

Searching for Ralph Connor: A Roundabout Introduction to Gender and the City

Christopher Dummitt
Trent University

It was Sunday morning, and I was being followed. Granted, it wasn't the most frightening time of day. The sun was out and the sky was blue and most of the cars racing past were filled with people on their way to church. But someone was following me nonetheless. I stopped to read a sign and he stopped too, ridiculously, with no attempt to hide what he was doing. He just stopped and waited.

At that point I began to get scared. What do you do when someone follows you? What are the possibilities in the face of such strangeness. I was in Winnipeg, where I didn't know a soul. Why would someone be following me?

The incident brings to mind a particular experience of the Canadian city: that of dangerous encounters; but also of a particularly gendered nature of those encounters: how I as a man ought to have responded. This issue of the *London Journal of Canadian Studies* takes up the subject of gender and the Canadian city. Most of the articles here were first presented at the London Conference for Canadian Studies' *Gender and the City* conference that was held in February 2006. In preparing this collection for print, my experience in Winnipeg kept repeating itself to me. Those strange events of a sunny September Sunday morning highlight a number of themes in this collection: the unexpected and the historically variable, but also the way history and literature could intertwine in the exploration of Canadian cities.

The odd thing was that I myself was following someone that Sunday morning. It's the reason I had come to Winnipeg, flying through six time zones and over a lot of very cold water to get there. He was not the easiest man to find which, despite the fact that he's no longer living, is rather surprising. I was on the hunt for the most famous Canadian writer before Margaret Atwood, better known in his day even than Lucy Maud Montgomery and you'd have a hard time not finding her on a trip to Prince Edward Island. But in Winnipeg, Ralph Connor (the penname for the Rev Charles W Gordon) is shockingly absent.

For thirty years, from 1894 to 1924, Charles Gordon led his congregation at St Stephen's Presbyterian church in their quest to find God and to lead better lives. But he did much more than that. You would be hard pressed to find a man who knew more of the important, and not so important, people of his time. He corresponded with all the Canadian Prime Ministers from Laurier to Mackenzie King and counted the American presidents Woodrow Wilson and Teddy Roosevelt as his friends. As Ralph Connor, he published twenty two novels and plenty more short stories and booklets, quickly becoming Canada's leading literary light. He also changed people's lives. For Connor wrote Christian stories about redemption, about temptation and the ever present danger of downfall, but also ultimately about the possibility for everyone, no matter how humble, to overcome.

I had spent the last week reading the letters his fans wrote to him. There are literally hundreds, ranging from short notes of appreciation to novella-length essays on personal tragedy. One thing unites them: inspiration. That's what Connor gave his readers, inspiring examples of characters who faced and overcame the great troubles of the day – drink and debauchery – as well as the enduring travails – death, morality and doubt. His influence spread far outside Canada to Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, the United States and even, going along with missionaries, to China, India and Japan. In 1902, after reading his book *Black Rock* a Virginia woman wrote: “it has affected me as no other book has for years. Its melting tenderness softened some of the callousness that has been gathering thick upon me.... It filled me with a sort of sadness that was full of tears, but at the same time, brimful of hope.”

So why, then, is Connor so little remembered?

I could have used some of the Connor courage that Sunday morning. Surely one of his characters would have known what to do with the Sabbath morning stalker. But what exactly? They would probably confront him straightaway. Ask him manfully what he wants. Tell him to buck up and not be skulking about. They would whip him in a fight if it came to it, though only if it came to it. Connor's men, the ones who we were meant to admire, fought a lot.

I wasn't so sure. It seems so easy in the Connor novels. Even when the bad guys have knives, the heroes adeptly disarm them and then show the scoundrels who is master. And when a good man goes down in a fight it is always after struggling with his soul and coming to God, his death a sacrifice, a beautiful end to a life which is only then just beginning. I thought it best not to risk it.

Subterfuge was the answer for me. I stopped at a bus stop and inspected the schedule. He stopped too. I hid myself from his view by slipping behind a pole to look at other schedules, and peeked out to see whether he is looking. He was, but then he looked away. I opted for a manoeuvre which wasn't exactly glamorous, and would be hard to construe as manly: I ran for it.

