

Marguerite Van Die. *An Evangelical Mind: Nathanael Burwash and the Methodist Tradition in Canada, 1839-1918.* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989. Pp. viii, 280. \$32.95.

At the end of a long and illustrious career, Nathanael Burwash was working hard to complete his autobiography. Like so many other religious figures from the Victorian era he assumed that the life story of a pious man confirmed the power of God working through history and, if properly presented, could serve as an inspirational guide for young men who were embarking on the journey that Burwash himself had begun in earnest some seventy years before. *The Life and Labours of Nathanael Burwash* would undoubtedly have found a comfortable place among the scores of books written by Canadian religious leaders about other Canadian religious leaders. Clothed in romance and didactic to the core, these lives of the Protestant saints form a distinct historical genre that makes a powerful statement about the theological assumptions of the age in which they were written.

The values that commended the writing of biography to the Victorians have tended to have the opposite effect upon contemporary scholars. No longer secure in the knowledge that God works through the lives of men and even less assured that the writing of history is a grand exercise in moral instruction, young scholars often regard the well-entrenched tradition of

Canadian religious biography as an obstacle to be overcome if they are to address successfully a long agenda of social and cultural concerns.

Marguerite Van Die's excellent book, *An Evangelical Mind*, restores biography to an important place in Canadian historical writing by recognizing a fact that many scholars have simply overlooked. The very assumptions that have so unnerved contemporaries also provide critical insights into the very heart of Canadian religion. If people in the nineteenth century read the life of a man as a novel in which God was the novelist, then they must have believed that the whole of life was infused by the spirit of God. For them religion was not an abstract category of social and cultural analysis but a lived experience—part of an ongoing dialogue between God and creation.

By treating religion as a lived experience Van Die is able to use the life of Nathanael Burwash as a framework for discussing the important issues in which he played a leading role. As a child in a devout evangelical household, as a student in a Methodist school, as a teacher of theology, and as a leader of the Wesleyan Methodist church, Burwash played a major part in almost every significant religious issue between Confederation and the First World War: the nature of children, the role of laity in the church, the impact of evolution and higher criticism on the teaching of theology, university federation, and church union.

This approach provides an insightful picture of Canadian Methodism in the late Victorian

period. Although Methodism changed in this period it was able to maintain the core evangelical traditions that John Wesley had bequeathed to his followers: repentance, conversion, perfection, and the importance of the scriptures for salvation. Burwash is presented as an intelligent and wise conservative: open to social change but determined to hold on to what was at the centre of Methodism and his own religious experience.

He did this by being open to intellectual change and at the same time working to accommodate new currents of thought to what he regarded as the essence of evangelical religion. For example, he responded to the challenge of evolution and higher criticism not by rejecting these modern ideas out of hand but by reformulating his theology on an inductive basis and then applying the lessons of Baconian science to the study of Biblical texts. In this way he set out to remove the false incumbrances that had built up in the past and so reduce the texts to their primitive essence. Intellectual progress, Burwash seemed to assert, came about by using science to return to primitive truth. The same pattern is evident in the debates over university federation and church union where Burwash was continually trying to discover the core of common truth that would secure progress towards newer and larger institutional structures. Like Ryerson before him he drew religion and education together and saw in their union the key to both social stability and progress.

This interpretation challenges directly the assertion that Methodism in Canada was changed dramatically

by its contact with the forces of the modern world. According to a number of historians, most notably Professor G.R. Cook, the religious leaders of this period contributed directly to the decline of religion and the secularization of society. In their haste to make religion relevant to the new secular age, religious leaders in the early twentieth century substituted sociology, the science of society, for theology, the science of religion. By loosening the ship of Protestantism from its doctrinal moorings, these men increased the pace of secularization and so contributed to the very process they fought so hard to oppose—the marginalization of religious belief and religious institutions.

Van Die offers three important criticisms of this thesis. First of all the evidence provided by the life of Burwash (and others) does not support the charge that the leaders of the church abandoned religious systems of thought for secular ones. They prided themselves on their orthodoxy and maintained their beliefs intact during a period of profound intellectual turbulence. Second, the assertion that religious change increased the pace of secularization is based upon a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of Methodist theology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Burwash taught his students to see theology not as an unchangeable corpus of theological doctrines but as an organic body of beliefs that was continually developing in the light of scientific examination and personal experience. To criticize his generation for abandoning a prescribed set of doctrines is to put the Methodist move-

ment in a fundamentalist straightjacket. It saw adaptation not as a sign of weakness but of strength. Third, the crisis of religion in the early twentieth century was not one of secularization. Following the insights of H. Richard Niebuhr, Van Die argues that religion has always been part of a dynamic relationship with society and social change. Profoundly affected by social developments, religion also seeks to explain and transcend the society of which it is a part. Burwash and his generation were worthy of this task, articulating a religion that tried to harness social change and turn it towards positive religious goals. Their problem was not that religion became secularized but that the pace of social change exceeded the grasp of religious explanation. The crisis that haunted Burwash at the end of his life was cultural. He assumed his religious synthesis would hold for all times—it only lasted for a few generations. When he took his leave from Victoria College it was not over a major theological issue but over the rules of behaviour for women in the students' residence.

An Evangelical Mind deserves a wide audience.

William Westfall
Atkinson College
York University

Harold Silver. *Education, Change and the Policy Process.* London: The Falmer Press, 1990. Pp. 230.

In the introduction to his book Harold Silver says, "The essential pur-

pose is to put historical tools to work on some contemporary and recent educational phenomena. The incentive in all cases is an interest in penetrating current debate and policy, the processes, practices and vocabularies in which they are embodied, and which they reflect and engender" (p. 1).

Silver believes that in general historians have been reluctant to commit themselves to policy research because of its demand for an orientation towards the future, its high level of generalization, threatening tyranny of concepts, clash of methodologies, and proximity of ideological conflict. As a result social and political scientists doing policy research either neglect its historical dimensions or become their own historians of policy. Silver sees a two-sided problem with such an outcome. On the one hand, historians who hesitate to do policy research fail to understand that history is always "substantively about the future" (p. 7) and it is inevitably theoretical. On the other hand, policy analysts who delve into historical studies often fail to appreciate the implicit doubts and question marks affecting historical descriptions and interpretations—"What history *is*, and how it is defensible, are questions never settled once and for all, to the satisfaction of its proponents and its critics" (p. 5).

The first two and the concluding chapters of the book focus on this general argument for historical policy analysis and the problems that may be anticipated for historians of education adopting such an approach. The intervening chapters illustrate Silver's own approach to historical policy analysis.