

## **The Gospel of Success in Canada: Charles W. Gordon (Ralph Connor) as Exemplar**

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Scholars have long been interested in the ideas of success that drive Americans and have studied the literature that communicated these ideas and values extensively.<sup>1</sup> If we can trust the self-help literature they read, Americans in most of the nineteenth century agreed with figures such as Cotton Mather and Benjamin Franklin that success was a matter of character. If anything, low origins and lack of education were a help, for they forced the development of character and the habit of industry. Americans believed that character was developed through strenuous effort. Natural endowments did not matter, nor did an adverse origin. The successful were those who developed a character that featured the virtues of frugality, loyalty, industry, humility, and so on and so on. These virtues would be rewarded with success.

Among the most active success and self-help writers in the nineteenth century were Protestant ministers, especially Congregationalists, with Unitarians and Methodists, some Presbyterians and Baptists, and a few Episcopalians. Prime examples were William Makepeace Thayer, a Congregationalist; Russell Herman Conwell, a Baptist; and the most famous American success novelist of them all, Horatio Alger, Jr., a Unitarian. That Unitarians were active in success literature illustrates an important characteristic of the literature: it was not written by the conservatives of the time, but by the more progressive mainline Protestants. Among the lists of late nineteenth century clerical success novelists and tract writers were a number of clergy who were identified with the

social gospel movement. Perhaps the best known of these was Congregationalist pastor Charles Shelton of Topeka, Kansas, whose *In His Steps* (1896), has sold millions of copies and is still in circulation.

The purpose of this essay is to study whether or not equivalent authors in Canada put forward similar ideas about what is necessary to be a successful person. Though Canadian historians have apparently been less interested in the Canadian ethos of success than American historians have been in the American success ethic, there are reasons to believe that there are similarities, especially between the United States and Anglophone Canada. Both of these cultures derived from the values of the English Reformation and Enlightenment and both were affected by the evangelical revivals of the eighteenth century. Several studies have shown that the success idea in England's Puritan and Enlightenment colonies is little different from that in the mother country,<sup>2</sup> so we might assume that Canadian visions of success are similar to American. At least two examples of Canadian success tracts develop the same themes as their American counterparts of the same eras (1920s and 1970s).<sup>3</sup>

To test the hypothesis that Canadian clerical writers of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were presenting ideas of success similar to the American clerical writers of that time, this essay will examine the novels of Charles W. Gordon who wrote under the pen name of Ralph Connor. I have selected Gordon/Connor for two reasons. First, Charles Gordon fits the profile of equivalent American authors almost exactly, being a late-nineteenth/early-twentieth century Presbyterian clergyman committed to the social gospel. Second, Ralph Connor was one of Canada's most popular novelists of the pre-World War I era. His novels of that period were best sellers in Canada and Connor was often the Canadian novelist most widely read outside of Canada.

Gordon was born in Glengarry County, Canada West, in 1860. In 1870 his family moved to Oxford County. In 1883 he graduated from the University of Toronto and in 1887 from Knox College. He was ordained in 1890 and served a variety of mining, lumber, and railroad camps centred on Banff from 1890-1893. Beginning in 1894 he served as pastor of St. Stephen's Presbyterian Church in Winnipeg. Under his leadership the church grew to a thousand members and Gordon participated in community life as a moderate progressive. During the first part of World War I he served as a chaplain at the front and after 1916 spoke widely in Canada to encourage support for the war effort and in the United States to encourage

that country to enter the war. Gordon was involved in the Winnipeg General Strike and its aftermath and was moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Canada in 1921-22. He was a strong advocate of church union and represented the United Church at the 1927 World Conference of Faith and Order. Even in the last decade of his life he spoke out against fascism and called on Canadians to institute national systems of social services. He died in 1937.<sup>4</sup>

In order to do this preliminary study I have read seven of the Ralph Connor novels: *Black Rock* (the first Ralph Connor novel, 1898), *The Sky Pilot* (1899), *The Man from Glengarry* (1901), *The Doctor* (1906), *The Foreigner* (1909, British edition: *The Settler*), *Corporal Cameron* (1912), and *To Him That Hath* (1921).<sup>5</sup> My conclusion after reading these novels is that Gordon's views on success are very similar to his American counterparts, though not exactly identical. A number of themes common to success novels from the United States appear in the Connor novels, and in many cases there are no real differences. At several points, though, the Connor novels develop themes in ways that reflect differences between the United States and Anglophone Canadian culture.

