

George Rawlyk Remembered

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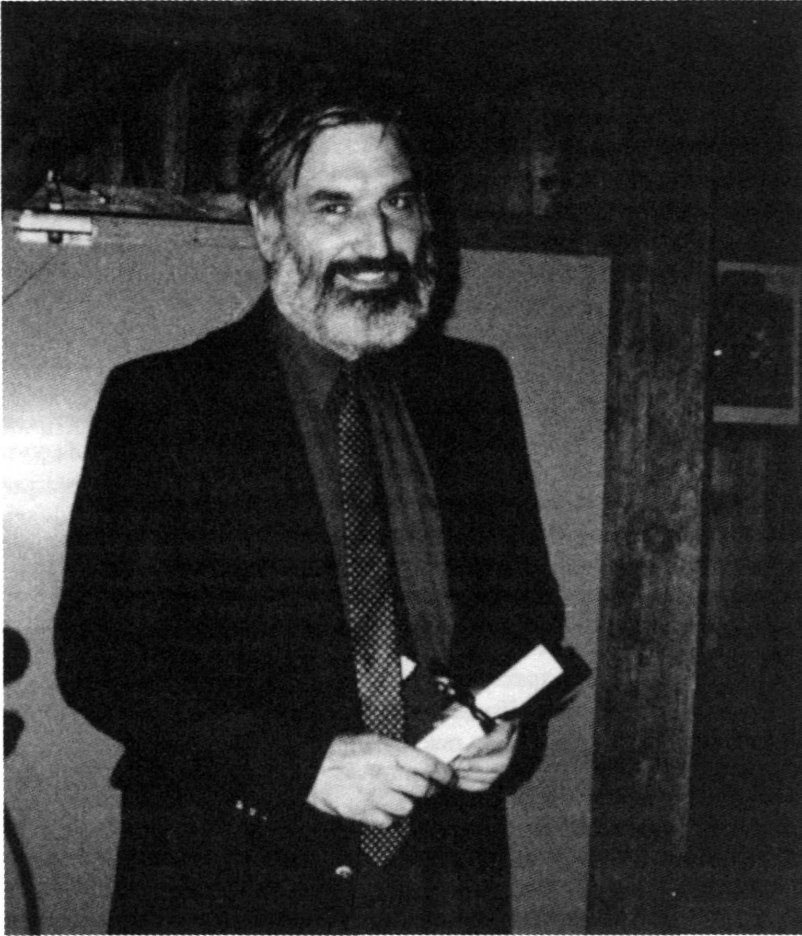
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George Rawlyk Remembered



In a 35-year career George Alexander Rawlyk (19 May 1935 - 23 November 1995) did more than anyone else in his generation to renew scholarly interest in 18th-century Nova Scotia and in the historical study of evangelical religion, especially in its Maritime context. An Upper Canadian whose first language was Ukrainian, Rawlyk received his higher education at McMaster, Oxford and Rochester. From 1966 until his untimely death he taught in the History Department at Queen's, but he held shorter regular or visiting appointments at Mount Allison, Dalhousie, Michigan State, Prince Edward Island and McMaster Divinity. He was Hayward lecturer at Acadia, MacNutt lecturer at New Brunswick, Imperial Esso lecturer at Prince Edward Island and Bell professor at Mount Allison. Rawlyk enriched the discipline not only through his own restless scholarship but also as mentor and friend to a long succession of graduate students who themselves came to work in fields which interested him. Some of them share memories below.

* * *

When, as a nervous and uncertain young graduate student, I first met George Rawlyk in his office at Queen's, where he had been teaching for only one year, practically my first thoughts were that I would endure this, and then move on as quickly as possible. Rawlyk was an intimidating, forceful individual, who appeared gruff and aloof. This most definitely was *not* someone I wanted, or expected, to have in my life for the next 30 years. And yet, in the fall of 1995, I, along with many others, had suddenly to contemplate a life without George, a life with a rather substantial hole in its middle. How had this come about?

