The “Taint of Self”: Reflections on Ralph Connor, his Fans, and the Problem of Morality in Recent Canadian Historiography

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This article is an examination of the protestant moral world of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Canada, as presented in the novels of the popular Canadian writer Ralph Connor, and the fan-mail that he received. At the same time the article discusses the difficulties encountered by modern day social and cultural historians when interpreting this protestant moral vision. The article suggests that we look to the ideas of philosopher Charles Taylor and historian Gertrude Himmelfarb in order to better appreciate how the language and understanding of morality changed over the course of the twentieth-century, and thereby re-examine our assumptions about the inherent usefulness of categories such as regulation and discipline in our historical accounts of morality.

Cet article s’intéresse à l’univers de la morale protestante du Canada de la fin du XIXᵉ siècle et du début du XXᵉ siècle ainsi que la dépeignent les romans du populaire écrivain canadien Ralph Connor et les lettres d’adepteurs qu’il a reçues. L’article se penche également sur les difficultés d’interprétation de la morale protestante auxquelles se heurtent de nos jours les historiens de la société et de la culture. On y suggère de se tourner vers les idées du philosophe Charles Taylor et de l'historienne Gertrude Himmelfarb afin de mieux comprendre en quoi le langage et l’entendement de la moralité ont évolué au XXᵉ siècle et d’ainsi réexaminer nos présomptions quant à l’utilité inhérente de catégories telles que la régulation et la discipline de nos comptes rendus historiques de la moralité.

A FEW DAYS before Christmas 1906, a young man named Norman Hookes wrote a letter to the famous Canadian novelist Ralph Connor. Hookes wrote glowingly about the newest Connor novel, *The Doctor of Crows Nest*, praising its depiction of “noble manhood and sublime womanhood.” The characters were “as near perfect ... as one can imagine let alone realize.” Yet this was the crux of...
the matter – putting into practice the ideals that Connor made so beautifully real in his fiction. Hookes was a troubled man, and his troubles soon spilled out onto the page in a spate of messy and frantic writing.

Connor’s women were one thing, and Hookes claimed to know some real-life examples. “[B]ut your men are rare, lamentably rare,” he bemoaned. “My father is one thank God, but what are his sons[?] [W]e have our ideals, but we need the strength and though I am a man 22 years old, worked my way through a year at college[,] am big and strong.... I need some one[,] some thing [sic] to take me by the throat and shake me awake.” What was it that so worried Hookes? Why did he need someone to grab him by the throat? The answer was painfully simple: the temptations of dancing. “[Y]our old country square dances were pure, proper and right,” Hookes wrote,

but you know, God knows[,] we all do when we stop to think, that the round dance[,] the only dance of today[,] is demoralizing, low and debasing. No man[,] real physical man[,] can encircle a beautiful girl[’]s waist with his strong right arm, feel her yielding soft woman’s form so close so infatuately [sic] close, without becoming just like “Dick” did with Iola.

This is where the fictional world of Ralph Connor entered the picture, for Dick and Iola were characters in the most recent Connor novel that Hookes had just read, *The Doctor*. The invocation of these two characters was not a pleasant one. In the novel, Dick and Iola succumb to temptation. Iola is the alluring fiancé of Dick’s brother. With his brother away (seemingly), Dick invites Iola into his rooms one night. Without a chaperone present, Dick loses “control of himself.” As Connor tells it: “fiercely he crushed her to him, and again and again his hot, passionate kisses fell upon her face.” At just that moment, his brother walks in to see them, a witness to how far they have fallen.  

This was the challenge that Hookes could not face, that he did not want to face. It must have seemed, to Hookes, all too easy to be like Dick, to lose control of his sexual passions. He therefore wanted Connor to do something about dancing. He conceded that he might be a “crank,” but he also knew that this kind of dancing was wrong, “wrong to women[,] wrong to God.” Hookes implored Connor to use his influence and authorial gifts to write against such temptation.

From the standpoint of the early twenty-first century, it is tempting to chuckle at poor Norman Hookes. Dancing? He wanted Connor to write a book against the round dance? Yet I suggest that Hookes – and others like him – represent a challenge to today’s Canadian historians precisely because they operated out of fundamentally different notions of morality than those that predominate in our era and especially within contemporary academia.

Norman Hookes comes to us across a historical divide. We are separated from Hookes by a series of historical transitions, the most notable of which is

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a transformation in our view of morality and its relation to the “self.” The difference is between an evangelical culture of self-restraint that saw the self as inherently tainted compared to a modern culture of authenticity, self-fulfilment, and self-expression that more positively views individual passions, seeing them as in need not of control or denial but rather of direction. As in most areas of cultural history, making hard and fast distinctions is difficult. Not all of Hookes’s contemporaries shared his view of the self, nor has the notion of the tainted self disappeared from early twenty-first century North American culture. Yet it is clear that Hookes and others who wrote letters to Connor, as well as the author himself, operated within a wider culture in which the dominant view of the self was fundamentally different from the view that would become common several decades later.

Many problems are created when we approach Connor’s fiction and his fan letters through the dominant analytical tools currently employed by most social historians. We need to keep in mind the transformation in understandings of morality that occurred over the course of the twentieth century and the way in which this separates contemporary historians from readers and writers who lived in the early years of the last century. In this regard, we might profitably consider the different approaches of Gertrude Himmelfarb and Charles Taylor and what they reveal about the nature of the changing meanings of morality.

The historical transformation in attitudes towards morality has not, on its own, elicited much commentary by Canadian historians. We can, though, gain some insight by thinking through the ideas of two quite different scholars, the conservative historian of the Victorian era Gertrude Himmelfarb and the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. Himmelfarb speaks of the process to which we refer here as the “de-moralization” of society in the twentieth century. This is, she says, “the great philosophical revolution of modernity” that often goes unacknowledged. As a shorthand for what this de-moralization entailed, she points to the significance of the change in speaking of values rather than virtues. While the virtues of earlier historical eras may have varied (the Victorian virtues being slightly different from Classical virtues, for instance), Himmelfarb argues nonetheless that virtue itself was a social bedrock before the modern era. The transformation from virtues to values was profound. Virtues have a “firm, resolute character.” In contrast, Himmelfarb argues, the switch to “‘values’ brought with it the assumptions that all moral ideas are subjective and relative, that they are mere customs and conventions, that they have a purely instrumental, utilitarian purpose, and that they are peculiar to specific individuals and societies.”

3 Indeed, some writers find in contemporary concerns over bodily health and fitness and campaigns against smoking, for example, a mirror image of Victorian moral strictures. It is worth noting this kind of continuity, although the changed focus of such strictures surely matters. See Peter Conrad, “Wellness as Virtue: Morality and the Pursuit of Virtue,” Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry, vol. 18 (1994), pp. 385-401.

an historical explanation for the modern complaint about encroaching moral relativism that had become so common to the conservative world view by the 1980s and has remained so since.

If Himmelfarb decries this transformation, this switch from virtues to values, Charles Taylor gives us a view that agrees with her only insofar as acknowledging that the moral horizon of modernity, especially in the twentieth century, changed in the kind of categorical fashion that she identifies. Taylor’s perspective is fundamentally different, however, in that he argues that this process cannot be described as de-moralization. Rather, he suggests, a new and different morality came to predominate in the modern era, and he explores this moral vision in several works, notably Sources of the Self, The Malaise of Modernity, and, more recently and in a different fashion, A Secular Age. Taylor calls this modern moral vision a “culture of authenticity.” This modern moral code called on individuals to be true to themselves, to live a good life that is judged good insofar as it is specific to their true natures. Taylor is keen to defend the essentially moral nature of this culture of authenticity against those like Himmelfarb who decry it as either relativism or selfish individualism (or both). He also acknowledges that the modern culture of authenticity is often perverted in ways that make easy the kinds of conservative critique advanced by Himmelfarb and others.5

Whether we agree with Himmelfarb or Taylor, historians can nonetheless engage with the historical questions they provoke. A larger project could take on the empirical research to tease out whether, why, and in what way this transformation worked in particular places and times and lives. That, of course, would be no modest task. My goal here is to use these insights about the fundamental shift in moral language in the twentieth century to re-examine one popular Canadian moralist, the novelist Ralph Connor. Just as Connor’s fan Norman Hookes was fraught with moral angst, so too were many others in the period who were drawn to Connor’s novels and who wrote to the author. They saw in his novels not only a “good read,” as we might say now, but also a vision of the good – a moral imagination – with which they could identify. The morality of which they spoke was distinctly different from what would follow by even the mid– and certainly by the late – twentieth century. This article considers how we might understand this moral vision in light of the transformation in moral language and understanding noted by Himmelfarb and Taylor.

