A.N. Bethune (1800-1879)  
Scottish Canadian Anglican

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I

An interesting feature of the history of the Anglican Church in Canada was the number of Presbyterians who left their church to join the Anglican Church. John Strachan, the redoubtable Bishop of Toronto (1778-1867) was the best known but there were others. W.T. Leach (1805-1886), a Scot who was minister of St. Andrews Church, Toronto for seven years left the Presbyterian Church in 1842. He was ordained into the Anglican ministry by Bishop G.J. Mountain and had a long career in the Anglican ministry in Montreal and on the faculty of McGill University. Another convert was Robert Machray, the Bishop of Rupert’s Land (1865-1904).

Why these men decided to shift from Presbyterianism to Anglicanism is a large topic which might well provide the basis for a major study. Leach said he had become convinced that the Anglican form of church government was superior to the Presbyterian.® Explanations of Strachan’s “conversion” vary with the general attitude of particular historians to Strachan. Some explain it as the result of self-interest. Others are more charitable.

A.N. Bethune, the subject of this article, was another convert from
Presbyterianism. While his background was Scottish and Presbyterian it had some features which would help to explain his transition to Anglicanism. One factor was the relation of his father, John Bethune, with the Anglicans. John Bethune (1751-1815) a Scot and a former chaplain in a loyalist regiment during the American Revolution had come to Canada in 1786. He organized the first Presbyterian Church, the St. Gabriel Street Church in Montreal and from 1787 to 1815 was pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Williamstown, Upper Canada. While John Bethune was always a strong champion of the rights of the Presbyterian Church in Canada,2 he had friendly relations with the Anglicans. There is evidence that he attended divine service with the Church of England congregation in Montreal prior to his organization of the Presbyterian church.3 After coming to Glengarry, Bethune got on very well with Strachan who became the rector of Cornwall in 1803.4 The fact that Bethune was a strong loyalist gave him a link with Strachan as well as with other Anglican conservatives like Richard Cartwright. Bethune’s wife, Veronica Wadden, had an episcopalian background.5

Alexander Neil Bethune was born at Williamstown, Glengarry in 1800 and attended John Strachan’s school at Cornwall from 1810 to 1812, along with his elder brother, John. While their family background tended to make the boys friendly to the Church of England, it was no doubt largely a result of Strachan’s influence that both eventually became Anglicans. Neil early developed a great admiration for Strachan. Many years later he recalled their initial meeting on the first day of school,

"the principal came over to where that youth [Bethune] sat quiet and timid; he kindly shook hands with him, patted him on the head, and assigned him his class and his work. Thus commenced the acquaintance, that by and by ripened into a life-long and never broken friendship."6

Attendance at Strachan’s school not only brought Neil and his brother in contact with Strachan but also with a number of young Tory Anglicans, notably J.B. Robinson and J.B. Macaulay. Later Neil had other ties with the Tory Anglicans, notably through his younger brother Donald (1802-1869) who became a prominent shipping magnate and a conservative politician.7

By 1819 Neil had decided to take Anglican orders. His elder brother John had already been ordained and had become minister of Christ Church, Montreal in 1818. Neil’s candidature was supported by Strachan who wrote to Bishop Mountain on July 25, 1819:

Alexr. Bethune should he be so fortunate as to receive your Lordships Patronage will come to York and place himself under my particular direction. He is an amiable youth of great sweetness of disposition and well advanced in his Studies.8

For the next four years (1819-23) Neil trained under Strachan and acted as the assistant in Strachan’s school at York. He was ordained deacon in 1823 and priest in 1824. He began his pastoral career in Grimsby in the Niagara Peninsula where he had charge of the Anglican mission from 1823 to 1827. While at Grimsby, he acquired an additional tie with the Upper Canadian conservatives when he married Jane Elizabeth, the daughter of Hon. J. Crooks (1778-1860) of West Flamboro, a Tory merchant and legislative councillor. In 1827 what might be called Bethune’s apprenticeship ended when he left Grimsby to become incumbent of Cobourg.

II

Bethune was rector of Cobourg for forty years (1827-67). In many ways these were the best years of his life. He emerged as a leading exponent of Anglican theology and a leading advocate of the rights and privileges of the Anglican Church. He became Archdeacon of York in 1847 and was from 1837 to 1856 (except for a brief interval 1841-3) editor of the Church, the Anglican church paper.