Although I did not lose my fear of him for some time, I did learn rather quickly that his high expectations, his demanding nature and his gruff ways were driven by an immense sense of caring and concern for those whom he considered worth bothering with. Not that he was everybody's cup of tea. He despised hypocrisy and conceit, laziness and arrogance, and more than a few students disappeared quietly from his seminars. But for those who endured, the rewards were immense. Stimulating and provocative, demanding and exciting, his classes kept one on one's intellectual toes like nothing most of us had ever experienced. By example, and through his expectations of us, he showed us what being an academic, an historian, really meant.

I did finally, successfully, leave Rawlyk's seminar and completed two theses under him, but I was not successful in removing him from my life. I no longer even wanted to try. He had become a permanent, and comfortable, fixture. George had a marvellous way of combining intense interest in and concern for one's personal life and an insistent probing of one's academic pursuits. I always came away from a meeting or telephone conversation with him both exhausted and refreshed. I felt drained by his kindly questioning but also invigorated by the knowledge that here was someone who thought that what I was doing, both personally and professionally, was interesting and important.

A fellow historian once referred to me sneeringly as one of George's 'disciples'. It was meant unkindly; I took it as a compliment. Yet his powerful mentoring was always tempered and modified by his strong sense of friendship, so even the teacher/disciple model was never quite accurate. George exerted tremendous influence on the work of former students such as myself, but anyone who assumed that his 'disciples' followed his lead slavishly would be greatly mistaken. He took as well as gave, absorbing new ideas or interpretations like the proverbial sponge, influencing and being influenced. That was why conversations with him could be so exciting, if occasionally unsettling.

George's great strength was an amazing ability to combine these two: mentor and friend. For me it was never possible to determine where one ended and the other began. They were both an essential part of knowing George Rawlyk.

Barry Moody

* * *

I arrived at Queen's as a doctoral student in 1968, shortly after George Rawlyk's own migration from Dalhousie. In his 1968-69 graduate seminar I was one of a number of 'older' students who had already spent several years teaching at

university level (Ernie Forbes, Neil MacKinnon and John Munro spring to mind). When mixed with younger M.A. and Ph.D. students, and with George's demanding style, it was a tremendously stimulating, and at times brutal, intellectual experience. George was hard at work on Henry Alline and his suggestive *Queen's Quarterly* essay on Maritime historiography (1969) was about to appear. Already he had a reputation as a driving, creative and productive historian who struck fear in some of his colleagues and many of his graduate students. Before the year was out I had switched from a possible thesis in 20th-century Canada to one in 18th-century comparative colonial societies in order to work under George. His compassion, friendship and scholarly perception had won me over, along with his generous assessment that a paper I had done for him might very well be the core of a Ph.D. dissertation! It was that and more, leading to articles in *Acadiensis* and the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, and to a book.

In the summer of 1969 I was employed by George as research assistant, working on what would become *Nova Scotia's Massachusetts* (1973) among other projects, and I was urged to take my comprehensives as soon as possible to get on with the dissertation. This I did and, by the spring of 1970, after two all-too-brief years at Queen's, George encouraged me to accept an appointment at Mount Allison, where he had started his own teaching career. To be truthful, I wanted very much to return to British Columbia but George's advice, and my interest in building on the Maritime and colonial foundation he had provided, sent me down east. George never ceased to offer suggestions about research leads as far afield as the National Library of Wales, along with regular reminders that the next dissertation chapter was overdue. He had an excellent record as a supervisor who kept in contact with his students and rarely tolerated an incomplete dissertation, and I profited from this concern and guidance.

At every step of my academic career, from assistant to full professor, from SSHRCC leave fellowship to visiting fellowship at Cambridge, from head of department to dean of arts at Mount Allison, Rawlyk was instrumental and available with advice and support. My own research and writing, whether on the 18th-century trans-Atlantic world, Atlantic Canadian historiography, or colonial New Brunswick was often linked with his insights and work, and at times was a direct response to his challenging intellectual assertions.¹ He never lost touch or interest. It was with pride that I was able, as dean of arts at Mount Allison, to play a role in his invitation to spend a year as our Winthrop Pickard Bell Professor of Maritime Studies in 1987-88.