I draw on two major sources: first, the writings of Ralph Connor; and second, the hundreds of letters that fans wrote to him, reacting to his fictional world. The Charles Gordon fonds at the University of Manitoba, with their voluminous

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holdings of fan mail, offer historians a valuable opportunity to look simultane-
ously at influential prescriptive literature (the popular writings of Connor) and
the responses of many individuals to that material. There are 555 dated letters to
Connor in the fan mail files, as well as 62 undated letters. In addition, there are
several hundred letters that overlap with the fan mail in that they were requests,
often from those who did not know Connor, or only loosely so, for personal
assistance. These could be as simple as a letter of introduction for, or a request to
watch out for, a particular young man or woman who had emigrated to Winnipeg.
Other exchanges were more extensive, involving many letters back and forth,
and in which Connor offered money or other assistance. The letters date from
the late 1890s and continue until 1937, the year of Connor’s death. The years of
greatest representation are before the Great War and, in particular, the few years
from 1900 up until mid-decade, following the release of Connor’s most popular
novels, *Black Rock* (1898), *The Sky Pilot* (1899), and *The Man From Glengarry*
(1901). Indeed, although the letters refer to all of Connor’s novels, these early
novels are mentioned most frequently by those who wrote to him.

The letters are a rich resource in early twentieth-century western Canadian
history, and in particular they speak to the moral concerns and anxieties of those
who read Connor’s novels. A number of other scholars have written on Ralph
Connor, usually focusing their analysis on one or two novels. Only recently
have scholars, with the help of this archival material, moved their analysis
beyond the purely textual. The fan mail offers historians the opportunity to
write an informed cultural history, one that checks its interpretations against,
and indeed relies primarily upon, the thoughts of those at the time who read this
material. First, it might be necessary to reacquaint ourselves with who exactly
Ralph Connor was. That in itself is an indication of just what a wide cultural
chasm separates our world from his.

6 A number of scholars have looked at only a few Connor texts, developing some useful insights into how
Connor fit into his times. See Glenys Stow, “Astride a Galloping Pony: Scottish-Canadian Womanhood in
Ralph Connor’s Neo-Kailyard Novels,” *British Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1992), pp. 49-58;
no. 2 (Fall 1980), pp. 350-359, and “Ralph Connor and the Tamed West” in Merrill Lewis and L. L. Lee,
eds., *The Westering Experience in American Literature: Bicentennial Essays* (Bellingham, WA: Western
Washington University, 1977), pp. 199-205; Natalia Aponiuk, “The Problem of Identity: The Depiction of
Ukrainians in Canadian Literature,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1 (1982), pp. 50-61; John P Ferré,
*A Social Gospel for Millions: The Religious Bestsellers of Charles Sheldon, Charles Gordon, and Harold
Bell Wright* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1988); J. Lee Thompson
and John H. Thompson, “Ralph Connor and Canadian Identity,” *Queen’s Quarterly*, vol. 72, no. 2 (1972),
pp. 159-170.

Burning Bush and a Few Acres of Snow: The Presbyterian Contribution to Canadian Life and Culture*
(Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994), pp. 139-157; Michael Gauvreau and
Nancy Christie, *A Full-Orbed Christianity: The Protestant Churches and Social Welfare in Canada, 1900-1940*
The Real Ralph Connor

Ralph Connor is the most popular Canadian novelist that most Canadians have never heard about. Of course, Ralph Connor was not actually Ralph Connor. This was a *nom de plume* chosen by the Reverend Charles Gordon, a Presbyterian minister and one-time missionary, who was coaxed into writing fictional stories to promote the activities of missionaries in western Canada. He sought, as he later put it, to “awaken my church in Eastern Canada to the splendour of the mighty religious adventure being attempted by the missionary pioneers in the Canada beyond the Great Lakes.” 8 The first stories were published in the Presbyterian weekly, *The Westminster*. Readers loved them so much that the editor pushed Gordon to write several more and work them all into a novel. Published in 1898, the novel *Black Rock* launched the literary career of Ralph Connor, a career that would soon turn him into a household name across not only Canada but also the United States, Britain, the English-speaking Commonwealth, and a great number of other countries into which missionaries took his books. 9


Connor was Canada’s first and most successful writer of best-sellers in the early age of mass fiction. His career coincided with a banner age in the publishing industry, and his success depended on it. The period saw the regularization of copyright law, advances in printing and transportation, the establishment of the Christmas book season, postcard advertisements, cheap postage, and many new libraries. All of these developments combined with a broader culture of self-improvement to help both create and satisfy a mass market for fiction. Ralph Connor was the leading Canadian exemplar of the popular novelist in the period. He outsold every other Canadian writer of the time, including the now much better remembered (and read) Lucy Maud Montgomery. His publisher George Doran estimated that the sales of his second novel, *The Sky Pilot*, reached more than one million copies and that his first novel sold at least that many, although, because of problems with copyright, Gordon received little of the money for the American sales of this first book. Indeed, Doran himself depended on his connection to Connor to build his own publishing empire. Connor’s name was itself worth a great deal to cultural producers: some of the earliest Canadian moving films were based on his novels. The promoter Ernest Shipman made films of several Connor novels and, despite wildly changing the plots and many other details, nonetheless used Connor’s name prominently in advertisements in the hope of reaping benefits from some of the spin-off fame and success.  

In the non-fictional world, Charles Gordon was a prominent clergyman and social reformer. Born in Ontario in Glengarry County (whose pioneer history he later memorialized in his Glengarry novels), Gordon was educated in Toronto at University College and Knox College and at Edinburgh, Scotland. While still a student in Toronto he attended a lecture given by the Reverend James Robertson, the Presbyterian Superintendent of Missions to Manitoba and the North West. Gordon listened with rapturous attention to Robertson’s account of the work being done out west (and later recreated the experience in his fiction). He volunteered to spend the spring and summer of 1885 in a mission field in Manitoba. While his brother organized a group of volunteer Scouts to put down what Gordon saw as Riel’s “second rebellion” and “a possible Indian War,” Gordon organized parish life in the province made out of Riel’s last armed resistance. The summer ended, and Gordon returned east. But after several more years of schooling and the death of his mother, Gordon again answered the call, for a “call” is what he thought it was, to go west. His future success was built on this decision.  

Gordon went as a missionary to the region around what is now Banff, Alberta. It was, as he saw it, a rough country of miners, lumbermen, and ranchers. Gordon spent three years in the region, trying to ensure that the new Canada being built would be a Godly nation. He sought, in his reformist way, to improve the lives

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of those who worked in the low rungs of the new industrial capitalist west. He was a member of that group of middle-class reformers whom Gerald Friesen has sympathetically presented as being “the glue that held” western Canadian communities “together.” With their emphasis on school and church, Gordon and others like him “accepted the challenge of smoothing the rough edges of the new society, thus making it more spiritual, more open to the talents of ambitious and mobile newcomers, and less harsh in its treatment of some of its citizens.”

Gordon worked to improve the living conditions of the work camps, urging temperance, trying to battle, as he saw it, the demon whisky, and supporting other reformist measures such as better living and working conditions. It was tough work, even just covering the distances in what he must have thought to be the largest Presbytery in the world.

