

Baptists in 19th Century Ontario

“A dismal region of moral darkness and the shadow of death” where most families had “no books, not even a Bible,” and thus were “grossly ignorant” was the way that the American Calvinistic Baptist missionary Asahel Morse (1771-1838) described the society of Upper Canada, or Ontario, in the first decade of the nineteenth century. . . . [O]ther testimonies from this era in Ontario history echo similar sentiments. The prominent Methodist revivalist Nathan Bangs (1778-1862), who ministered for twelve years in Upper and Lower Canada, called York “a town of people as wicked as the Canaanites of old.” And the staunch Tory, John Strachan (1778-1867), the first Anglican bishop of Toronto, could observe in 1803: “Every parish in this country is to be made; the people have very little or no religion, and their minds are so prone to low cunning that it will be difficult to make anything of them.”¹

It was into this rather bleak religious landscape that Calvinistic Baptist missionaries like Asahel Morse of the Shaftsbury Association came with the gospel. The Shaftsbury Association was one of four Baptist missionary bodies involved in reaching central Canada. The other three were the Woodstock Association, the New York Association, and the Massachusetts Association. The various missionaries of these four associations, then, are responsible for planting and/or supporting the first Baptist churches in Ontario.

At the outbreak of the war of 1812, Baptist life in Ontario was little more than embryonic. There were fourteen churches in all with a total membership of around 400. These first Baptist churches in Ontario were linked together in two fledgling associations: the Thurlow Association consisting mostly of churches between Coburg and Kingston and the Clinton Conference made up of four churches—Charlotteville, Townsend, Clinton, and Oxford. Theologically, these two associations were Calvinistic in doctrine.

John Winterbotham notes the difficulties faced by the Baptist missionaries planting these early churches:

[In the 1790s, the area around Vittoria was] almost an unbroken forest, having only a very few human habitations scattered here and there in the thick woods down to the shore of Long Point Bay. . . . [As such, American Baptist missionaries] had to traverse the country all the way from Niagara River to Long Point, across swamps, over rivers and creeks, and through trackless woods, thus evincing their love for the souls of dying men.²

Thus, these early days of Baptist influence in Ontario were marked by pioneering heroes.

¹ Michael A. G. Haykin, *A Glorious Fellowship of Churches: Celebrating the History of the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches in Canada, 1953—2003* (Guelph, ON: The Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches in Canada, 2003), 116.

² Winterbotham as cited by Haykin, *A Glorious Fellowship*, 119.

And yet, it seems, Baptist influence in Ontario stagnated for a number of years. Numerous reasons for this stagnation have been proffered:

- The Methodist use of camp meetings as a key evangelistic tool
- The fact that North American Baptists largely identified with the American Revolution and hence did not want to come to Upper Canada where they would again be subject to the threat of oppression by the Established Church
- The suggestion that conflict between open and closed communionists scuttled any attempt to establish a unified base for evangelism
- The early Baptists' lack of commitment to theological education

With respect to theological education, matters begin to change in the late 1850s. In mid-October 1856, **Robert Alexander Fyfe** and seven other pastors, including T. L. Davidson and John Winterbotham, issued a call for a convention to meet in Brantford on the 19th of November. When the convention met, a commitment was made to raise money so as to establish a theological institute. This institute would not be located east of St. Catharines nor west of London. Within a month property was provided in Woodstock by Archibald Burtch, a deacon at one of the Baptist churches.

In 1860, the school, then known as the Canadian Literary Institute, opened its doors with a student body of 79 and a faculty of 5. Robert Fyfe was the school's first principal and, under his leadership, the school grew to a peak of 253 students in 1874. Every school year between 1861 and Fyfe's death in 1878, Fyfe regularly taught six hours a day, five days a week. On Sundays he never declined an opportunity to preach and conduct Sunday School classes. During the summers, Fyfe would travel the province seeking to raise funds for the school. In the entire seventeen years that he was principal he only took two vacations all but working himself to death. It is a testimony to Fyfe that many of his students became either overseas missionaries or key leaders of the Baptist movement in Ontario.

Upon Fyfe's death in 1878 there began a movement to relocate the theological department of the Canadian Literary Institute to Toronto, the political and economic centre of the province. Principal among this movement was one **William McMaster**, an Irish immigrant who, upon arriving in Toronto in 1833, became a partner in, and then sole proprietor of, a dry goods firm. A member of Jarvis Street Baptist Church in Toronto, McMaster donated a site on Bloor Street as well as \$100,000 in capital pledging an additional \$14,500 annually.

Construction of the Toronto Baptist College was completed in the summer of 1881 with classes beginning that fall. The theological statement of the new school contained strong affirmations of both Calvinism and closed communion. "The election and effectual calling of all God's people" was affirmed, along with "the atoning efficacy of the Death of Christ, the free justification of believers in Him by his imputed righteousness" and "the preservation unto eternal life of the Saints." "Immersion in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" was confessed to be the "only gospel 'baptism'." And only those "so baptized are . . . entitled to Communion at the Lord's Table."

Up until his death in 1887, McMaster dreamed of moving the rest of the Woodstock Literary Institute to Toronto desiring to establish a major Baptist presence in the heart of the most influential city in Ontario and to show that Baptists were as respectable as other denominational bodies. To secure his dream, he left close to one million dollars to the new school which was appropriately named McMaster University after his death.

Toronto Baptist College's first principal was Jarvis Street's pastor, Dr. John H. Castle. Castle served from the school's beginning in 1881 through the spring of 1889 when he resigned due to ill health. The school's second principal, **Daniel Arthur MacGregor**, served an even shorter term. After replacing Castle in the summer of 1889, MacGregor succumbed to what is known as Pott's disease, a tubercular disease of the spinal column. By August, MacGregor was completely paralyzed in the lower half of his body.