The most basic of the themes shared is the fundamental assumption that success is a matter of personal character and that the person with a strong, virtuous character will be more successful than the person of weak character. This assumption forms the bedrock of all seven novels and each novel is something of a long illustration of the point.

*Black Rock* is the story of the reform and renewal of a mining and lumbering community in the Selkirk Mountains. The local Presbyterian minister and his allies wage a long and eventually successful campaign against demon rum and bring both sobriety and culture to the miners and loggers of Black Rock. There is a crisis created by the two weak characters of the local saloon owner and doctor. Because of the strength of character of the minister and Mrs. Mavor, the doctor gives up drink and the saloon is converted to a coffee house. The novel illustrates the point made in the preface: "The men of the book are still there in the mines and lumber camps of the mountains, fighting out that eternal fight for manhood, strong, clean, God-conquered."<sup>6</sup> If this particular novel reads like a temperance or evangelistic tract, it is because the original purpose of the short stories on which it was based was to encourage Presbyterians in the East to give money in support of missions in the West. Nonetheless, when shaped into a novel, the stories of *Black Rock* found a ready audience

outside of the original readership.

An important aspect of the strong character – weak character motif is the contrast between the virtue of industry and the vice of sloth. Just like the hero of a Horatio Alger novel, the hero of a Ralph Connor novel is always industrious and those characters whose weakness leads to the crisis of the novel are always slothful. Interestingly, they often mix high intelligence with laziness or lack of direction.

An example of such a weak character is Tony Perrotte in *To Him That Hath*. Tony's moral character is contrasted with the strong, virtuous character of the novel's hero, Jack Maitland, throughout the book. As a child, Tony's sister had been taken out of school so that he could continue, but he had shown no appreciation for her act of sacrifice. On the contrary, Tony tended to take advantage of his sister's love whenever possible. During the Great War both Tony and Jack had committed deeds of great heroism, each saving the other's life on separate occasions. But on returning from the war and each being given jobs by Jack's father, Jack succeeded and prospered and became highly respected by both labour and management while Tony failed and wandered off to Toronto to live a dissolute life. Tony returned just in time to join the workers in a general strike and his weakness of character, combined with the weakness of character of one of the factory owners, lead to the violence which resulted in his own sister being shot. What were Tony's primary character flaws? He had a tendency toward arrogance, he could not stick with a project to completion, and he would rather talk than work.

Perhaps it is not incidental to Tony's weak character that his mother is Irish. In the Ralph Connor novels the Irish do not come off looking very well. Of course, they are all Catholic, which raises at least a minor question. Most of them are a bit too fond of the bottle and some of them even join together and plot to undo the success of various temperance and betterment efforts. Irish women tend to be empty-headed and vain. Very few of the Irish characters have the requisite moral character for success, though a few in the end have a conversion which leads to a change of life.

If the Irish are of questionable character in the Connor novels, immigrants who don't speak English are a serious problem. *The Foreigner* focuses on the life of the Eastern European immigrant community in Winnipeg. Gordon refers to these people as "Galicians," which the novel notes is the way that Anglo Winnipeggers referred to anyone of Slavic origin. The actual characters in the novel appear to be Ukrainians, though

some might be Poles who actually emigrated from Galicia. Whatever their origin, their living conditions are recorded as abominable and Anglophone Winnipeg pays little attention to them except for the few Christian activists who provide some measure of health care and counsel. Interestingly, in *The Foreigner* the evil landlords who oppress the immigrants are always other “Galicians,” never Anglos.

The situation of the immigrants in *The Foreigner* is part caused by social forces and part by the weak character of the immigrants themselves. Most are fairly stupid (except for those few of noble birth) and all drink like fish. After drinking for awhile, they then turn to fighting, especially at weddings. When they get around to working, they work at the lowest and meanest jobs available. The goal of the reformers – and these characters seem to speak for Gordon himself – is to turn the new immigrants into good Canadians, which clearly means into good English Protestants, and some do make that transition while working in mine or mill. If they can’t be turned into English Protestants, then the next best is French-Canadian Catholics.