Gordon took to his missionary work an optimistic belief in the possibility of individual salvation. It was a reassuring approach in a chaotic context. Religious circles in these years were riven apart by the challenge posed by scientific developments and debates over the place of theology and especially the Higher Criticism in religious life. Gordon eschewed what he saw as the harmful complexity of the Higher Criticism, and he dismissed the notion that science and religion were irreconcilable. Instead, Gordon focused on individual salvation. Ministers had a duty toward the spiritual lives of individuals. In the rough and tumble

Image 3: A stylized portrait of the author, by Dana Hull Studio, Chicago, nd. UMASK, CWGF MSS 56, PC 76, file 1, image 3.
Canadian west, with a new society in the making, this pragmatic Protestantism was popular.\textsuperscript{13}

In the mid-1890s Gordon settled in Winnipeg, taking up a position as minister to the congregation at St. Stephen’s. In 1899 he married Helen Skinner King, the daughter of Rev. Dr. John M. King, Principal of Manitoba College. Yet from his vantage point in the metropolis of the expanding west, Gordon never left the missionary field behind. Within a few years he had created the figure of Ralph Connor and had put his stories of the missionary west and his liberal practical Protestantism into his Ralph Connor novels. His first and most successful novels were missionary tracts that fictionalized the plight of those who sought to make a Godly life in the pioneer communities of western Canada. He set \textit{Black Rock} (1898) in the same kind of community in which he himself had served. His other most successful novel, \textit{The Sky Pilot}, (1900) trod the same ground. Other novels followed, roughly one every other year.

Charles Gordon, however, continued to see himself largely as a Christian minister, ministering not only to his congregation in central Winnipeg, but also increasingly to his city, province, and nation. Gordon became heavily involved in projects that we would now associate with the social gospel. He served on the Social Service Council of Manitoba and on the Social Service Committee of the Presbyterian Church of Canada. In these roles he fought for temperance legislation and conducted investigations into a range of social problems including poverty, ill health, and immigration. These concerns increasingly surfaced in his fiction. Temperance appeared from the start, but later novels moved outwards from the subjects of the Canadian west and temperance. His 1909 novel, \textit{The Foreigner}, was a sympathetic (for its era) account of the plight of Galician immigrants in the Canadian west. Gordon himself served as a labour conciliator, and this experience clearly provided material for his detailed 1921 novel about a general strike in a fictionalized Ontario community. His 1932 novel \textit{The Arm of Gold} took on the problems of speculation in stocks. Gordon also wrote in newspapers and periodicals about labour and capital and the plight of the unemployed during the depression.

When the Great War broke out, Gordon volunteered for service (at the age of 54) as an army chaplain in the 43\textsuperscript{rd} Cameron Highlanders. The war cast a shadow over other Connor novels. During the war years and for many years after, Connor was drawn to highlighting the sacrifices made by those who had fought and the difficulties of the men in readjusting to life back in Canada. For Gordon himself, the war also took a personal toll. His friend and financial advisor Colonel R. M. Thomson died during the war and, in the sorting out of Thomson’s estate, it became clear that Gordon would lose much of the wealth he had garnered in rising to acclaim as a popular writer. Gordon refused to speak about the situation, but his own fortunes were much diminished by the imbroglio. He continued to write until the end of this life, and he took on various prominent public tasks,

including acting as moderator of the Presbyterian Church in 1922 and pushing for the church union that ultimately came about in 1925.

Most critics have come to dismiss the Connor novels artistically, labelling them little more than “fictionalized sermons.”\textsuperscript{14} Even J. Lee Thompson and John H. Thompson, who in the 1970s hoped to rescue Connor from literary obscurity, nonetheless acknowledged that the novels followed a predictable formula: “the playing out of a morality [tale] in a magnificent natural setting with colourful characterizations and vivid descriptive passages to put flesh on the archetypal confrontation of men with their unruly souls.”\textsuperscript{15} Another appreciative critic, Glenys Stow, summarized Connor this way: “Didactic popular novelist; social activist; unconscious mythmaker; Connor is a strange mixture as a writer. Little that he has written will last.”\textsuperscript{16}

In one clear sense, these critics and commentators are right: the Connor novels are indeed fictionalized sermons; they are morality tales and, as Stow belatedly predicted, have not lasted. Most of Connor’s books are now out of print or only available from small presses connected with evangelical churches. The only novels to be included in the New Canadian Library series are two of his Glen-garry novels, \textit{Glengarry School Days} and \textit{The Man From Glengarry}. The series did not reprint the books that were most popular at the time. Yet, for some of the very reasons that Connor is so easily dated and did not manage to achieve the status as a writer of “timeless” fiction, his novels are especially useful for historians. The Ralph Connor novels, whatever their literary merit, are rich artefacts of the protestant culture that flourished in Canada in the years before the Great War.

**To Conquer One’s Self**

Why was Ralph Connor such a popular novelist? The reasons are not easy to pin down. He clearly had a knack for writing exciting, moving, and humorous stories that were pleasurable to read. Yet part of the reason for his popularity, if we judge this by the letters that his fans wrote to him, lay in Connor’s moral vision. The morality of the novels, his “sermonizing” as some later commentators have called it, far from putting off many of his readers, seems to have been what many greatly appreciated. Indeed it was his ability to incorporate this moral vision effortlessly into fast-paced, page-turning romance that so many found compelling.

One fundamental feature of this vision lay in Connor’s evangelical notion of the self. A hint, indicating how different this notion was from later twentieth-century variants, can be found in the preface to Connor’s biography of his mentor, James Robertson. “This book is set forth,” Gordon wrote, “in the hope that it may inspire my brethren in the ministry with something of that spirit of devotion, so free of taint of self, that made Dr. Robertson what he was.”\textsuperscript{17} The one little
word – “taint” – conveys a great deal. There was always in the Connor novels a view of the self as tainted by original sin, as beset by human passions and desires that needed controlling or reigning in. “To conquer one’s self,” says one character in *Black Rock*, “It is worth while. I am going to try.”\(^{18}\) The self that Gordon envisioned was not one that would be taken up by the increasingly mainstream therapeutic culture of the twentieth century. This was not a self that simply needed direction, fostering, and nurturing. Such sentiments were not anathema to Connor, but the use of the word taint indicated nonetheless a very different idea of how the self could be fulfilled. Connor would more likely have identified with what historian Gertrude Himmelfarb describes as the Victorian notion of self: an idea rooted in self-discipline and self-control, in which the recognition of the self does not come from within but rather from following through on one’s duties and responsibilities to others, whether these be individuals or community standards.\(^{19}\) Moral strictures, in this view, are not modes of domination hidden under the guise of social convention. Rather, morality offers a freedom from a tainted human nature, a path to a better self, away from human nature that is desperately in need of improvement. What threatens to dominate and bring down the self are the untamed passions that lie within the self and which themselves need to be controlled.

The tainted self wove its way throughout Connor’s fiction. All of his heroes, especially his male heroes, struggle with inner passions that threaten to send them down a wrong, anti-heroic path. Being a hero in a Connor novel meant overcoming not only external foes but also the demons within. The young boy Kalman in *The Foreigner* looks at Jack French, into whose care he has been entrusted, and sees “a new image of manhood” noting his “courage and patience and self-command” but also “a quickness of sympathy in his moods that revealed in this man of rugged strength and forceful courage a subtle something that marks the finer temper and nobler spirit, the temper and the spirit of the gentleman.”\(^{20}\) Yet French is constantly beset with his own demons, notably the temptation of drink and the debauched manhood into which he sinks when he indulges. Although French is meant to serve as a mentor to the young Galician, it is clear that French too is meant continually to prove himself a man, to control his own demons, and in doing so to be a role model for the young Kalman. This constant need to battle the demons within, to face the internal enemy and original weaknesses, makes even the heroes of the novels very much like every man as Connor saw him. When a young man in *The Prospector* goes west to minister, as did Connor, to the rough country around the foothills, he almost despairs thinking of all the forces arraigned against him: “the great human passions – greed of gold, lust of pleasure in its most sensuous forms, and that wild spirit of independence of all restraint by law of God or man.”\(^{21}\) This need for self-control was part of Connor’s celebration of a manly sporting culture. In his 1921 novel, *To Him That Hath*, a book loosely based on the Winnipeg General Strike, the


\(^{19}\) Himmelfarb, *The De-Moralization of Society*, p. 256.


workers’ hockey team not only keeps men out of drinking houses; it also inspires in them what the hero calls “their fine self-denial.”

