Presbyterian Professor on the Prairies: The role east-coast Presbyterian faith played in ensuring co-education for women in Canada's prairies, 1907–1937.

"…no woman shall by reason of her sex be deprived of any advantage or privilege accorded to male students of the university." Given this quote and equipped with the knowledge that it is drawn from a provincial university act in the Canadian context, what approximate date or time period would you hazard to assign it? [A significant pause, I am honestly looking to engage the audience in this critical thinking exercise.]

Introduction

This statement is drawn from the founding document of the University of Saskatchewan: the *1907 University Act*. That date merits repeating, 1907. At a time when Canadian women did not have universal Dower rights, legal recognition as 'people', or even the provincial and federal vote, they could vote and hold office in the University of Saskatchewan Senate, the most powerful administrative organization at that institution. The University of Saskatchewan not only espoused this principal of equality, but adhered to the spirit of this belief. As this paper will come to reveal, 'belief' played a significant part in entrenching the rights and opportunities afforded to all the university's women between this institution's creation in 1907 and the end of the First President, Charles Walter Murray's administration thirty years later. Many Canadian historians of education, such as Jean Barman and Heidi Macdonald, have recognized the significance Maritime Presbyterians played in educating Canadians during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.[i] Many religious historians, such as Berry Cahill, have analyzed how a Christian denomination which does not neatly fall into the category of evangelical, could possess numerous progressive veins,[ii] but no academic historian has attempted to link Maritime Presbyterian values to the unprecedented progressive developments at a upstart university, half a continent away. This, in short, is the goal of this paper.

Before explaining why Presbyterianism is intrinsically linked to women's rights at the University of Saskatchewan, we have to first discuss how the university was progressive. Beginning in 1909, when the university first held classes, all programs were available to both sexes in a completely co-educational setting. This translated into women studying in the fields of law, medicine, engineering, and agriculture. During the length of this study, women's enrollment at the University of Saskatchewan never dropped below 30%, a staggering 18.5% above the Canadian national average.[iii] Women were hired as instructors and staff on equal terms with their male peers, and salaries were determined based on a gender-blind salary grid that took into consideration years of employment and education level. Scholarships, pensions, and job advancement were all determined using meritocratic methods that did not discriminate based on sex.

Nina Preston: Example of Equality

Perhaps an example will better elucidate how these top-down administrative policies could impact the hundreds of women who attended the university in this period and the over 150 women who were in the university's employment. Ms. Nina Preston began working as a stenographer in the Engineering building in 1915.[iv] She had her senior matriculation but no formal post-secondary education. She quickly demonstrated her aptitude with numbers and in 1919 took advantage of the informal program that I have termed 'the flexible workday for education program' set in place by President Murray. In this program any employee could take a university course while maintaining full employment. They could attend the appropriate class and then make up the time before or after work, or on Saturdays. Their tuition was docked directly from their pay incrementally over the length of the course or by other negotiated terms. After completing the accounting course, Preston was quickly promoted to the position of clerk in the Bursar's Office,[v] a posting which garnered her almost $1400 per year,[vi] nearly twice her

starting salary only five years earlier, and only $400 less than a full professor.[vii] In August of

1921, Preston died suddenly. Nina Preston had been her family's major breadwinner and had

lived at her family home with her widowed mother.[viii] As the *University Act* only guaranteed

equal treatment to female students, and not staff, the university was under no legal obligation to

extend after-death benefits to Preston's mother. Regardless of this legal loophole, the

administration adhered to the spirit of equality and granted the same after-death benefits afforded

to male breadwinners in the university's employment.

The case of Nina Preston is not unique at the University of Saskatchewan. Several

employees upgraded their education, many women were both students and stenographers, and all

felt the overseeing, benevolent hand of the notoriously micro-managing President Murray.

Methodology, Primary Assumptions and Surprising Findings

Before I begin to discuss the important role that religion played in the creation of this

gender-inclusive environment, I believe it is important to take a moment to situate this research

and justify my methodology. I am currently completing my PhD. in twentieth-century cultural

history in the Canadian context with specialties in gender and sexuality as well as medical and

public health history. This paper is drawn from my completed Master of Arts thesis which

effectively debunked the widely held theory that Canadian universities in the first half of the

twentieth century were universally hostile places for women and that only through the post-war

establishment of the welfare state, the distancing or breaking of religions affiliations for these

institutions, and the lobbying by second-wave feminists of the 1960s and 1970s, did Canadian

women's place on the country's university campuses become entrenched.