During all this long period Bethune was closely associated with Strachan who was Archdeacon of York from 1825 and Bishop of Toronto from 1839. They were in frequent correspondence in regard to diocesan affairs and as often as possible Bethune paid visits to Toronto where they consulted together.9 Strachan frequently took Bethune into his confidence in expressing his opinions, often unflattering, of the diocesan clergy and others. Thus he referred to the Evangelical clergy “more dissenters than Churchmen and in all their public meetings rail against their Mother [Church]”10 while he described a clergyman in the eastern part of the diocese as “so coarse a blackguard.”11 Strachan sometimes deferred to Bethune’s judgment. On February 1, 1850 [Bethune Papers] in sending him some petitions for publication in the Church he wanted Bethune to make revisions. When Bethune suggested a number of changes Strachan accepted some but rejected more, explaining, “I should have gained perhaps in the smoothness and roundness of the sentences - but lost more in energy.”12

It would have been surprising if Bethune’s views had differed much from those of his mentor and patron. Their views in regard to
Christianity, the Church, Canadian politics et al were generally similar. Bethune was somewhat critical of Strachan’s famous Ecclesiastical Chart of the clergy in Upper Canada and his statistics in regard to the Methodists. He was somewhat more kindly disposed to Egerton Ryerson than was Strachan. But in the essentials Strachan and Bethune were in agreement.

Like other converts to Anglicanism from other Protestant churches Bethune developed strong views on the appropriate position of the church in Canadian society. He believed in the principle of an established church and argued that in Canada, as in Britain, the Church of England should be the established church. Bethune’s early background made it easy for him to adopt this view. Adherents of the Church of Scotland were accustomed to think in terms of established churches, since the Church of Scotland was the established church in Scotland. Bethune merely applied the philosophy of religious establishments to his adopted church.

Bethune’s pamphlet, *Thoughts upon the Lawfulness and Expediency of Church Establishments* (Cobourg, 1836) made the case for religious establishments in general. He argued that it was natural for the state and the church to be allied together. The alliance strengthened the sanctions of law and prompted the spirit of general subordination. The state guards the great defences of Christianity and provides the money necessary to produce an educated ministry. Voluntary contributions, he asserted, are not enough to support religion permanently. Two years after publication of his pamphlet, Bethune was arguing in the *Church* (February 17, 1838) that since the moral greatness of England was largely the result of its religious establishments, Canada, which had the transcript of Great Britain’s civil polity should not be denied the blessing of a religious i.e. an Anglican establishment. Although, like Strachan, Bethune was pushed into accepting practical compromises, he never abandoned his basic position. As late as 1870 in his *Memoir on Strachan* (pp. 88-9) he was still arguing the benefits of an established church.

Bethune’s views on the Anglican establishment provided the basis for the active role which he played in the controversy over the Clergy Reserves, crown lands set aside by the British Government for the support of “a Protestant clergy” in Upper and Lower Canada. The Anglicans claimed a monopoly of the Reserves but this was resisted by other groups including the Presbyterians, the Methodists and also by advocates of complete secularization of the Reserves. Eventually the Anglicans had to be satisfied with settlements in 1840 and 1854 in which they received only a portion of the proceeds from the Reserves.

Bethune made two trips to England representing the Anglican position, the first in 1831 when he accompanied Bishop C.J. Stewart and the second in 1852-3. The fullest statement of his views was contained in a pamphlet which he published in London in 1853, *The Clergy Reserve Question in Canada*. At this time the Clear Grits and their allies were demanding complete secularization of the Reserves. Bethune’s pamphlet was a closely reasoned plea for retention of Clergy Reserve funds for religious purposes rather than devotion of the funds to the support of secular schools. He predicted that confiscation of the Clergy Reserve lands would probably be followed by attacks on all church property including that of the Roman Catholics.

Despite the opposition of Bethune and his friends, the Liberal Conservative administration which had just taken office secularized the Reserves in 1854. However Bethune was mollified by the compensation given to the Anglican and other clergy. He asserted that the Conservative Government “which had shown a friendly and liberal spirit throughout” made an acceptable commutation settlement.