The readers of Connor’s fiction saw themselves and their own plight in this depiction of the human condition. They too seemed to share Connor’s notion of the self as tainted, as beset by temptations, as capable of easily slipping into a debased existence. Ann Sampson wrote from Virginia in 1900 to thank Connor for his books, which she saw as “so wholesome and breezy and strong: so true to poor wicked human nature, so true to redeemed divine-implanted human nature.” His books, said a Winnipeg woman, helped those who wanted to help others “onward and upward.” This view of the self was, after all, what lay behind the very idea of uplift. The lifting up was not just from difficult material conditions, but also from a lower, baser sense of themselves and what they could become. “I shall be a better man for reading it,” wrote one fan of *Black Rock*. “It has done me good,” wrote another. What exactly had Connor done? He had given an example of a higher form of life to which those who read the books could aspire and rise up to achieve. “You have given the idea of a great man,” one minister wrote, “too great for the limits of ordinary description, so great that you forget what he is like, but he stays with you all through your after life, and you can never be quite so small and mean as you might have been had he not come into your life.”

The western frontier environment in which Connor set many of his novels set this basic human predicament into stark relief. The west made it too easy to seem to escape. Connor wrote in the preface to *The Sky Pilot* how the area attracted “those ... outcast from their kind [who] sought to find in these valleys, remote and lonely, a spot where they could forget and be forgotten.” The dangers were many. “Here they dwelt,” Connor wrote, “safe from the scanning of the world, freed from all restraints of social law, denied the gentler influences of home and the sweet uplift of a good woman’s face. What wonder if, with the new freedom beating in their hearts and ears, some rode fierce and hard the wild trail to the cut-bank of destruction.”

Within the text of his novels, he could be even more blunt. In *Black Rock*, the missionary hero of the novel, Mr. Craig, bitterly reflects on the “curiously innocent ideas” that some from the east had about the “reforming properties” of western life:

> They send their young bloods here to reform. Here! in this devil’s campground, where a man’s lust is his only law, and when, from sheer monotony, a man must betake himself to the only excitement of the place – that offered by the saloon. Good people in the East hold up holy hands of horror at these godless miners; but I tell you it’s asking these boys a good deal to keep straight and clean in a place like this.

23 UMASC, CWGF, Anne E. Sampson [Warm Springs, Virginia] to Connor, July 26, 1900, File 1, Box 48; Mrs. H. M. Sharpe [Winnipeg] to Gordon, February 5, 1908, File 4, Box 48; N. R. S. to Gordon, March 8, 1903, File 3, Box 48; H. Trevor Wheeler [Simla, India] to Gordon, September 8, 1902, File 3, Box 48; R. Campbell Tibb [Dick] [Presbytery of Toronto] to Gordon [Charlie], September 5, 1904, File 3, Box 48, MSS 56.
25 *Connor, Black Rock*, pp. 76-77.
The possibility for escape and uplift ultimately, in this worldview, depended on giving oneself over to God. This was a transcendental view of human fulfilment in which overcoming the basic human taint, and the many struggles of life, was ultimately possible only by external, other-worldly assistance. The missionary Mr. Craig’s words of advice to the miners and lumbermen in *Black Rock* convey this sense of rescue from above: “in loving Him you are saved from all base loves,” he tells the men. The capitalization of “Him” is no mere typographical choice; it is rather a small symbol of the source of salvation. When a character in *The Man From Glengarry* struggles with the idea that he needs to forgive a man who has, through trickery and deceit, injured him in a fight, the civilizing mother figure Mrs. Murray sympathizes with his predicament. “I know it is hard, but we must forgive. You see we must forgive. And we must ask Him to help us, who has more to forgive than any other.” This notion of transcendental fulfilment lies behind the fact that, although so many characters in Connor novels die, when they die correctly, when they find faith before death, their deaths are meant to be symbols of beauty and meaning, not moments of despair.26

What made the sacrifice worthwhile – whether it was the ultimate end of death or hardship, illness, or the burdens of duty – was the sense of meaning that lay behind it. The Connor novels spoke to those who faced all kinds of hardship in their lives – those who were struggling with some of the most difficult and basic of human conditions. Connor imbued these struggles with a sense of higher purpose. Sacrifice mattered. Following one’s duty, especially when that meant great difficulty, made it all the more worthwhile. In *The Prospector*, when the son of a single mother opts to go west and become a missionary, the mother’s loss is made heroic. “The mother’s face was a strange sight,” Connor wrote. “On it the anguish of her heart was plainly to be seen, but with the anguish the rapt glory of those who triumph by sacrifice.” The young man leaves behind not only his mother but also the young woman whom he loves. He feels he cannot ask her to come west and endure the hardships of the missionary life, but he writes to her saying that he cannot give up that life, cannot forsake that duty, just for his own pleasure. “But though it break my heart,” he writes, “I cannot go back from what I see to be my work. I belong to you, but first I belong to Him who is both your Master and mine.” In Connor’s fictional world, those who forsake their own needs ultimately are rewarded, and so it is with this young man. His love responds with admiration and her own determination to embrace hardship. “How could I honour and love a man who, for the sake of a girl or for any sake, would turn back from his work?” She opts for the strenuous life of a missionary’s wife. The same sense of sacrifice and duty above all else imbued Connor’s war novel, *The Sky Pilot in No Man’s Land*. When the chaplain is killed in trying to rescue wounded soldiers from the front, his wife knows the proper response. Although she is distressed by her loss, she also understands that such a sacrifice is necessary, and that, indeed, sacrifice gives the death a kind of nobility. “I’m so

happy!” she responds. “It was a beautiful closing to a beautiful life.... His body was beautiful, his soul was beautiful, his life was beautiful, and the ending, oh, was beautiful.”

Connor extended these notions of duty and sacrifice outward to the community and in the process helped to create a social Christianity that was elsewhere gaining force in these years. In real life Gordon supported the temperance campaign in Manitoba, the fight for woman’s suffrage, and other moral reform initiatives. The battle for temperance and even prohibition were major components of his fiction from the beginning. They grew out of his sense of Christian brotherhood. When Jack French in The Foreigner is brought low by drink, this is his own failing and his own struggle, but not his alone. For Connor, it mattered that someone provided the drink, that someone was (to use the modern parlance that he would not have recognized) an enabler. “Jimmy has been filling him up ... which he has no right to do,” explains a character about French’s drunken state. Connor’s first novel, Black Rock, was one long temperance tract that took this theme to its logical conclusion. It followed the activities of one missionary, Mr. Craig, in a mining and lumber town who seeks, with the help of a few local men and one widow, to keep the town dry. When one started from the same assumptions as did Connor about human nature, individual duty, obligation, and brotherhood, the fight to help one’s “brothers” in need was a logical extension. “Now don’t you think,” asks the young missionary in The Prospector, “that kicking a man along that is already sliding toward a precipice is pretty mean business, but snatching him back and bracing him up is worth a man’s while?” The question was meant to be rhetorical. For Connor, and for many of his readers, keeping alcohol away from those who could harm themselves and others was an obvious good.