This negative view of immigrants is quite similar to views expressed by American success novelists of the same era. The guides to success of the era, and even down into the 1920s, were written not only by, but also for the English Protestant native-born and show more than a little prejudice against immigrants. For example, Richard Weiss quotes success writer Bolton Hall who had no qualms about calling immigrants “the Dagos and Huns and Kikes.”<sup>7</sup> Many other Americans saw immigrants as one of the biggest threats to traditional definitions of and opportunities for success. The images of success presented to Americans in the nineteenth and into the early-twentieth century were white, English Protestant, middle-class, and nativist. In this, Gordon’s views are similar. They are certainly more moderate than some<sup>8</sup> in that immigrants in the Ralph Connor novels have the opportunity to become Canadian, but the prejudice against immigrants is still present and being Canadian is defined by British Protestantism.

In spite of Gordon’s pride that the North West Mounted Police treated aboriginal peoples much better than the United States Cavalry,<sup>9</sup> his view of native Canadians is even more severe than his view of immigrants. In *The Foreigner* one significant character is Mack Mackenzie, half Scottish and half native. About Mack, Gordon says on one occasion, “His enthusiasm . . . even waked old Mackenzie out of his aboriginal lethargy.”<sup>10</sup> In *Corporal Cameron* aboriginal people are described as

utterly unable to refrain from whiskey: “The Stonies had no doubt as to his meaning. Their hearts were filled with black rage against the unscrupulous trader, but their insane thirst for the ‘fire-water’ swept from their minds every other consideration but that of determination to gratify this mad lust.”<sup>11</sup>

Success writers in the United States also were often anti-Catholic. Again, Gordon shares this attitude, but tempered by the existence of Quebec as part of Canada. The Connor novels have a definite hierarchy of Catholic priesthood. At the bottom are the priests who have come from Eastern Europe who are all out to fleece the flock as thoroughly as possible. In the middle are the Irish priests, who don’t work as hard as they ought to, but still are not out to con the people. At the top are the French-Canadian priests who work hard to care for the spiritual and material welfare of their people. Being an English Protestant is definitely the best way of being Canadian, but short of that, if you want to remain Catholic make sure that your priest is from Quebec.

In *The Foreigner* the young hero must be taken out of the immigrant community in Winnipeg to the Saskatchewan frontier in order to learn the lessons of character that will help him be successful. Even on the frontier there is a community of “poor, ignorant Galicians” that calls him away from his mission. Just like so many of Horatio Alger’s heroes, young Kalman has had to grow up poor for reasons beyond his control. His parents were noble revolutionaries – thus enabling Kalman both to have a noble birth and be committed to parliamentary democracy! – but his mother was killed because the revolutionary movement was betrayed by Rosenblatt, the villain of the novel, and his father gave him over to a poor, dumb “Galician” woman to care for. He becomes friends with several reform minded Anglos who decide to send him off to live on a ranch. There he becomes friends with the local Presbyterian missionary to the “Galicians” who functions as preacher, school master and doctor, and who helps Kalman in his quest for virtue. In the end Kalman becomes what everyone has hoped: a good English Protestant who discovers and then manages a thriving coal mine which employs the “Galicians,” teaches them how to be Canadians, and contributes to the economic and cultural growth of the West.

It is in Gordon’s hopes for Western Canada that we see one distinction between him and his American counterparts. Both have a sense of what is called in the United States manifest destiny. Whereas the

American sense of manifest destiny is that the United States is destined to cover the continent from Atlantic to Pacific with the benefits of democracy and capitalism, Gordon's sense of manifest destiny is connected with the place of Western Canada in the whole British Empire. The preface to *The Foreigner* says it most clearly:

In Western Canada there is seen today that most fascinating of all human phenomena, the making of a nation. Out of breeds diverse in tradition, in ideals, in speech, and in manner of life, Saxon and Slav, Teuton, Celt and Gaul, one people is being made. The blood strains of great races will mingle in the blood of a race greater than the greatest of them all.