My destination that Sunday morning was the church where Connor, though here I should rightly say Gordon, was pastor. It had been called St Stephen's in his day but when I looked in the phone book there were no longer any St Stephen's United Churches. And I assume it must have been a United Church: Gordon was one of the key leaders in the movement for church union that led in 1925 to the joining of Canadian Presbyterians, Methodists and Congregationalists into the United Church. It was one of his greatest achievements, representing a coming together of different peoples, a breaking down of prejudice and parochialism. Strange then that it is, like Connor, hardly remembered. The average history major in a Canadian university will never sniff anything even hinting at what contemporaries believed to be one of the most significant events of the still-young twentieth century.

The church is hard to find. I probably should have looked in the archives where I was spending my days going through his papers. But I tried to do it the contemporary way. A listing for the Gordon King United Church in the north end looked promising. Gordon's wife's maiden name was King and they gave this name to their son, a prominent man in his own right, one of the leading lights in the League for Social Reconstruction and later editor of the influential American publication *The Nation*.

The only thing my visit to this church showed me, however, was that God could now be found via PowerPoint. The young unshaven man in front of the church, smoking as he leaned against the railing, turned out to be the pastor. Butting out his cigarette he invited me in and took me to a corner where there are pictures of his predecessors. It quickly became apparent that this wasn't the church I was looking for. He invited me to have a coffee and stay for the service. I was intrigued by the PowerPoint screens and the sounds of energetic band rehearsal, but knowing that my time was limited I headed off to continue the search.

I had better luck at the second-hand bookstores, though not at first. The first one I tried had nothing. I should have known better given the stacks and stacks of paperbacks; Connor's fame didn't last to make it into the soft covers of the post Second World War years. The woman at the counter had never heard

of him. I told her that he was a local author but the more I talked about him, the more offended she seemed to become. I feared sounding too pedantic so I rushed away to the next shop.

By the end of the day I had bought six books: five novels and a biography Gordon wrote of a man he much admired, the Rev James Robertson, Superintendent of Presbyterian missions in western Canada. As usual, some of the best writing is in the preface. It's here that we get some sense of why Connor is no longer read. "The book is sent forth," he writes, "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."

That's just it. With just one little word, he says so much, encapsulates exactly what is so different about life in the early twentieth century from that of the twenty-first. That the self could be, indeed intrinsically is, tainted: it's not something that runs off the tongue these days.

Yet how different it was for Connor's readers. Almost every letter from his fans drips self-abnegation. They are not worthy, they are humble, they are "just" this and "just" that. They pray to be led on the right path. They hope they are not bothering him. They want to become better people led by the grace of the Master. It makes for strange and fascinating reading. It's just the kind of thing that led Lytton Strachey in 1918 to pen his now classic *Eminent Victorians*, with its acerbic attack on what he saw as the hypocrisy of Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale and other Victorian heroes. For Strachey, their selfless protestations were all a ruse, hiding darker and more dangerous ambitions. But Strachey, like most of us, was a little too hard on his parents.

It became fashionable in the 1970s to talk about how people had become more selfish. Self sacrifice had departed. People had switched from a "WE generation" to a "ME generation" and lost a lot in the translation. Such criticisms endure, certainly in conservative circles. Our troubles are blamed on a lack of self sacrifice, responsibility and restraint. This kind of thinking tends to the reactionary side of good sense, but it is based on a significant historical transformation. And it's this transformation which separates us from Connor.

Connor played a role for his readers not unlike that played today by Oprah or Dr Phil. But the big difference is that Connor asked his contemporaries to give themselves up to God whereas Oprah and Dr Phil ask people to give themselves up to themselves, to a truer, more authentic version of what they truly are. Both versions demand a kind of discipline and a willingness to give

up what is not good for us. For Connor, this meant drink, prostitution, narrow-mindedness. For our current ministers of better living, this means over-eating, aggression, selfishness.

But the key difference is the idea of the self. Religion is never far away from Oprah and Dr Phil, but the vision of the self, at least for the majority of us, is startlingly different. For Connor, the self had to be defeated and conquered, the passions reined in. It was not easy. But what made this incredible task possible was God. Faith. It was the only way.

The essays in this collection highlight but also go far beyond some of the insights that my exploration of Connor/Gordon led me to that September in Winnipeg. They demonstrate the ways cities are useful places to look at the changing gendered experiences of Canadians, and also of the ways cities themselves have become symbols of gender and culture. The essays also blend history and literature in a way that matches my Connor/Gordon experience, beginning with three articles on history and then moving on to three literary pieces.