Rawlyk was a significant figure, intellectually and physically, with a somewhat intimidating presence. Yet his commitment to his beliefs and to his students, his generosity and patience, and his unswerving support, revealed a side of the man sometimes overlooked. From my perspective, he was a friend, mentor and colleague whose prolific pen is stilled but whose impact and influence will not be forgotten. The words in a preface I once wrote apply still: "Like many other graduate students

1 See for example W.G. Godfrey, "'A New Golden Age': Recent Historical Writing on the Maritimes," *Queen's Quarterly*, 91 (Summer, 1984), pp. 350-82.

in history who passed through Queen's, any scholarly contribution I may have to offer was brought to fruition by George Rawlyk's stimulating scholarship and friendship".² Queen's, and the broader scholarly community, lost a great deal with George's untimely death, but we who knew him well gained insights, direction and friendship which will be appreciated and emulated but never equalled.

W.G. Godfrey

* * *

George Rawlyk was to me a mentor, an advisor and a friend, but he could also be a rough task master. He would, at various and probably appropriate times, tell me that it was time to "crack the whip", a wonderful phrase that meant several months of working twelve hours a day rather than merely eight. He set very high standards for his graduate students, but even higher standards for himself. He taught us how to work hard, think critically and never accept being second best.

He also taught me and other students the importance of a social conscience. I'll always remember October 1970, when New Democrats stood alone in Parliament to oppose invocation of the *War Measures Act*, and I made some frivolous comment to the effect that the Liberal government was probably right in imposing the legislation. George exploded and I quit as his graduate student, saying that I couldn't work for anyone who treated me like that. To this he responded that professors fired graduate students, not the other way around. I won the battle — he apologized for screaming at me. He won the war — he taught me by example the importance of commitment and courage.

Through incidents like this, George and I became good friends. He was always there for me and other students. No matter where I was or what I was doing, whether as academic, politician or parent, when I had a serious problem I phoned George. He always had the time to listen and provided wise, measured and compassionate advice. Like so many others, I miss his strength, his wisdom and his compassion. His legacy lives in the many students whom he touched so deeply.

Janice Potter MacKinnon

* * *

My encounter with George Rawlyk began in the fall of 1972 when, as a second year History major at Queen's, I entered the Canadian-American relations course he co-offered with Janice Potter. It ended 23 years later, shortly before his death, with a long, confidential sunset supper overlooking Mactaquac headpond. For the last dozen of those years we were warm friends. It seems paradoxical, but I think fair, to say that this friendship developed by telephone, well after the teacher-student relationship had ended.

In the interim he had supervised the independent studies project (1974-75) that persuaded me that I should defer law school for an M.A., supervised my thesis (1976), plucked out of his head the improbable paper assignment — how I resisted

2 W.G. Godfrey, *Pursuit of Profit and Preferment in Colonial North America: John Bradstreet's Quest* (Waterloo, 1982), p. xii.

it — that would become *Early Loyalist Saint John* (1983), and procured my first History teaching job (1977). In addition to the usual funding and employment support, he volunteered his influence at a crucial point in my life to open doors at Toronto and Yale; and all of this was despite my unwavering assessment that I was cut out for Law rather than History. Such generosity of impulse was typical Rawlyk, and many will tell similar tales of his guidance, encouragement and faithful facilitation in launching careers across an almost embarrassing number of years. Yet it was far more than exemplary paternalism which made him so great a figure in the lives of former students.

With George Rawlyk one had a 'relationship', with all the emotional enthusiasm the term connotes. Though physically enormous, almost brutal-seeming on first encounter, the Rawlyk one came to know was profoundly empathetic, and he conveyed this empathy with great delicacy. That he was a stern and exigent seminar leader there is no doubt. Yet a student, even an undergraduate, visiting his office was focussed on as if he were the only person in the world. Awesomely productive in his own activities, he always gave the impression that he had all the time for you that you needed (equally, however, you had no doubt when your time was up). In a strictly correct way, he interested himself in you not merely as student but as an individual. He was utterly genuine, the sort of person who, when your parents, sister and grandparents arrive for graduation, proposes himself for the family lunch. If he passed even one night at your parents' home, he would still enquire after them a decade later. This ability to relate to non-academics was more than a social skill; it was a need. Others will recount his resonance with a 'general' audience at the never-to-be-forgotten 1983 Hayward lectures and his prophetic 1995 convocation address at Acadia, but I will mention his 1986 MacNutt lecture on Maritime fundamentalism. At Fredericton the event brought out the usual worthies; what thrilled Rawlyk was his reception in Saint John, where he revelled in a packed house that included many who had known personally the disdained men and measures he was willing to try to understand.