In his championship of Anglican rights Bethune sometimes displayed resentment of the Church of Scotland. He opposed claims of the Old Kirk to the Clergy Reserves, and was indignant at attacks made upon Strachan by members of the Church of Scotland after the issuance of Strachan’s Ecclesiastical Chart. However, at times he appeared more favourable to the Old Kirk than was Strachan. In 1837, he thought that Strachan, in a charge to the clergy, had been too hard on the Presbyterians, and two years later he suggested to Strachan that the Anglicans might reach an agreement with Moderators of Synods of the Church of Scotland in regard to the strategy of the two churches on the Clergy Reserves question.

Bethune was more hostile to the Scottish Free Church which emerged after the Great Disruption of 1844 than he was to the Church of Scotland. He resented efforts of members of the Free Church to secularize the Clergy Reserves and blamed them largely for reopening the controversy in the 1850’s. He asserted in 1853, “Jealousy, combined with the heat of religious animosity, led the members of the Free Church to seek the overthrow of the settlement of 1840.”

In local politics Bethune was a strong supporter of the Family Compact and an opponent of radicals like William Lyon Mackenzie and Robert Gourlay. He supported the Compact in its opposition to the Rebellion of 1837 and insisted that loyal citizens should rally to
suppress it, exclaiming "Our cause is a just and holy one." Like other Upper Canadian Tories, he disliked Lord Durham's Report, describing it as "that Mischievous Report."

Bethune's political loyalties were similar to those of the Compact, but indeed they were reminiscent of the English Anglican Toryism of the seventeenth century. He was a strong believer in the biblical adage, "Fear God, Honour the King." He argued that the British monarchical system of government had a biblical sanction which was denied to the American republican system. When good Canadian Tories, mostly in Montreal, were contemplating annexation to the United States in 1849, Bethune insisted that it was their Christian duty to remain loyal to the British Crown. On October 21, 1849 he preached at Cobourg on the text (Proverbs 24: 21) "My son, fear thou the Lord and the King: and meddle not with those that are given to change." Bethune argued that Canadian Anglicans must forego the commercial gains which annexation to the United States might bring and must adhere to their Christian and monarchical traditions. He insisted that this tradition was, in the words of the Catechism "to honour and obey the Queen, and all that are put in authority under her; to submit ourselves to all our governors, teachers, spiritual pastors and masters; to order ourselves lowly and reverently to all our betters." He repudiated John Locke's idea that governments derive their authority from the consent of the governed and pointed out that in Old Testament times God had given kings to the Jews and not democratic republics. He claimed that monarchy (presenting to every man a state which he cannot attain) makes every one content with his station in life. "Better a little with a conscience at peace," he concluded, "than thousands with the agitations and conflicts and sins which the desertion of principle and the abandonment of duty will inevitably bring on."

III

During his long period in Cobourg, Bethune published a number of sermons and lectures on questions of theology and churchmanship. Of these the most important were *Sermons on the Liturgy of the Church of England* (York, 1829), *Four Sermons on the Holy Sacrament of the Lord's Supper* (Toronto, 1852), *Lectures upon the Historical Portions of the Old Testament* (New York, 1857), and *Lectures, Expository and Practical, on the Liturgy of the Church of England* (Toronto, 1862).

These writings indicate that Bethune shared the theological conservatism of most Canadian Anglicans of his day. His sermons and lectures were closely argued with careful attention to Scripture. He believed in a literal Heaven and Hell and in the vital necessity of a personal commitment to Christ. He also believed in the Atonement, "a costly ransom" and in the Second Coming. Like other nineteenth century theologians he was a great believer in the concept of typology and thus he argued in his *Lectures on the Old Testament* (pp. 38-39) that the deliverance of the Children of Israel from Pharaoh was a type of Christian redemption and (pp. 196-197) that Jonah was a type of Christ.

Bethune's writings indicate that he was a middle of the road high churchman. He disliked the Evangelicals in the church but also suspected the ritualism of the Tractarians. On the key issue between Evangelicals in the church and high churchmen over the place of faith and works in the Christian life, Bethune was on the side of the high churchmen. He laid stress upon the scriptural injunction that faith without works is dead and argued in effect that our primary "work" and continuing source of strength is participation in the eucharist. Thus in the Four Sermons on the Sacraments (pp. 10-11) he argued that while faith "is the main-spring of Christian conduct" yet "it would seem, indeed, as if Christian faith was parted with, when the Lord's Supper is neglected."