Having a previous background in education history, I initially approached the case study

of the early years at the University of Saskatchewan with some basic assumptions. Firstly, like in

the United States, the Canadian Eastern provinces had several well-established ladies' colleges affiliated with numerous male-only and denominationally-associated universities. In the Canadian West, by contrast, prior to 1905 there existed only two small universities on the region's fringes: in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and Vancouver, British Columbia.

Secondly, the Eastern universities were century-old institutions, well funded and reputable. It was by way of their affiliated women's colleges that women such as Grace Annie Lockhart, the first women in the British Commonwealth to receive a university degree in 1875, were able to make education inroads.[ix] At the turn of the twentieth century when women's education and co-education with men were being hotly debated in Canada, the Eastern provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island were viewed as most receptive to these policies. As one moved further west, the support for women's education slowly ebbed. Perhaps the best example of this trend is Dalhousie University in Halifax, which first welcomed women into all programs in 1881. By contrast, at the University of Toronto, in the province of Ontario, women were not granted full access to all university facilities and programs until 1973.[x] Knowing this trend in human geography, I assumed that the University of Saskatchewan would lag behind its eastern predecessors in allowing women access to post-secondary education. I was proven entirely wrong.

Established in 1907, the University of Saskatchewan was both gender-inclusive and co-educational from its founding. I discovered the key to this pleasant educational anomaly was the man at the helm, President Charles Walter Murray. Like many Maritimers before him, Murray had made the sojourn west to build a future in this 'New Eden'. Modeling the U of S after the University of Wisconsin and U.S. land-grant universities, Murray set forth three foundational pillars. First, he believed the U of S should service the entire province and, although government

funded, not government controlled. Second, this would be a non-denominational school, with open admission void of religious testing, disclosure, or a religious component to degree completion. And lastly, this university was to service both the province's "young men and women"[xi]. Upon closer investigation, it is clear that these foundational pillars are drawn directly from Murray's Presbyterian values and Maritime roots. It is important to take a moment to unpack this connection.

Pillar I: "One Province, One University"

To Walter Murray, his paramount concern regarding the founding of a university was that it be united, transparent, and independence. The University of Saskatchewan was to be the only degree-granting institution in the province. In 1907 this made perfect sense. The population simply did not possess the tax-base to sustain more than one university, and the provincial administrators hoped to avoid the piece-meal funding issues currently plaguing the many overlapping universities in the province on Ontario, a crisis that sparked the 1906 *Royal Commission of the University of Toronto*.[xii] Although the University of Saskatchewan was to be entirely publically funded, the government was to have no control over internal funding allocation. No patronage appointments or government interference would be tolerated. This type of agreement between provincial and university administration was unprecedented, but in Murray's vision, this was a mandatory component of his taking the position of president.

Murray's near obsession with transparency can be traced to his Secessionist Presbyterian background. Originally from a small farm in the parish of Studholme, New Brunswick, Murray's family, although Presbyterian, could not be considered part of the "established" "Church of Scotland." As outlined by historian Charles Scobie, as early as 1690, divisions began to appear in the Presbyterian Church over the issue of Patronage, a policy by which local clergymen and

town teachers were appointed by local landowners and the crown. Those who opposed this level

of state surveillance and control broke with the established church and created 'Secessionist'

churches often labeled as member churches of 'Free Synods.' It was adherents to the

Secessionist movement who overwhelming constituted the Presbyterians who settled in the east

coast of Canada during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. Through a system of

chain migration, between 1871 and 1921, these Presbyterians would compose between 15-16%

of Canada's total population.[xiii] With this knowledge in hand, it seems intuitive that Murray

would insist that while the university was state-funded it would not be state-controlled.

<center>**Pillar II: The Potentially Divisive Nature of Faith**</center>

Although the policy of Patronage was never applied in the Canadian Presbyterian synods,

the re-introduction of this policy in Scotland caused The Disruption of 1843, which formalized

divisions between the established and Secessionist churches. The shock waves were felt across

the Atlantic and over three-quarters of Canadian Presbyterian churches formed Free Synods

outside the Church of Scotland. Historian, Barbara C. Murison cites this reaction to The

Disruption as clear evidence of the progressive and politically democratic leanings of those