The Rawlyk I observed in the 1970s and 1980s had a somewhat defensive outlook. He wondered whether the work of a scholar whose field was the Maritimes and evangelical religion — a scholar who was Baptist — would be taken seriously. His department's success in attracting outstanding Maritime graduate students pleased him immoderately, but he sometimes feared that his own scholarly concerns were not respected within the region itself. I well remember, for example, his agitation over the *Acadiensis* review of *Nova Scotia's Massachusetts* (1973). But just as he accepted, in time, that critics of that book had a point, so, in my view, he came to a mature confidence in the last decade of his life that his legacy could withstand just criticism. No doubt the affirmation of his historical concerns by U.S. scholars contributed to this equanimity. Taken together, the final two projects on which we collaborated — editing Ernest Clarke's *Siege of Fort Cumberland* (1995) for McGill-Queen's and Frederick Burnett's *Free Baptist Biographies* (1996) for the Baptist Heritage series — called into question nearly every plank of *People Highly Favoured of God* (1972). Rawlyk understood this very well, but he intervened decisively on behalf of each.

George used to voice the hope that his legacy would be his students, but the

renewal of his muse that began with *Ravished by the Spirit* (1984) seemed to persuade him that some part of his own scholarship would endure. Though he was not spared to complete — as surely he would have — the biography of the apostate evangelist Charles Templeton and the history of Maritime Baptists in the 20th century, I do not think that this would have bothered him unduly. Enough of his important work was done. For those he touched deeply, however, there remains an aching loss that can never be filled. *D.G. Bell*

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In 1980 I was drawn to do graduate work at Queen's by the presence and reputation of George Rawlyk, who had helped revitalize historical scholarship on Maritime Canada. By then his graduate seminar was legendary as a training ground for students of Maritime history.

On first encounter one was impressed by Rawlyk's larger-than-life qualities — the towering physique, the conch-shell resonance of his voice, and the chiselled visage of an Old Testament prophet. One was struck, as well, by the prodigious energy powered by intense intellectual curiosity, ambition, dedication and Christian ethic. Rawlyk's various studies of Maritime Canada's evangelical heritage demonstrate that he could write passionately, poetically, his heart in his pen. In his work there was always a strong emotional identification between author and subject.

Rawlyk was far more than the simple sum of his parts. To the graduate student, he loomed compulsive and complex, often intolerant of frailties. On occasion, he seemed remote and unapproachable, as if occupying a special island of his own. Other times, he was a sympathetic, outgoing spirit. His graduate seminar was a forum for probing discourse. Minds were stretched, nerves were frayed, as he pushed students to extend their intellectual boundaries. Yet he demanded no more from graduate students than from himself, and his talents shone too brightly for his faults to overshadow them.

Only time will afford a fair assessment of Rawlyk's contribution to Canadian historiography. His impact as a nurturing teacher is indisputable, however. In my own case, he adopted a non-interventionist stance. I was neither driven nor led. At the time, this restrained style of guidance struck me as benign preceptorial neglect. In retrospect I realize that his mentoring was tailored to individual needs; some students required spurs, others the rein. Even as protégés became colleagues, Rawlyk continued to take an active interest in their careers by opening pathways to employment and facilitating publishing contracts. From behind the scenes, he monitored the progress of his former students, gaining satisfaction from their successes and extending friendship and counsel.