During his confinement to bed during the autumn months of 1889, MacGregor composed a hymn "expressive of adoring love and ardent longing for the Saviour." The hymn, "Jesus, Wondrous Saviour," became the great theme hymn of McMaster University oftentimes being known simply as the McMaster Hymn.

As Michael Haykin notes, the hymn is "a marvelous expression of nineteenth-century Ontario Baptist piety."³

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| <p>1 Jesus, wondrous Saviour! Christ, of kings the King! Angels fall before Thee, Prostrate, worshipping; Fairest they confess Thee In the Heaven above. We would sing Thee fairest Here in hymns of love;</p> | | <p>4 All earth's flowing pleasures Were a wintry sea; Heaven itself without Thee Dark as night would be. Lamb of God! Thy glory Is the light above. Lamb of God! Thy glory Is the life of love.</p> |
| <p>2 Fairer far than sunlight Unto eyes that wait Amid fear and darkness, 'Til the morning break; Fairer than the day-dawn, Hills and dates among, When its tide of glory Wakes the tide of song;</p> | | <p>5 Life is death, if severed From Thy throbbing heart. Death with life abundant At Thy touch would start. Worlds and men and angels All consist in Thee: Yet Thou camest to us In humility.</p> |
| <p>3 Sweeter far than music Quivering from keys That unbind all feeling With strange harmonies. Thou art more and dearer Than all minstrelsy; Only in Thy presence Can joy's fulness be.</p> | | <p>6 Jesus! all perfections Rise and end in Thee; Brightness of God's glory Thou, eternally. Favoured beyond measure They Thy face who see; May we, gracious Saviour, Share this ecstasy.</p> |

Eventually, MacGregor, the author of this hymn, underwent an operation in New York Hospital. However, he died of complications not long afterward on April 25, 1890.

³ Haykin, *A Glorious Fellowship*, 133.

In addition to Robert Fyfe, William McMaster, and Daniel MacGregor, two other men warrant our attention when talking about Baptists in 19th Century Ontario:

I. John Gilmour (1792-1869)

Gilmour was born in Ayr, Scotland on August 4, 1792. As a young boy, Gilmour was blessed with an excellent memory. He memorized entire chapters of the Bible even before he could read. Gilmour's education was cut short, however, when he decided to go to sea at the age of nine. On January 1, 1809, Gilmour's ship, the Cumberland, was attack and captured by a French privateer. Gilmour and the rest of the crew subsequently spent the next five years in relatively free captivity in France.

While in France, Gilmour came to faith in Christ. Later, on June 18, 1814, John was both baptized and introduced to his future bride, Jannet. While dating Jannet, John could not help but feel that the Lord was calling him into the ministry. After four years of studying under Dr. Steadman, John Gilmour established the first Baptist church in Aberdeen where he served as pastor for nine years.

In 1830, however, John Edwards, a Scottish immigrant pastor who had settled in the Ottawa Valley traveled back to Great Britain to highlight the need for Christian workers in Canada. Edwards, a persuasive man, was able to convince Gilmour of the need and, on September 18, 1830, Gilmour and his family arrived in Montreal. Not one year later, Gilmour had already established the first Baptist church in Montreal with a membership of twenty-five.

This Baptist community in Montreal served as a rallying point for men of capable leadership who would ultimately form the Ottawa Association. Gilmour himself moved to the Ottawa Valley (Clarence) in 1835 when ill health forced him to resign his pastorate in Montreal. Still desiring to serve the Lord, however, Gilmour became Edwards' associate pastor.

In the years following 1835, Gilmour proved instrumental in establishing an association of Baptist churches in the Ottawa Valley (1836), a Baptist Canadian Missionary Society (1836), the Canada Baptist College in Montreal (1838-1849), and a number of Baptist churches in and around Peterborough: one in Smith Township (1838), one in Peterborough proper (1846), one in Lakefield, one in Dummer, and one in Bailieboro. After establishing the church in Peterborough, Gilmour became its pastor and he subsequently served there for twenty-three years until his death in 1869.

II. William Fraser (1801-1883)

Fraser, like Gilmour, came from Scotland. He was converted to Christ in 1817 and then studied for a couple of years in the 1820s before becoming an itinerant preacher. In the summer of 1831, Fraser moved to Canada arriving at

Breadalbane Baptist Church in the Ottawa Valley. Things, unfortunately, were not going well in the church and by 1834, Fraser had become quite despondent. It was then that John Gilmour visited him and encouraged him with these words: "There must be fire in the pulpit before there will be a blaze among the congregation."

That fall and winter there was a large-scale awakening throughout the region around Breadalbane. Between August and December, 1834, Fraser baptized fifty-eight new converts. By the fall of 1835 over one hundred had been converted and brought into the membership of the Breadalbane church.

Ever the pioneer church planter, Fraser made the decision to leave Breadalbane in 1850 and head west to Illinois; but he got no further than Bruce County. Initially, he lived on a farm just outside of Kincardine, where he held services in his own home in Gaelic and English. Eventually he moved to Tiverton, where he gathered a congregation. When Fraser resigned this pastorate due to age and infirmity in October of 1875, the membership stood at 354, a figure which would not have included members dismissed to form other Baptist churches in the area or those who might have died or moved away from the district altogether.

Fraser died in 1883 after he had gone out to Manitoba to evangelize a community of Gaelic-speaking Highlanders. The trip apparently proved to be too much for the old man; but he went out as he lived spreading the gospel message.