Interpreting the Protestant Moral Vision

The same could not be said for recent historians. Over the last 20 to 30 years, social historians have largely employed analytical tools that seek to expose the hypocrisies of, and the tools of domination hidden within, the protestant moral vision so dominant within English Canada not only in the Victorian era, but well into the twentieth century. In early postmodernist histories of moral reform, the discomfort is on the surface. In The Age of Light, Soap and Water, for example, Mariana Valverde explicitly sought to expose the complex workings of racial,

27 Connor, The Prospector, pp. 78, 125; Ralph Connor, The Sky Pilot in No Man’s Land (New York: George W. Duran, 1919), p. 349. The existential predicament that Connor presents in his novels is one that Charles Taylor contrasts with the modern predicament that eventually became much more common in the twentieth century. Taylor put it succinctly: “The existential predicament in which one fears condemnation [as assumed by Connor] is quite different from the one where one fears, above all, meaninglessness” (Sources of the Self, p. 18). See also the way Taylor links this to the changing complaints dealt with by psychiatrists from the time of Freud to later in the century (Sources of the Self, p. 19).


sexualized, and class regulation that underpinned moral reform. Even some of the most complex and richly empirical social histories, attuned to the contradictions and ambivalence that lay along the lines between practice and rhetoric, nonetheless display a similar discomfort with the moral projects of the “Victorian” past. In tracing changes in attitudes toward gambling over the twentieth century, Suzanne Morton talks about a more repressive “old Canada,” rooted in the “Victorian values” of the past. Perhaps the most common approach is found in Craig Heron’s history of alcohol in Canada, in which he deals with supporters of temperance as part of a “bourgeois culture” that helped to enshrine a “liberal order” in Canada. Heron’s scholarship is thoughtful and nuanced, and he acknowledges that temperance was what he calls a “flexible ideology” that the working class as well as racial minorities could turn to their own purposes. Ultimately, however, he sees these attempts as being “overwhelmed by the dominant white, English-speaking bourgeois forces.” In this approach Heron and Morton are but articulate voices writing from the common sense of contemporary social history. Other historians make the same characterization, not only of temperance and gambling, but of the rise of public schools, the police, and other kinds of state institutions as well as voluntary activities.

Indeed, the main approach in social history in recent years to matters of morality – whether examining the temperance movement, debates over gambling and smoking, anti-vice campaigns, or matters of sexuality – focuses on regulation, power, and agency and their connection to a liberal order. That is, historians

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31 I use this term very loosely, following in part Suzanne Morton, who herself draws on Peter Stearns, in noting just how long many of the moral views associated with the Victorians continued to hold sway well into the twentieth century. See Suzanne Morton, *At Odds: Gambling and Canadians, 1919-1969* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p. 17.


34 The adoption of the analytical usefulness of regulation and resistance as interpretative strategies is widespread and, to take only a few examples from each field, includes such diverse works as those on single women (Carolyn Strange, *Toronto’s Girl Problem: The Perils and Pleasures of the City, 1880-1930* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995]; Margaret Jane Little, *No Cat, No Radio, No Liquor Permit: The Moral Regulation of Single Mothers in Ontario, 1920-1997* [Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1998]), on Aboriginal peoples (Robyn Jarvis Brownlie, *A Fatherly Eye: Indian Agents, Government Control and Aboriginal Resistance in Ontario, 1918-1939* [Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2003]) and discussion of some of these issues (Robyn Brownlie and Mary Ellen-Kelm, “Desperately Seeking Absolution: Native Agency as Colonialist Alibi?” *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 75, no. 4 [December 1994], pp. 543-556), on immigrants (Franca Iacovetta, *Gatekeepers: Reshaping Immigrant Lives in Cold War Canada* [Toronto: Between the Lines, 2006]), and on individuals who came into contact with experts and the state (Franca Iacovetta and Wendy Mitchinson, *On the Case: Explorations in Social History* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998]).
tend to frame debates over morality as instances that created a hegemonic bourgeois culture. The main development in the field, meant to give it more nuance and sophistication, has been in the way historians have rethought the concept of agency. Power is now seen as working in more diverse and complicated ways. Historians focus not only on attempts to construct a bourgeois common sense, but also on the resistance to these attempts. This final concept – resistance, and its counterpart regulation – has most dominated academic discussions. Much of the academic discussion of morality has focused on attempts to shape morality and behaviour and the limits to these attempts, the extent to which regulation has worked as a kind of net, limiting behaviour, but also leaving holes for people to sneak through, escape, or resist in some fashion. More recently, Ian McKay’s “liberal order framework” has provided Canadian historians with a way of giving a synthesis (McKay would say reconnaissance) of diverse historical fields by tying them to the creation, in Gramscian fashion, of a liberal order. All of this leads to a rich social history rooted variously in Marxist, Gramscian, and Foucauldian analytical frameworks, one critical of what it sees as nineteenth- and twentieth-century liberal bourgeois morality. However, even as this approach allows historians to see across a broad terrain of the past, it is worth considering what is beyond its analytical horizon.

What is striking when we contemplate bringing this neo-Nietzschean approach to bear on the moral visions of someone like Connor is how fundamentally different are the starting assumptions of each. Our modern social history common sense is suspicious of the notion of “uplift” itself. Attempts to modify the behaviour of others are seen as misguided from the outset, certainly worthy of suspicion, and likely to be connected to political and class interest. Moving from social history to sociology, such a moral vision can be defined, as Alan Hunt puts it, as “classic instances of an intimate link between the ‘governance of others’ and the ‘governance of the self’.” Yet to use the language of governance – of power and regulation – is to come at Connor from across the historical divide that separates contemporary (often secular) historians from his vision of the good. Such approaches do not so much get Connor and his moral world wrong (part of morality is, after all, to regulate the behaviour of oneself and others) so much as they reduce a complex moral vision of the good to only one component, leaving the larger whole from which it emerged unrecognizable. Ian McKay’s term “reconnaissance” is indicative here in that it conveys a kind of purposeful partial knowledge, a seeking out of information for a single purpose – in McKay’s case (and presumably that of others) of reinvigorating contemporary leftism. McKay’s purpose is similar to my own

36 The synthetic general work that has explained these principles is Carolyn Strange and Tina Loo, Making Good: Law and Moral Regulation in Canada, 1867-1939 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), pp. 3-5. See Valverde, The Age of Light, Soap, and Water, pp. 32-33.
37 Hunt, Governing Morals, p. 2.
suggestion here in that he is trying to get beyond mere “scorecard” history that marks previous historical actors against current concerns. By definition and intent, however, such a reconnaissance is not interested in much of the moral vision of Connor and his contemporaries that was not connected to the “path to leftism.”

Historians could do much worse than to consider the warnings of philosopher Charles Taylor, who sees such approaches – those whose main aim is to expose the hidden workings of power in all moral issues – as “neo-Nietzschean.” “It is a confusion,” Taylor claims, “to infer ... that views of the good are all simply enterprises of domination or that we can consider them all arbitrarily chosen. This would be to fail to recognize the manner in which one’s own position or, indeed, that of any human being, is powered by a vision of the good.” Taylor suggests that we not start with a narrow “content”-based version of morality that looks only at injunctions to do or not to do certain things – and hence over-emphasizes the aspects of coercion that become embedded in attempts to change behaviour in line with this moral code. Rather he suggests that we look to morality as containing a vision of the good, or the good life. Taylor urges scholars, in other words, to include but not to be limited by the insight that certain moral visions can and have been used as justifications for, or covers for, domination. That this can happen and has happened is clear, but it would be reductionist in the extreme to treat morality primarily as simply a tool of hegemony.

Certainly, fans of Connor novels saw much more in the books and their moral vision. They seemed to love the books precisely because they gave readers ideals to achieve. This could be described as a form of regulating the self, of disciplining the self, and perhaps of then attempting to discipline others along the same lines. Discipline and regulation are only one part of what contemporaries saw in the novels, however. Connor’s books made it seem as if it really were possible to live a nobler life, one truer to the kinds of Christian ideals by which so many wanted to live but frequently could not. A missionary in Korea wrote to tell Gordon that his first novel *Black Rock* “is beautiful ... and it has lifted my soul away out of this dark city into a life of love, and purity and holiness.” Edith Murray from Michigan agreed and echoed the language of Norman Hookes. After reading *Black Rock*, she wrote, “I am more than every impressed with our possibilities as humans.... May your pen never fail you. You are keeping us all nobler.” Yet the Connor novels injected this sense of high ideals and noble Christian purpose into everyday events, into accounts of real life that were recognizable even if they did take place frequently in the far Canadian North West. A brother minister congratulated Gordon on how *Corporal Cameron* “implants high ideals into conditions of life so commonplace as hoeing turnips.” A New York fan thought that “More than any other author you have caught the pathos,
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the humor, [sic] and the realism of simple life.... It is an escape from the drabness and sordidness of modern civilization; a journey into the romance and glamour of the golden past.”  