There is no need to construct a monument to this man. *Si monumentum requiris, circumspice*. Look for instance at his body of writings, numbering some 30 books, authored or edited. Consider also the McGill-Queen's Studies in the History of Religion series, the child of his own imagination and editorial direction. George Rawlyk built his own enduring monument, fashioned by the working hands and disciplined mind of a scholar and a teacher. *Laurie C.C. Stanley-Blackwell*

* * *

George Rawlyk was one of the few teachers I have known whose interest in students extended far beyond the office interview and completed thesis. In an age when many scholars are consumed by personal research interests and career advancement, Rawlyk gave time, money, books and encouragement to young scholars and students. He had the ability to set what often seemed impossible academic goals and then convince his students that they had the capacity to achieve them. I learned to trust his judgement and his faith in me even when my own was lacking.

All of these admirable personal qualities were not evident at the beginning of one's relationship with Rawlyk. His imposing stature, combined with his sometimes massive beard and booming bass voice, made him seem unapproachable and often distant. Nevertheless, for those with the courage to remain in the circle of his influence, it became clear that his passions were teaching and people. In spite of his academic reputation as a creative thinker and prolific writer, Rawlyk was first a mentor and caring individual.

While the priorities in George's life demonstrated to me, yet again, that people are more important and valuable than ideas, his scholarship had a profound impact on how I view the writing of the religious past and the place of religion in Atlantic Canadian history. In the preface to *Ravished by the Spirit* he confessed:

I know that the historian is expected to be an objective critic of the past who carefully avoids — especially in the area of religious history — any temptation to be emotionally sympathetic or to link past events and contemporary realities. I have not been able to resist the temptation, despite the fact that I realize it would have been wise, in the scholarly sense, to do so. So be it.³

This commitment to a "sympathetic yet critical" approach to understanding the Maritime religious past is one I share. As a committed Christian, I wanted to work with an historian who would demand the highest level of scholarship but also recognize that one's world view may appropriately influence one's understanding of the past. George Rawlyk was such a mentor.

The great emphasis on religious experience and its relationship to cultural developments which permeates Rawlyk's work provided a necessary corrective to my own first attempts at writing religious history. Influenced by a rather reductionist interpretive scheme borrowed from early social history, I defined religious experience and behaviour primarily in terms of function and effect. My mentor challenged me to interpret spirituality on its own terms, as well. Responding to my 1986 study of the great Yarmouth revival of 1827-28, Rawlyk characterized it as "largely one-dimensional and rather limited" because my

3 G.A. Rawlyk, *Ravished By the Spirit: Religious Revivals, Baptists, and Henry Alline* (Montreal, 1984), p. xi.

statistics had not revealed *why* people had been converted.⁴ He was right. I hope my current work on outdoor baptismal services and revival in the 19th century reflects greater sensitivity to the “inner realities” of religious experience.

Another area where current and future writing intersect with Rawlyk’s work is in the general interpretation of 19th-century Maritime religion. Implicit in *Ravished by the Spirit* and *Wrapped Up In God* is the notion of religious decline since the days of the First and Second Great Awakenings. It is my contention that, at least for the Calvinistic Baptists, the shift from being “religious outsiders” to “religious insiders” did not lead to a fundamental alteration of their spirituality, a spirituality inherited from Henry Alline and other late-18th-century evangelical radicals. Rawlyk encouraged me in this somewhat revisionist direction as I wrote “The Footprints of Zion’s King: Baptists in Canada to 1880” for his memorable Aspects of Canadian Evangelicalism Conference, held at Queen’s in 1995.

George wrote once that there is “a great need in Canada for evangelical scholars to realize not only how important their historical tradition is but also how important it is for them to make all Canadians aware of this richly textured heritage”.⁵ With his death the need is perhaps greater than ever but, owing largely to him, the prospect for future study has never looked so good. **Dan Goodwin**

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4 D.C. Goodwin, “Advancing Light: Evangelicalism in Yarmouth Township 1761-1830” (Acadia University, 1986) and Rawlyk’s critique in *Wrapped Up in God: A Study of Several Canadian Revivals and Revivalists* (Burlington, ON, 1988), pp. 146-47.

5 G.A. Rawlyk, *Wrapped Up in God*, p. xii.