It would be our wisdom to grip these peoples to us with living hooks of justice and charity till all lines of national cleavage disappear, and in the Entity of our Canadian national life, and in the unity of our world-wide Empire, we fuse into a people whose strength will endure the slow shock of time for the honour of our name, for the good of mankind, and for the glory of Almighty God.<sup>12</sup>

Charles W. Gordon was an active part of the social gospel movement in Winnipeg and as a novelist is not afraid to take on the social issues of the day. In *The Foreigner* he presents a story which takes up the plight of the immigrant community in Winnipeg. In *To Him That Hath* the crisis of the story is a general strike which has been brought on by a combination of certain owners ignoring the conditions of their workers and outside agitators. In these stories Gordon discusses some of the structural changes that need to occur. Here Gordon is a bit more cognizant of social and structural issues than most of his American counterparts. In the end, though, as in similar American novels, social problems are solved by the individual action of persons of virtuous character. The immigrants are bettered when Kalman opens a mine foils the attempts of the evil Rosenblatt to take it away. The mine then provides employment and that, combined with the education and religion provided by the Presbyterian missionary Brown, leads to the uplifting of the community. The strike is settled when Jack Maitland and Malcolm McNish sit down and hash out a solution acceptable to both sides. In both cases, individuals of virtuous character solves the problem. The structures are left pretty well intact.

Nonetheless, it is the case that Gordon is somewhat less individualistic than his American counterparts. For example, in the preface to *The Sky*

*Pilot* he says, "The measure of a man's power to help his brother is the measure of the love in the heart of him and of the faith that he has that at last the good will win. With this love that seeks not its own and this faith that grips the heart of things, he goes out to meet many fortunes, but not that of defeat."<sup>13</sup> Later, in the course of the story, the hero, a Presbyterian missionary, confronts one of the characters:

"Well," I said, rather weakly, "a man ought to look after himself."

"Yes! - and his brother a little." Then he added: "What have any of you done to help him? The Duke could have pulled him up a year ago if he had been willing to deny himself a little, and so with all of you. You do just what pleases you regardless of any other, and so you help one another down."

I could not find anything just then to say, though afterwards many things came to me . . . This was certainly a new doctrine for the West; an uncomfortable doctrine to practice, interfering seriously with personal liberty, but in the *Pilot's* way of viewing things difficult to escape. There would be no end to one's responsibility. I refused to think it out.<sup>14</sup>

Another characteristic which Gordon shares with American clerical success writers of the character-ethic school is a certain ambiguity about the subject of success itself. Certainly these novels on both sides of the border were written to inspire young people to pursue those virtues which would lead to success. And failure was treated with contempt. For example, in *Corporal Cameron*, Cameron is listening to a sermon on the parable of the talents:

Cameron's vagrant mind, suddenly recalled, responded with a quick assent. Opportunity? Endowment? Yes, surely. His mind flashed back over the years of his education . . . How little he had made of them! Others had turned them into the gold of success . . .

"One was a failure, a dead, flat failure." continued the preacher. "Not so much a wicked man, no murderer, no drunkard, no gambler, but a miserable failure. Poor fellow! At the end of his life a wretched bankrupt, losing even his original endowment. How would you like to come home after ten, twenty, thirty years of experiment with life and confess to your father that you were dead broke and no good?"<sup>15</sup>



But which is most important, the virtues or the success? No one could deny that there were many who were quite wealthy who pursued their success not through a virtuous character but through double-dealing, shady practices, and monopoly. Did virtue always lead to success? Experience in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century said that it did not always, and often led to a much more modest success than did the practices of the great railway tycoons, stock market moguls and oil barons. Yet Charles Gordon and all of the other clerical success novelists on both sides of the border held out against experience on this point. For them virtue was its own reward, of course, but the idea that somehow virtue might go unrewarded was just unthinkable. It might take time and it might involve a period of privation, but virtue would be rewarded at some point with success in the world. While one needed to adapt to one's surroundings, there was simply no need to adopt shady practices in order to get ahead. Eventually those who failed to live lives of virtue would lose their temporary wealth while those of strong character would live out their lives comfortably middle or upper-middle class.

These few examples do show several of the ways in which the novels written by the Rev. Charles Gordon under the name Ralph Connor share themes and assumptions with equivalent novelists in the United States and show how Gordon's Anglo-Canadian context provided differences in nuance from his Anglo-American counterparts. At the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, those who promoted the classic Protestant ethic of virtuous character and hard work in both Canada and the United States promoted the same doctrines of success. In particular, even the advocates of a progressive, social gospel Anglo-Protestantism on both sides of the border held to the classic model of character and a virtue ethic which had been developed in the English Reformation and Enlightenment.