Yet, if this last letter suggested some kind of longing for a simpler past, readers did not all look backward. Many may have yearned for a simpler life, a life made less burdensome, in which it was easier to live the kind of Christian life that Gordon espoused, but they used the Connor novels as tools for the present. Gordon’s accounts of the noble life gave his readers what they seemed to want most of all: inspiration.

One reader from Kansas, having just read Black Rock, wrote to say he felt “compelled to express my obligations to you for the help it has given me. It has given me a new view of human sorrow and need together with an inspiration to meet that need.” A reader from Boston felt “indebted” to Connor for The Sky Pilot and Black Rock, “both for hearty enjoyment, and for inspiration to better and stronger Christian living.” The readers yearned for this kind of inspiration. “I found that [Black Rock] contained so many things that I have been searching for,” Blanche Beatrice Mix wrote in 1901: “the struggles of a human soul to fulfil its capabilities – that glorious struggle which makes the soul shine through the eyes, and which compels admiration and respect from the lowest. Your book shows great truths in such a simple way that I cannot but admire it. I am not a Church Christian but I am searching after the great truth.”  

Many readers seemed to turn this inspiration to practical benefit. The journalist J. W. Bengough, who had adapted some of the Connor stories for the stage, certainly thought this likely. He wrote to tell Gordon that he was “not only adding to the Canadian literature that will live, but teaching lessons of the greatest practical importance.” J. W. Graves wrote from Carnduff, Saskatchewan, in 1906 to say that he had begun reading Connor’s books three or four years earlier in England and had resolved to come west. He had started out farming, but a month earlier “had accepted a call to enter field work in this district.” A young woman from Massachussetts wrote of how Black Rock had inspired her. “I read it; reread it; committed portions of it to memory; devoured it. Yes, I too would be an author, a missionary or a doctor. Later when I read ‘The Sky Pilot’ I vowed that my life would become beautiful and strong and noble.” She was about to enter medical school and thanked Connor for his inspiration. Another teacher from Nova Scotia reported how she would read The Man From Glengarry to her students.

40 UMASC, CWGF, James S. Gale [Seoul, Korea] to Gordon, May 16, 1900, File 1 Box 48; Edith Murray [St. Thomas, Michigan] to Ralph Connor, March 6, 1897, File 1, Box 48; R. P. MacKay, Secretary, Presbyterian Church of Canada, Board of Foreign Missions, Western Division [Toronto], December 30, 1912, File 5, Box 48; John B Merchant [Rochester, NY], November 18, 1934, File 2, Box 49, MSS 56.

41 UMASC, CWGF, J. E. Kirkpatrick [Almo, Kansas] to Gordon, December 28, 1900, File 1, Box 48; Mary Alice [J]enney [Boston, Massachussetts] to Gordon, November 30, 1900, File 1, Box 48; Miss Blanche Beatrice Mix [Pennsylvania] to Gordon, July 27, 1901, File 1, Box 48; MSS 56.
One boy who was with us six years ago, ... went West, and, I grieve to say, also "went bad." Two years ago I had a letter from him saying that he had that day picked up "The Man from Glengarry" in the hotel Parlor where he was spending Sunday. That he had read it again and that it had brought back our Sunday evenings ... very vividly to him, and that reading of Mrs. Murray again had induced him to write.

A working-class reader from Colorado wrote bluntly to the author: "you will never know how many ‘Connor’ has, of us fellows, brought back to God, and the old Psalms and the Catechism." 42

In one sense, these fans were telling Connor that his novels helped them to achieve the kind of respectability that they desired but found hard to maintain otherwise. While it is common to invoke respectability as something imposed upon the working class or racialized others, 43 it is clear from the letters and from Connor’s novels that readers saw the achievement of moral ideals in quite a different way. Ironically, it is precisely the moral vision of Connor’s Victorian and Edwardian world view that lies at the heart of so much of the democratic and egalitarian sensibility in his novels. Connor was an egalitarian writer in many senses. In the early novels this comes across in his characterization of pioneer life as harsh and dangerous, but also as fulfilling for those who persevere and conquer the challenges both within the environment and within themselves. Success depended not on class but on character, and character could be achieved by anyone. If Connor’s heroes tended to be ministers and schoolteachers, his other characters ranged up and down the social scale, and their positive attributes did not depend on their class position. Indeed, the ability of someone living under harsh conditions to act with character and to overcome his or her material conditions was precisely what Connor celebrated. Mrs. Fitzpatrick in The Foreigner is an Irish housewife living in the working-class north end of Winnipeg, close by the Galician immigrants whose tale the book largely covers. She is the embodiment of working-class respectability. Despite her humble situation and her less than desirable neighbourhood of residence, she keeps a tidy home and is a beacon of respectability in the area. When she appears in court as a witness, her humorous common sense in defence of one of her neighbours is too much for

42 UMASC, CWGF, J. W. Bengough [Toronto] to Gordon, January 18, 1899, File 1, Box 48; J. W. Graves [Carnduff, Saskatchewan] to Gordon, Aug 6, 1906, File 4, Box 48; Caroline P. Bowditch [Bridgewater, Massachusetts] to Gordon, February 7, 1907, File 4, Box 48; Minnie F. Patterson [Cortonville, Nova Scotia], May 6, 1914, File 5, Box 48; Andrew B. Bennett [Union Printer’s Home, Colorado Springs, Colorado], July 2, 1933, File 2, Box 49, MSS 56.

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the prosecutor, who is left bumbling while all else in the courtroom, including the judge, are laughing. The way she abides by common moral values gives her this power to speak sense to her material “betters.” This was how the language of respectability, in its idealized form, was meant to work. As Gertrude Himmelfarb has written of the Victorians: “Political equality depended on moral equality. And this, in turn, assumed that the working classes had the same virtues, aspirations, and capacities as all other classes – that they shared a common human nature and a common civic and political right.”44 Far from being a component of hegemony, a sense of common morality and respectability was what ate away at notions of hierarchy and inequality.

Perhaps more than any of his other novels, Connor’s novel of the general strike, To Him That Hath, addressed the issue of inequality directly. It would be easy to treat the novel as an example of hegemony at work, as the finding of a new, softer hegemony within which Canadian capital could create a liberal order in the face of resistance.45 It is certainly true that, in commenting on the conflict between labour and capital, his book does not challenge the nature of capitalist enterprise along Marxist lines. Characters with whom we are meant to sympathize do not adopt arguments that challenge capital’s control of the means of production. Those characters who are the most radical on the side of both employers and workers are treated as troublemakers. The book is Mackenzie-King-esque in its emphasis on the community as the fourth and oft-neglected element in labour disputes. As the novel ends, with the strike over and both sides coming to compromise, the solutions Connor offers are on the surface important but pedestrian: the sharing of information about costs of production and profits, setting workers’ wages according to the rate of inflation, recognition of the rights of workers to organize and bargain collectively but not necessarily allowing for the “closed shop.”