In “Property and Gender: Lessons from a 19th-century town” Robert C H Sweeny carefully shows the changes in patterns of property ownership in Montreal as it changed from an artisanal and commercial town into an industrial city. Sweeny shows some striking changes in the levels of women’s property ownership over these years. His evidence suggests that as the city became more modern, it also became more masculine. The streamlining of the city’s downtown into an industrial centre also went hand in hand with reducing the number of properties owned by women and women’s organizations.

In “Working Women Downtown: Single Women in Toronto” Richard Dennis moves our analysis slightly – pushing forward in time to the early years of the twentieth century, westward to the city of Toronto, and down the social scale to focus on young women workers. Dennis blends quantitative and literary analysis to flesh out some of the tales of working girls in this period, asking the pertinent question: “where and how did these women live?” The answers he finds point to the ways in which early twentieth century notions of the “woman adrift” contained many myths and several surprising truths.

Maureen Flanagan takes on some of these same issues in her exploration of the gendered nature of turn-of-the-century urban planning in both the United States and Canada. Flanagan points to the ways in which the development of urban planning enshrined divisions between reproduction and production – and gendered inequality – into the structure of North American cities. She also

makes some provocative suggestions about the ways in which these changes traverse the twentieth-century and continue to shape urban life.

The next three articles move the collection into literary studies beginning with Linda Knowles thoughtful piece on the place of cities in Carol Shields' novels. Knowles perceptively points out the way in which the geography of city life in Shields' novels both confirmed and subverted notions that both Canadian cities and women's place in the city and literature were somehow lesser colonial versions of better and purer originals. Knowles offers us a Shields who celebrates the domestic and commonplace, pointing out the extraordinary and the subtle in what might otherwise get overlooked. It is, she argues, a particularly gendered vision of the city, one which celebrates the hominess of Ottawa's Glebe neighbourhood as every bit as significant as other more conventional celebrations of the modern city.

In "Redefining Quebec Identity" Julie Rodgers moves our focus back to the city in Quebec, but this time to its more modern variant. In a detailed examination of Francine Noël's *Nous avons tous découvert l'Amérique* Rodgers shows how the book symbolizes broader tensions within contemporary Quebec society around the issues of immigration and nationalism. Comparing Montreal to the biblical Babel, Noël's novel, and Rodgers' analysis of that novel, highlight the changing visions of the city within contemporary Quebec.

The final essay of the volume also focuses on Montreal and also delves into the way the vision of the city, especially its gendered and sexualized version, was radically different than the cityscapes explored in earlier articles. In "Spectacular sexualities on la Sainte-Catherine and Josée Yvon's *Danseuses-mamelouk*," Ceri Morgan shows how Yvon's work displays evidence of what she calls a certain kind of "urban uncanny." Rooted in gay, lesbian and transsexual experiences of the city, and uncovering for literature the experiences of Montreal's most notorious (and famous) street Sainte-Catherine, the novel sees the city, Morgan suggests, "as a site of oppression and a place of potential liberation" even as Yvon's inimical style sets her apart unto herself.

From strippers on Sainte-Catherine to Ralph Connor's Winnipeg is something of a stretch, but it is one worth noticing and contemplating. When I finally retired back to my room that Sunday night, my search for Connor only partially fulfilled, I was left thinking about his elusiveness and also about my luck in eluding my own searcher. The historical variability of a century, and of the strange twists and turns we must follow in going back over that time, stand out.

It struck me that if we don't read Connor very much any more, I have to think that he wouldn't read us either. At least not our novelists. We are too present in what we do. All of the ironic, stylistic and navel-gazing flourishes of contemporary writers, from David Foster Wallace to Dave Eggers, would baffle and likely disappoint him. In fact, he probably wouldn't like this article. I have tainted it too much with myself.

Though perhaps I'm simply starting to take on too many of his prejudices. Despite myself, I can't help but admire him, to want to see what it would have been like to be one of the last great Canadian Victorians. Ultimately, the search for Connor isn't entirely about me. It is about him, and the past, and the realization that even as I'm searching for him, there's someone else out there looking for me too.