Bethune's two works on the liturgy were written at the beginning and towards the end of his stay in Cobourg: *Sermons on the Liturgy* in 1829 and *Lectures on the Liturgy* in 1862. The argument was similar in the two works but the 1862 volume was much expanded and better written. Both commenced with general remarks on the importance of prayer and on the question of the best form of prayer and continued with an analysis of the Anglican liturgy.

Bethune was a strong believer in a formal liturgy. He disliked extempore prayer, (so widely used by other Protestant churches), questioning the ability of a congregation to join the minister in worship if he is uttering prayers which the congregation has not previously heard. Bethune had a high regard for the Anglican liturgy as derived from earliest times and purified by the sixteenth century Reformers. Thus in the 1862 volume, after describing the development of the Prayer Book, Bethune wrote (p. 42)

"After all this time, all this searching investigation, all these improvements so gradually introduced, and with this authority and formal sanction of the Church and of the state, the Book of Common Prayer comes before us with claims unrivalled in the history, and with excellencies not to be found in the composition, of any [other] manual of devotion in the world."
Bethune’s view of higher education was similar to that of Strachan, Charles Inglis and other high church Anglicans who believed that church-related colleges should not be merely theology schools but should also include arts and other faculties. This view they shared with the Church of Scotland. King’s College in Nova Scotia and King’s in Toronto, both Anglican, and Queen’s, the Presbyterian College, all began as church-related colleges. Free Church Presbyterians and other secessionist Presbyterians believed that the arts and science faculties should be entirely under secular control with the church controlling only the professional training of candidates for the ministry. Knox College, Toronto and Presbyterian College, Montreal exemplified this theory.

Bethune was a stout advocate of King’s College, Toronto from the time of its chartering in 1827 until its secularization in 1849. He was horrified when King’s was secularized and agreed that the Anglicans had no choice but to establish a college of their own. Looking back on the controversy about secularization, twenty years later he reiterated this view in his Memoir on Strachan (pp. 239-40).

In the period before the establishment of Trinity in 1851, Bethune rendered an important service to the Anglican Church by conducting a divinity school. At Bishop Strachan’s instigation the school opened in 1841 under the name of the Diocesan Theological Institute of Cobourg.35

During the nine years of the school’s operation (1842-1851) Bethune prepared some forty-five candidates for the Anglican ministry. He reported with some pride “with few exceptions, they have proved themselves amongst the most hard-working and most successful of our Clergy.”36

IV

While Bethune was making his reputation as a theologian and leader in the Diocese of Toronto, the prospect of his becoming a bishop developed in the 1850’s.

As early as 1850 Bishop Strachan had suggested to the British ecclesiastical authorities37 that the Diocese of Toronto be divided into two or more dioceses. This was followed by a long process of negotiation culminating in the emergence of one diocese, Huron (1857), previously the south-western part of the Diocese of Toronto and a second diocese, Ontario (1861) in the eastern part. The central section remained as the Diocese of Toronto, under Strachan’s jurisdiction.

As a leading churchman in the Diocese of Toronto, Bethune was a logical candidate for bishop in one or other of the new dioceses. When an election was scheduled for Huron in 1857 he came to be regarded as the high church candidate. The other leading candidate was Benjamin Cronyn, the rector of London and a leading evangelical. Protagonists of the two carried on vigorous campaigns.38

Outwardly Strachan was neutral but he strongly disliked Cronyn and gave private encouragement to Bethune.39 On June 2, 1857 he wrote to Bethune, “I have said nothing of the evil you may prevent and the good you may do by supplanting Dr. Cronyn.”40 However on July 8, 1857 Cronyn was duly elected Bishop of Huron by a clerical vote of 22 to 20 and a lay vote of 23 to 10.

Having failed to secure the Huron bishopric, Bethune had hopes of being elected bishop of the eastern diocese, Ontario. Here too he failed and J.T. Lewis was elected bishop of the new diocese on June 12, 1861.

