

Nowhere were these theological convictions more apparent than in the town of Pictou. As immigrants from the Church of Scotland (Kirk) began pouring into Nova Scotia, those Burghers and Anti-Burghers, like MacGregor, formed a Seceder Union in 1817 as the Presbyterian Church of Nova Scotia (PCNS). Yet, as the Kirk made further inroads throughout the 1820s, clashes between these groups became commonplace. The PCNS, for example, appeared better suited to pioneer society, and were determined to educate and ordain a cadre of home-grown ministers, while followers of the Kirk looked back to Scotland for guidance and authority. In fact during the “Brandy Elections” for the colonial legislature in 1830, “brawling and killing” between the two groups was common (p.173).

Perhaps nothing better illustrates this divide than the fight for the Pictou Academy. Organized in 1816, the Academy sought to provide dissenters with the same opportunities afforded to Anglicans at King’s College in Windsor. As a threat to King’s, and a mechanism to promote the PCNS within the colony (through the education of new

ministers), the school was attacked by both the Halifax establishment and the Kirk. According to Nova Scotia newspaperman and politician, Joseph Howe, “next to the old fort at Annapolis,” the Academy “caused more battles than any other building in the country.”

Throughout the fight for Pictou Academy, Wilson paints MacGregor as a moderate, and a man willing to compromise with his Kirk colleagues. It is clear that he viewed the Academy as a means to offer a liberal education to all (based on the pedagogy of Glasgow University) and not merely to promote the PCNS (p.177). Unquestionably, he lost many friends because of this position.

Yet, Wilson is not as charitable to the other actors, most especially the Reverend Doctor Thomas McCulloch (1776-1843), an important voice in the PCNS, who is described as a man who “left no room for conciliation” (p.178). Rev. McCulloch is ever present in this book. Not only because he was a younger contemporary of MacGregor, but also because his narrative has long dominated the historiography of this period. Although MacGregor had ministered in the forests of Nova Scotia since 1786, historians like D.C. Harvey (and many others) argued that the important contribution of Presbyterianism to Nova Scotia’s economic and intellectual life was not fulfilled until Rev. McCulloch landed at Pictou in 1803. It was McCulloch, Harvey argued in his seminal paper, “The Intellectual Awakening of Nova Scotia” (1933), who “stirred his illiterate countrymen into action.” Yet, as Wilson, and Barry Cahill (who pens a “Historiographical Introduction”) argues, it was, in fact, MacGregor, that planted the roots of this awakening.

Why does this matter? Historical events must be understood in the wider context of the period. Typically there are numerous actors that contribute to the story. Too often, particularly among historians of Nova Scotia, the narrative has been one of heroes or villains, greatness or mediocrity. Rev. McCulloch did not operate in a vacuum, nor, as this book illustrates, were all concepts of education and political economy his own. Despite MacGregor’s devotion to science and

philosophy, the liberal product of the Scottish Enlightenment had been cast as the “rough-hewn minister” and backwoods preacher. By ignoring MacGregor’s scientific, religious, and philosophical contribution, historians failed to offer a complete picture (or timeline) of the Presbyterian contribution to colonial Nova Scotia.

One fine example of this reality is MacGregor’s public hostility to slavery. It may come as a revelation to some readers that some loyalist settlers in Nova Scotia brought indentured servants and African slaves with them. In fact, the Burgher head of the Truro Presbytery, Rev. Daniel Cock, kept a young slave named Deal. It seems incredible that a man of God (or anyone else for that matter) could own another human being as property, and unquestionably MacGregor was horrified. Although his attacks on Rev. Cock in a Halifax newspaper did not, as Wilson notes, begin an anti-slavery movement in British North America, it made MacGregor a moral leader in the colony.

Rev. MacGregor lived an interesting life and, like all human beings, was not perfect. Wilson does a good job describing his personality and the trials of pioneer life, including the death of his first wife, Ann, who succumbed after delivering a baby (who also died) in 1810. He is also depicted as an exceptional Gaelic scholar and poet, writing lines that remained popular well after his death. Yet, he also displayed traits of anti-Catholicism, something that was fairly common among Presbyterians in this period despite their enlightened tradition of tolerance (although Nova Scotia did not have the overt sectarianism of other communities). Interestingly, in highlighting the Highland Scottish Bishop Agnes Bernard MacEachern of Prince Edward Island as one of those that MacGregor “particularly disliked,” (Bishop MacEachern objected to MacGregor corrupting Catholic immigrants), Wilson humanizes both men, and does not fall into the trap of making new saints and sinners (p.65).

Importantly, Alan Wilson is able to examine noteworthy historical events, like the creation of Pictou Academy, without losing

sight of MacGregor's spiritual responsibilities. He was a writer, a thinker, preacher, surveyor, and agriculturalist, but to his flock he was the source of spiritual sustenance. MacGregor was an itinerant preacher, ministering to communities across Nova Scotia, Cape Breton, and Prince Edward Island. It was difficult work and at times his spirits were low, but he was undoubtedly committed to the daily requirements of his flock. These ministers knew their people intimately, which is why, for example, Rev. McCulloch's famous musings, "the Stepsure Letters," published in the *Acadian Recorder*, dealt with the "short-term benefits" of a timber boom, the recklessness of easy money, and the folly of going astray from the faith. (p.147).

Structurally, the book is divided into five parts, each containing short chapters that follow a traditional approach to biography. As noted previously, Barry Cahill provides a useful Historiographical Introduction, which champions *Highland Shepherd* for doing justice to the legacy of Rev. MacGregor. I would certainly agree with that assessment. The notes are extensive given the general scarcity of sources from this period. There are, however, only six illustrations in the book, and a few period depictions of Pictou might have helped, as would a good map to orientate readers not familiar with the geography of Nova Scotia. These are but minor flaws for a book that is well written and accessible to both the scholar and the general public.

Dr. Peter Ludlow works for the Diocese of Antigonish and is currently writing a third volume of *A History of the Catholic Church in Eastern Nova Scotia, 1880-1960*. The first two volumes were completed by Fr Anthony A. Johnston in 1960 and 1971. He is also the Vice-President of the Canadian Catholic Historical Association.