Presbyterians who peopled the Canadian Maritimes. Although part of an established,

traditionally liturgical denomination, these were rebellious evangelicals of that sect.[xiv] These

internal divisions continued to splinter during the middle decades of the nineteenth century, only

to be resolved in 1875 with the creation of the Presbyterian Church in Canada. Murray was born

into this infighting in 1866, and he was acutely aware of the potentially divisive nature of

religious doctrine. Before taking his position at the University of Saskatchewan, he had

completed his education at the University of Edinburgh on a Gilchrist scholarship, and had

taught at both the University of New Brunswick and Dalhousie University. He was conscious

that religious denominational influence could be detrimental to a university's broad base appeal, and had seen first-hand that Christian values could be imparted to a greater number of people even if a public institution eschewed official religious association. The University of Saskatchewan was imbued with Presbyterian humanist moralism, and every student who received their education within its halls was inculcated with these morays. No religious affiliation was necessary and even desirable.

Pillar III: Educated Women – the Key to Democracy

Murray's third educational pillar focused on the equal education of women. The link between Maritime Presbyterianism and women's education has been well documented by numerous Canadian historians. Paul Axelrod of York University has extensively investigated the differences between the development of universities in Canada and the U.S. He frames religion and economic factors as critical to the earlier acceptance of women's post-secondary education in the United States. According to Axelrod, the U.S. had a strong Evangelical movement that emphasized spiritual equality before God.[xv] This equality was easily applied to the issue of women's education, as these young educated women would be able to go forth and teach younger generations, bettering society as a whole. This belief dovetailed with the ideals of the Social Gospel movement that were pervasive in the Northern United States at the time. He also proposed that the American Civil War had so depleted the country of young men as potential students that institutions were eager to include female students in order to maintain enrolment. Axelrod concluded that the lack of any large Evangelical movement in Canada and the absence of devastating war lead to its lagging acceptance of women in post-secondary education.[xvi]

Axelrod did concede that in the Canadian Maritimes, the Presbyterian population had a significant impact on the attitudes towards women's education , but did not elaborate on what

form that impact may have taken. Evidence to support Axelrod's comment on the atypical nature

of the Canadian Maritimes would be provided by historians such as John Reid[xvii] and Heidi

MacDonald[xviii] who focused their research on Maritime provinces: Reid, predominantly in Nova

Scotia, and MacDonald, in Prince Edward Island. MacDonald linked the higher attendance

numbers in PEI to the disproportionally large Scottish and Presbyterian population of the island,

stating that "the Maritime dedication to formal education [is tied] to the large Scottish population

who subscribed to the notion that education encouraged democracy."[xix]

The link between East-Coast Presbyterianism and acceptance of women in education has

been carried westward by historians such as Hilda Neatby in her discussion of Queen's

University President George Monro Grant's openness to women[xx], and Jean Barman's evidence

for the effect Nova Scotian sojourning female teachers had on the education system in 19th-

century British Columbia.[xxi] My study of women at the University of Saskatchewan and the

influence of Walter Murray is in direct conversation with this body of scholarship. Murray's

motivations for the inclusion of this particular clause in the university act are not only religious

but acutely personal. Murray's mother, Elizabeth Murray, had a passion for learning but had

never been afforded the opportunity to receive formal training. As public historians David and

Robert Murray uncovered in their biography of the university president, Elizabeth Murray so

loved learning that she would tie a Latin grammar book to her broom handle while sweeping the

floor.[xxii] Walter Murray's wife, Christine, also a Maritime Presbyterian, was a university

graduate, and his three daughters were all intelligent young women who completed training at

the University of Saskatchewan.

Presbyterian President on the Prairies – why the dots haven't been connected

President Walter Murray was the visionary behind the University of Saskatchewan. Not only did he help craft the University Act, but his long and distinguished career afforded him the opportunity to entrench his personal values into the institution of his creation. His strong Presbyterian faith imbued the foundational pillars he established and guided his administration of this publically funded and non-denominational university. Murray, himself, would never have vocalized this link. He was an acutely private man who preferred consensus and relationship building to confrontational management styles or discussion of divisive topics such as religion. Even after his death in 1945, his own children could not identify his political leaning. He worked equally well with both Liberal and Conservative provincial governments and never publically or privately announced a position on a contentious political issue. His private nature has not aided his biographers, both popular and academic, in making the links between his religious upbringing and his unprecedentedly progressive career. As has been made apparent in my research, those links are there, if the researcher is open to viewing historical actors through a non-presentist cultural and social lens.