This is important, it seems to me, for several reasons. Firstly, what philosopher Charles Taylor might call a "debased form" of the English Protestant character ethic still holds significant power in Canadian culture as it does in American culture. Several, usually right-wing, parties have attached themselves to this power in order to sell their programs to the public in recent elections on national and provincial levels. Belief in the social efficacy of individual character and effort persist even in the face of systemic and technological unemployment. These issues also appear in our debates over the similarities and differences between the United States and

Canada. If we are to have reasoned discussions on these issues and others, it is essential that we understand the history of the ideas and values behind our present beliefs.

Secondly, particularly for historians of theology and ethics there is an interesting tension that runs through the history of mainline Protestantism and shows itself in the success theories of American and, if this paper is correct, Canadian English Protestants. How does one hold together a belief in *sola gratia* and the simultaneous belief that hard work and virtue will be rewarded with temporal success? This question is perhaps not so sharp for the Wesleyan and Baptist traditions, but it is particularly sharp for Reformed traditions such as Puritanism / Congregationalism and Presbyterianism who must hold together belief in divine predestination with the belief that you are what you make of yourself. As a Lutheran theologian this question is especially interesting, because part of my task is to figure out how we Lutherans, whose ancestors came to this continent as “Foreign Protestants,” as some of those immigrants who were so problematic for the success writers of the late-nineteenth century, fit into this culture with its assumptions that sound so much like late-medieval doctrines of justification.

### **Endnotes**

1. Compare, e.g., Peter Baida, *Poor Richard's Legacy: American Business Values from Benjamin Franklin to Donald Trump* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1990); Rex Burns, *Success in America: The Yeoman Dream and the Industrial Revolution* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1976); Richard M. Huber, *The American Idea of Success* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971); Moses Rischin, ed., *The American Gospel of Success: Individualism and Beyond* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965); Richard Weiss, *The American Myth of Success: From Horatio Alger to Norman Vincent Peale* (New York: Basic Books, 1969); and Irvin G. Wyllie, *The Self-Made Man in America: The Myth of Rags to Riches* (New York: The Free Press, 1954).
2. For example, see Louis B. Wright, *Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1935).
3. William E. Blatz, *The Habit of Success, A 1929 Edith Butler Pool Lecture* (Chicago: The Visiting Nurse Association of Chicago, 1930); and Jack H. McQuaig, *Challenge Yourself and Live* (Toronto: Hunter Carlyle

Publishing, 1973).

4. John Lennox, *Charles W. Gordon ("Ralph Connor") and His Works* (Toronto: ECW Press, n.d.), 1-3.
5. Charles Gordon (Ralph Connor), *Black Rock: A Tale of the Selkirks* (Toronto: Westminster Co., Ltd., 1898; American edition, New York: Grosset & Dunlap); *The Sky Pilot: A Tale of the Foothills* (Toronto: The Westminster Co., Ltd., 1899); *The Man from Glengarry* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1901); *The Doctor: A Tale of the Rockies* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1906); *The Foreigner: A Tale of Saskatchewan* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1909; American edition, New York: George H. Doran Company; British edition, *The Settler: A Tale of Saskatchewan* [London: Hodder and Stoughton]); *Corporal Cameron of the North West Mounted Police: A Tale of the MacLeod Trail* (New York: Hodder and Stoughton; George H. Doran Co., 1912); and *To Him That Hath: A Novel of the West of Today* (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1921).
6. *Black Rock*, v. The preface is signed C.W.G.
7. Bolton Hall, *Thrift* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1916), 6-7; cited in Weiss, *American Myth*, 132.
8. Compare J. S. Woodsworth's attitude toward immigrants.
9. See *Corporal Cameron*, 386-398.
10. *The Foreigner*, 288.
11. *Corporal Cameron*, 354.
12. *The Foreigner*, 5. This preface is also signed C.W.G.
13. *The Sky Pilot*, 7.
14. *The Sky Pilot*, 80-81.
15. *Corporal Cameron*, 272.