Finally Bethune was successful in his election as coadjutor to Bishop Strachan who at the age of eighty-eight had moved to secure an assistant. The election which was held on September 20 and 21, 1866, was strenuously contested.41 The leading candidates were Provost Whitaker of Trinity College, the leading churchman in the diocese; Archdeacon T.B. Fuller, a moderate high churchman who was strongly backed by native Canadian clergy and by the laity; and Bethune. For the first eight ballots the election appeared to be mainly a struggle between Whitaker who led the clerical vote and Fuller who led the lay vote. For the first eight ballots Bethune looked like an also-ran. At the end of the eighth ballot deadlock appeared to have been reached, but the impasse was resolved by the withdrawal of Whitaker. On the ninth ballot Bethune was returned as the successful candidate. He was consecrated under the title of Bishop of Niagara on January 25, 1867 and after Strachan’s death on November 1, 1867, he became Bishop of Toronto.42

The Globe was not very enthusiastic about Bethune on the occasion of his election, reporting on September 22, 1866, “The new Coadjutor Bishop is admitted even by his opponents to be a man of blameless private life and high personal merit, but he is hardly possessed of that force of character and capacity for governing which has distinguished the venerable Bishop of the Diocese.” Bethune, however, turned out to be a good administrator, handling with tact and firmness the difficulties presented by some of the parish clergy. Yet his period in office (1867-79) was in a sense marred by the great struggle with the
Anglican evangelicals, led by S.H. Blake, Clarke Gamble, Daniel Wilson and others. By means of the Evangelical Association, organized in 1869 and reorganized in 1873 as the Church Association, these men mobilized the Evangelicals into a coherent voting bloc in the Toronto synod. In 1876 they established the Evangelical Churchman as a mouthpiece for their ideas and in 1877 they established the Protestant Episcopal Divinity School, soon changed to Wycliffe College.43

Bethune disliked the Evangelicals partly because he thought they were too extreme in their opposition to "ritualism" in the church. He himself was critical of extreme ritualists in Great Britain but he thought they were a problem for the British ecclesiastical authorities (Lambeth) to solve. Bethune seems to have thought that the differences of the local Evangelicals and the high church party were purely over the matter of ritual.44 He does not seem to have comprehended the fundamental differences between the Evangelicals and the high church party over the respective roles of faith and works in the processes of salvation.

Bethune objected not only to the views of the Evangelicals but also to their method of organization. He was a great believer in the organized church as the normal channel through which Christians could achieve salvation. He resented the actions of the Evangelicals in working through quasi-ecclesiastical bodies such as the Church Association.

Mutual distrust between the Bishop's supporters and the Evangelicals produced differences on a series of specific issues in the synod:

1. patronage - who should make appointments in the church. Bethune and his friends stressed the role of the Bishop; the Evangelicals stressed the role of the laity.
2. missions. Bethune thought that they should be financed through the mission board of the diocese; the Evangelicals, anxious to maintain some control over the disposition of their funds, wanted to work through the Church Association.
3. the trial court, to consider charges of heresy, immorality, etc. against members of the clergy. Here also the two groups stressed the role of the Bishop and the laity respectively.

While the synod had some success in dealing with the specific issues in dispute,45 the Bishop and his supporters continued to wage war against the Evangelicals.46 In his charge of 1877, the Bishop threatened to refuse ordination to graduates of the Protestant Divinity School.47 In his last charge to the synod, shortly before his death, Bethune reiterated his criticism of the evangelicals, accusing them of an unfair attack on the high church party because of practices which had been traditional in the Anglican Church.48 It remained for Bethune's successor, Arthur Sweatman, a moderate churchman with evangelical leanings, to establish good relations between the Toronto episcopate and the evangelicals.49

Bethune died in Toronto on February 3, 1879. He had made a significant contribution to the development of the Anglican Church in Ontario. It was unfortunate that his career as a bishop was characterized by a note of controversy. This gives the impression that he was more of a fighter than was in fact the case. Most of his career was reasonably placid. His best time was the middle period (1829-67) while he was rector of Cobourg. In that period he had a fine record as a parish priest and as a strong exponent of the Anglican position.