What is striking, however, is how the moral vision of the novel undermines hierarchy and inequality. This is what lies behind the book’s egalitarian spirit. Connor uses the disjuncture between the moral worth of an individual and his or her material circumstances to bring his readers along with him on this novelistic sermon about inequality. The plight of one young working-class girl, Annette Perotte, is indicative. Born to a French Canadian father and Irish mother, Annette and her brother are taken up by the local public school teacher. Yet, despite their immense promise, ultimately the mother decides, for lack of funds, to pay for further schooling only for Annette’s older brother. Annette goes to work in a match-box factory while her brother, with all the advantages of his schooling and the more well-to-do friendships that this affords, fails to live up to expectations. Annette is presented as having all of the noble and admirable traits of a respectable lady, yet her work takes her out of the social circles she might have expected to frequent. Connor uses the plight of Annette to comment on the

45 As, for example, Ian McKay suggests more generally in his “Liberal Order Framework,” pp. 643-644.
unreasonableness of these social inequities. In this view, individual character ought to matter more than social convention.  

The counter to Annette is Rupert Stilwell, the son of a wealthy businessman in town. Stilwell has not served in the war, and the implication is that he is like some others in town who profited unfairly from it, or at the very least did not sacrifice sufficiently. Stilwell is the example of undeserving wealth, and he also, despite an outward display of seeming gentlemanliness, is a cad. The beauty of the novel form and the expectations of the romance mean of course that Stilwell gets what he deserves, which is to say that he does not win the affection of his love interest, and he is ultimately forced to back down in the strike. Yet, despite the “happily ever after” simplicity of the plot, To Him That Hath shows a more nuanced moral vision at work. The spirit of the novel is egalitarian, not because Connor had read leftist critiques of capital and put these arguments into fictionalized form, but rather because the material is presented as of so little significance in essence. Matters of spirit and character are what should triumph. That they do not is clear, but also presented as unjust. In the novel’s climactic scene, Annette is shot in a riot over strike-breakers; while she does not die (surprising for a Connor novel), she nonetheless pays a price. This sacrifice brings the town, both strikers and employers, back to their senses and recalls them to a truer and better sense of themselves.  

The question of character and morality, in other words, supersedes class interest. 

If To Him That Hath dwelt on the postwar labour revolt, other Connor novels touched on social concerns of a different sort, the position of non-white Canadians. The Connor novels are, unsurprisingly for their era, replete with examples of racialized thinking. Connor was very much of his era in thinking of the tangible importance of race in affecting individual behaviour. His stereotypes of Aboriginals and French Canadians are particularly obvious and extreme. Nevertheless, a characteristic of his fiction is the way in which morality works against doing ill to others, regardless of race. Certainly the readers of his books, when they wrote to him, wrote as if they were meant to adopt a more open-minded perspective. One young man, whom Connor was assisting financially, had taken up residence in Vancouver as a not-very-successful piano teacher. He had a studio on Pender Street in Vancouver in 1907 and was there to witness the race riots of that year. The man explained how a “gang of roughts [sic] with bricks & sticks broke every window in Chinatown on Saturday night,” but went on to say that this was “greatly deplored by every rightminded citizen [sic].” Another man whom Connor had helped to convert reported a transformation in his attitude toward immigrants. “The new life imparted to me thereby is constantly manifesting itself to me for I find life worth living now and everything seems sort of to harmonize with me,” he wrote to Connor in March 1907. “For example – foreigners – Galicians and the like,

that to a great extent fill up all labouring camps for whom I have always had a strong contempt, I can now see that they too have hearts and are my brothers just the same as my English neighbor.\textsuperscript{48}

The complexity of Connor’s thinking and of the morality in the novels is striking. The same man whose novels could include such stock racist stereotypes as the savage Indian and the cheap Jew was simultaneously expounding a moral philosophy that inspired his readers to treat others with fairness and in brotherhood regardless of race. In other words, the novels unthinkingly reproduced racial stereotypes or failed to criticize the material basis of class privilege, but the moral vision they contained was a force that undermined the inequalities of class and race.

The Shift in Moral Values

The Great War beclouded Ralph Connor’s moral world. It also, arguably, accelerated if it did not begin the transformation in moral values that followed over the course of the next century. Gordon saw the war as a call to duty and self-sacrifice. There is some evidence that his wartime experience modified his moral tone. His popular war novel, \textit{The Sky Pilot in No Man’s Land}, presented a minister struggling to find a way to deal with the frequent moral transgressions of those under his charge – the soldiers’ regular swearing, drinking, and visits to prostitutes – while still winning their confidence and acknowledging the harsh realities of their daily routine. It is hard not to see something of the novelist/minister in the young fictional chaplain who comes to a new realization about his holy duty. Partway through the novel the minister sees things anew when he is faced with the death of his own father, who urges him to be kind to the men and to be as a father to them. “No longer did he conceive himself as a moral policeman or religious censor, whose main duty it was to stand in judgment over the faults and sins of the men of his battalion,” Connor says of the chaplain. “No more would the burden of his message be a stern denunciation of these faults and sins.... ‘A man of God,’ his superintendent had said in his last letter to him. Yes, truly a man of God! A man not God! A man not to sit in God’s place in judgment upon his fellow sinners, but to show them God, their Father.”\textsuperscript{49}

Connor’s postwar novels may have been replete with his characteristic optimism, but the war, with all its horror and its loss, is always present – a constant drip from what had become the leaky fount of prewar exuberance. Sadness and hope became ever more closely entwined in the Connor novels of these years. In \textit{The Arm of Gold} (1932), a doctor and a minister gaze up at the wooded hills of Cape Breton, the doctor reflecting, “It is fairly easy to believe that God’s in His Heaven in this environment.” “Yes,” the minister replies, “I

\textsuperscript{48} UMASC, CWGF, Frank Roland Austen to Charles Gordon, September 11, 1907, File 6, Box 49; Frederick S. Hartman to Charles Gordon, March 8, 1907, File 7, Box 49, MSS 56.

\textsuperscript{49} Connor, \textit{The Sky Pilot in No Man’s Land}, pp. 188-189.
find it easier here.” This startles the doctor, the idea that the minister would not always find it easy to believe in God. But the minister only asks if the other had seen “the War.” “In that hell,” he says, “Browning’s optimism was not so easy.”

Not only the war undercut belief and rusted certainty; it was also how life changed after the war. The doctor responds to the minister’s perception that the hell of war had made it not so easy to believe by lamenting: “Nor in New York.... Nor anywhere in my life.... There’s a lot of hell about.” Indeed, so it seemed from Connor’s novels of the 1920s and 1930s. Modern life, whether represented by New York or the latest dancing and drinking customs of youth, was increasingly a threat. In the prewar novels, the moral dangers of drink and human passions are timeless. The modern present is a constant choice to live the good life and to overcome such unchanging temptations. Yet in the novels of the 1920s and 1930s, the dangers of modern life itself are more threatening. There are the problems of jazz music, of dance halls and dinner dances, of pre-dinner cocktails, of women wearing excessive make-up, wearing their hair too short, and smoking cigarettes. The major theme in his 1932 novel, *The

51 Ibid., p. 58.
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Arm of Gold, involves a group of Americans who come to Cape Breton for a fishing holiday and are transformed by their experience with the simple and pure people of the small community, especially a young minister and his selfless sister. They come to realize that the supposed sophistication of New York high society is nothing compared to the simple purity of small town life. This followed on an almost identical premise (which worked out very differently) in the 1928 novel, Treading the Winepress. Again, a group of Americans (one of German decent, playing the obviously villainous role) come to the same realization when they too visit Nova Scotia, though this time a cove near a fictionalized Lunenburg.

The change in setting to Nova Scotia is indicative of a broader turning to the past in these novels. Just as modern life is no longer the great expanding west in the Connor novels, so Connor himself turned to older Scottish communities, rooted in tradition and the traditions of rural life. Connor also put his hand to writing historical fiction, writing novels about the war of 1812, the Loyalists in the American revolutionary war, and French Canada after the conquest. When these choices are combined with the anxieties about modern life in other Connor novels, it is hard not to see the novelist turning to history as an easier choice compared to the contemporary fiction of his earlier years. Connor was engaged with the present, but his earlier moral vision was not nearly so buoyant after the war.