Concluding Thoughts

I would like to end this paper by thanking the conference organizers for the opportunity to present and discuss my research. Within the Canadian Historical community, no such conference exists which recognizes the significance that religion plays as an important lens of historical analysis in topics that are otherwise considered secular, such as public institutions. The reasons for this academic discrepancy are many, but perhaps the most tangible cause is that the majority of Canadian historians today come from a very narrowly defined cultural, political, and economic background, one that often does not include any formal religious training or established Christian belief system. Their personal discomfort and lack of knowledge with the

topic of formal religion translates into an omission of this important category of difference

within their historical research and writing. With the advent of the New Social History, we, as a

profession, have effectively removed the ghettoizing stigma that once undermined investigations

in sex, race, and class, but unfortunately have failed to acknowledge that while these are

significant categories of potential oppression and othering, they are by no means the only such

groupings.

Notes

[i] Jean Barman, *Sojourning sisters: the lives and letters of Jessie and Annie McQueen*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003). Heidi MacDonald, "PEI Women Attending University Off and On the Island to 1943." *Acadiensis*, 35.1 (Autumn 2005):103-104.

[ii] BarryCahill, "The Antislavery Polemic of the Reverend James MacGregor: Canada's Proto-Abolitionist as "Radical Evangelical", in *The contribution of Presbyterianism to the Maritime Provinces of Canada*, Charles H.H. Scobie, George A. Rawlyk, (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997.) p.131-143.

[iii] Robin S. Harris, *A History of Higher Education in Canada, 1663-1960*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976 p. 352.

[iv] The University of Saskatchewan, *Executive Committee of the Board of Governors Meeting Minutes,* September 27, 1916.

[v] Ibid., December 30, 1916, July 22, 1920.

[vi] Ibid.

[vii] Ibid., September 27, 1916.

[viii] Ibid., September 1, 1921.

[ix] John G. Reid, *Mount Allison University: A history, to 1963*. (Toronto: Published for Mount Allison University by University of Toronto Press, 1984), 49.

[x] At the University of Toronto, women were not granted access to all university facilities until 1973, Hannah Gay, Review of *The University of Toronto: A History.* By Martin L. Friedland. *H-Net Reviews*: (2003). 3.

[xi] *Saskatoon Daily Phoenix*, January 11, 1906, p. 1 "A Provincial University".

[xii] The *1906 Royal Commission on the University of Toronto* was convened to resolve major administrative problems plaguing the university. Martin L. Friedland, *The University of Toronto : a history,* (Toronto ; Buffalo : University of Toronto Press, 2002), 203.

[xiii] Charles H.H. Scobie, George A. Rawlyk, *The contribution of Presbyterianism to the Maritime Provinces of Canada*, (McGill-Queen's University Press 1997). p.xiv-xv.

[xiv] Barbara C. Murison, "The Kirk versus the Free Church: The Struggle for the Soul of the Maritimes at the Time of the Disruption", in *The contribution of Presbyterianism to the Maritime Provinces of Canada*, Charles H.H. Scobie, George A. Rawlyk, (McGill-Queen's University Press 1997). p. 19-34.

[xv] Paul Axelrod, "Higher Education in Canada and The United States: Exploring the Roots of Difference", *Historical Studies in Education,* vol. 7, no. 2 (1995): 164.

[xvi] Ibid.

[xvii] John G. Reid, "Beyond the Democratic Intellect: The Scottish Example and University Reform in Canada's Maritime Provinces", *Youth, University and Canadian Society: essays in the social history of higher education*, John Reid, and Paul Axelrod, eds. (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989): 279.

[xviii] Heidi MacDonald, "PEI Women Attending University Off and On the Island to 1943." *Acadiensis*, 35.1 (Autumn 2005):103-104.

[xix] Ibid., 140.

[xx] Hilda Neatby, *Queen's University: Volume I, 1841-1917.* Edited by Frederick W. Gibson and Roger Graham, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1978): 151. and John S. Moir, "From Sectarian Rivalry to National Vision: The Contribution of Maritime Presbyterianism to Canada", *The contribution of Presbyterianism to the Maritime Provinces of Canada*, Charles H.H. Scobie, George A. Rawlyk, (McGill-Queen's University Press 1997). p.160-174.

[xxi] Jean Barman, *Sojourning sisters: the lives and letters of Jessie and Annie McQueen*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

[xxii] David R. Murray, Robert A. Murray. *The Prairie Builder: Walter Murray of Saskatchewan*. (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1984) p.14.