While Bethune's basic Christian position may well have been derived as much from his Presbyterian as from his Anglican background, yet he had all the zeal of the convert to Anglicanism. His most distinctive contribution was fervent championship of the rights and privileges, the worship forms and the theology of the Anglican Church. Within the framework of Anglicanism he was not quite so narrow as his Evangelical opponents supposed.

While he was always a vigorous opponent of the Anglican Evangelicals, one cannot read his sermons and other writings without feeling how much he shared with them. Like them, he always stressed the idea of sinners saved by grace. He was always aware that salvation could only be obtained by a personal commitment to Christ. He laid more stress than the Evangelicals on the place of the sacraments as channels of grace, but the element of personal decision was frequently stressed in his sermons. He even gave a sort of altar call at the end of some of them.50 It would be wrong to minimize Bethune's differences with the Evangelicals, yet compared with the Christian liberalism which was already emerging in the Church, Bethune and the Wycliffe College people were on the same side of the table.
NOTES

1John A. Irving in Canadian Historical Review, September 1950, pp. 276-277.
5Young, p. 554.
7Donald was not a favourite of the Toronto Tories, since he was more identified with Kingston.
8Spragge, pp. 192-193.
9Ontario Archives, Bethune Papers, Strachan to Bethune, March 7, 1851.
10Ibid., Strachan to Bethune, October 2, 1843.
11Ibid., Strachan to Bethune, Feb. 22, 1849.
12Ibid., Strachan to Bethune, Feb. 6, 1851.
14The Church, February 10, 1838; Strachan Memoir, p. 124. For Strachan’s attitude to Ryerson see Ontario Archives, Strachan Papers, Strachan to Ryerson, December 26, 1846.
15In his Lectures upon the Historical Portions of the Old Testament (New York, 1857), Bethune declared (p. 206) that a people are happy whose rulers take the lead in acts of religious duty.
16He also attacked the voluntary system in his charge to the clergy in 1852. See A Charge Delivered at Visitations of the Clergy and Churchwardens of the Archdeaconry of York (Toronto, 1852), pp. 4-6.
17Strachan, Memoir, p. 270.
18Ibid., p. 93.
19Ibid., pp. 124-5 “The storm was one of unprecedented fierceness.”
20Strachan Papers, Bethune to Strachan, October 16, 1837.
21Ibid., Bethune to Strachan, May 16, 1839; Strachan Memoir, p. 176.
Bethune thought that the churches would be able to arrange a reasonable division of the Clergy Reserves if they avoided an appeal to the laity.
23Strachan Memoir, pp. 64-5, 68.
24The Church, December 9, 1837.
25Strachan Papers, Bethune to Strachan, July 25, 1839.
26The Duty of Loyalty, A Sermon Preached in Saint Peter’s Church, Cobourg on Sunday, 21 October 1849 by A.N. Bethune D.D. – Cobourg, Printed at the Star Office, 1849.
27Ibid., p. 8.
28Ibid., p. 16.
29Lectures on the Old Testament, pp. 54, 70.
30Ibid., p. 22.
31Ibid., pp. 69-70, 159, 211-12.
32For an example of Bethune’s careful analysis see Sermons on the Liturgy of the Church of England (York, 1829), Sermon III, pp. 28-41.
34Sermons, 1829, pp. 15, 27 and Lectures, 1862, p. 40.
36Strachan Memoir, p. 193. With the opening of Trinity College the school at Cobourg was closed.
37Strachan sent a memorial to the council appointed to arrange measures for the creation of additional bishoprics in the Colonies and Dependencies. See Bethune Papers, Strachan to Bethune, January 1853, enclosure.
39Bethune Papers, Strachan to Bethune, March 26, 1857.
40Ibid.
41Journal of the Synod of the Diocese of Toronto adjourned meeting of the fourteenth synod, 1866, pp. 19-28.
42After his consecration as Bishop of Niagara Bethune resigned the Archdeaconry of Toronto and the Rectory of Cobourg, Strachan Papers, Bethune to Strachan, January 30, 1867.
44See Journal of the Synod of the Diocese of Toronto, fifteenth session, 1867, pp. 16-18, eighteenth session, 1870, pp. 21-22.
47Evangelical Churchman, June 28, 1877.
49Mockridge, pp. 309-11.