It is common for historians to downplay the cultural liberalization and secularization of the 1920s. Indeed historians of religion Michael Gauvreau and Nancy Christie argue that the whole period from 1900 to 1940 “represented the apogee of the cultural authority of the [Protestant] churches” in Canada. 52 Yet this revisionist argument overstates the continuities between the prewar and postwar eras. The confident moral vision of the Connor novels and the world out of which it emerged changed in the 1920s and 1930s. Small and important cracks were appearing in the foundation of belief – whether associated with literary modernism, Freudian psychology and modernist art, or the more prosaic but perhaps even more threatening practices of pleasure-ridden entertainment in movies, radio, and that source of discontent for Norman Hookes, the dance floor. Respectable folk may indeed have still frowned on such esoteric ideas and worldly pursuits, but the context had changed. Contemporaries now lived in a world in which these alternatives had to be dealt with, even if only to be resisted, derided, or scoffed at. 53

As an author of popular evangelical fiction, Connor was one of only a small handful of writers who offered contemporary fellow believers what they saw as wholesome literature. The threat of secular and what some saw as more sordid alternatives was very much a reality. Connor stood out from many other, less

52 Gauvreau and Christie, A Full-Orbed Christianity, p. xii.
religiously acceptable alternatives, and his readers appreciated the difference. “I do not read many works of fiction,” one reader admitted to Connor, “as there is so much written which should properly be consigned to the rubbish heap.” Connor, however, seemed different from so much modern fiction. “So many books seem to ignore or scoff at God,” Graham Tinning wrote in 1928; “… it is a pleasure to find a writer who believes and acknowledges God.” Another fan wrote: “In the days of trashy books, it is such a comfort to read of real, breezy-manly men, men that could not do a dishonourable or mean thing, nor think them.” Yet, with standards so high, Connor could occasionally disappoint some readers when he failed to achieve the right moral tone. His decision to include more slang and “cuss” words in *The Doctor of Crows Nest*, published in 1906, was not appreciated by all. Alexander Patteson from Illinois wrote to complain and included a detailed list of all the inappropriate terms. “You are one the religious public have looked to supply a clean and wholesome literature in the mass of filthy fiction that swarms over the earth now,” Patteson wrote. For Patteson there was no place in the homes of “the best Christian families” for books with such words and expressions as “dang,” “I swear,” “By Jingo,” “Ye little devils,” “Begog,” or “Hivins above.”

Part of the reason readers cherished Connor’s idealized Christian men and women is because they failed to see such figures in their everyday lives. The fictional world acted as an idealized substitute for the real world. One reader wrote to say how much he liked the men in Connor’s novels. “I feel there must be such men somewhere I thank god that at least one man can write & has written about them. Life sometimes seems pretty discouraging,” the reader admitted, “when one sees chicanery & underhand dealing [sic] prosper & at such times I can turn to ‘The Man from Glengarry’ & feel stronger and refreshed.”

Yet the number of readers who turned to Connor for just this kind of moral refreshment diminished through the 1920s and 1930s. Although Connor was still a popular Canadian novelist, sales of his books declined. Most of those who write on Connor note this decline and attribute it to a variety factors, largely dealing with the growing disconnect between his own style of fiction and moral standards and the modern more pleasure-oriented style of these decades. The number of letters from fans declined relatively as well in these years, and many of these later letters came from people he already knew in other capacities. Connor himself still maintained a significant place in the culture. His books were in libraries and schools and on the bookshelves in many homes. But he was, as in real life, a more aged figure, less in tune with the growing currents of a different twentieth century culture.

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54 UMASC, CWGF, Ian Aikins [?] [Winnipeg] to Gordon, March 21, 1902, File 2, Box 48; Graham Tinning to Connor, January 21, 1928, File 1, Box 49; Geo G Coamer [NJ], December 10, 1912, File 5, Box 48; Alexander Patteson [Morgan Park, Illinois] to Gordon, November 15, 1906, File 4, Box 48, MSS 56.

55 UMASC, CWGF, Geo. G. Coamer [NJ], July 13, 1912, File 5, Box 48.

56 The explanations for Connor’s decline are various and include such factors as far-fetched as the rise of a multicultural Canada (Thompson and Thompson, “Ralph Connor and Canadian Identity”) to the growing
Lost in Translation

The Ralph Connor novels offered a potent vision of the good to which many contemporaries responded enthusiastically. It was a vision of the good rooted in a notion of the self as “tainted” and in need of control. Connor offered contemporaries examples of those who, in difficult times, had managed to overcome themselves and live up to noble ideals. That many of these stories (at least the early novels) also took place in the exciting and stark environment of the wild west only made them more popular.

I have sought to recapture what it was in Connor’s morally infused fiction that so captivated his readers without putting it through a kind of analytical meaning-making machine that would rob the original vision of its intended meaning. The dilemma in doing so is the historical chasm that separates us from Connor. The contemporary language of regulation and resistance can too easily assume the naturalness of a liberal vision of the free self, free from constraints or outside influence. To use this language to interpret those who spoke a different dialect is to fail to acknowledge how much gets lost in translation – and indeed that historical analysis is itself a project of translation. Understanding Norman Hookes and Ralph Connor means reading them in both their own language and our own simultaneously. Norman Hookes was a troubled young man, bestirred by the passions in his body, made dangerous to him on the dance floor. Modern life seemed to offer too many possibilities for downfall. Although he and others lived in a world where liberal Protestantism was the underlying common sense of public culture, he (like other Protestants) was uncertain about how to balance sensual pleasures with his religious world view. He saw in Ralph Connor the possibility of uplift. Hundreds of other readers wrote letters to Connor echoing the same sentiments, the same vision of “poor wicked human nature.” They saw in this popular novelist not a purveyor of a bourgeois agenda, but a vision of hope and noble ideals, an escape from a self that was inherently tainted.

The argument here is to suggest that the analytical tools most popular among social historians in Canada today are not adequate, on their own, precisely because they are so firmly rooted in modern moral assumptions that run counter to what they attempt to study. Canadian social historians have not been kind to moralists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century except insofar as they can be linked to the political sympathies of our era. In recent years the twin concepts of regulation and resistance have dominated our historical accounts of moral issues in the past. Whether we are looking at alcohol, drugs, gambling, or sexuality, a neo-Nietzschean analytical framework has tended to dominate our historical language and hence our vision. Our emphasis has been on exposing the power relations that morality so often masked and on the way that this morality disconnect between an aging writer and the passing of the time when his concerns were widely shared across the nation. For versions of the latter, see Mack, “Modernity without Tears,” and Connor’s own publisher, Doran, Chronicles of Barabbas, pp. 205-206.
often acted to reinforce a hegemonic liberal bourgeois order. This approach does not do justice to either Connor or his readers.

In general terms, then, this article is a call for the kind of occasional rebalancing that is needed in scholarly debate. Academic scholars, and historians in particular, are usually expected to answer questions rather than tell stories. It is all too easy, however, to go down the route of argument and counterpoint slowly losing track of the larger and more complex historical world that exists all around our scholarly debates and that these debates purport to represent. In this article, these questions and the larger story have to do with the character of moral and religious belief in Canada from the late nineteenth century through to the recent past. The novels of Ralph Connor and the letters that his fans wrote to him show a moral world that involved more than our recent questions and answers have had to say about this period and this subject. This is not altogether surprising, but it is fundamental to recall.

57 A more extended discussion of this follows below but for representative texts on this subject, see, for example, Prentice, *The School Promoters*; Bruce Curtis, *True Government by Choice Men? Inspection, Education and State Formation in Canada West* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Strange and Loo, *Making Good*.

58 The question of whether this should be so is currently being hotly debated in the United Kingdom. See Richard J. Evans, “The Wonderfulness of Us (The Tory Interpretation of History),” *London Review of Books*, vol. 33, no. 6 (March 17, 2011), pp. 9-12. Evans presents what is perhaps the common-sense view that it is impossible to write critical scholarly history and still “tell stories,” although, for a different view, see James Goodman, “For the Love of Stories,” *Reviews in American History*, vol. 26 (1998), pp. 255-274.