

# Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

## The Early Editorial Policy of the *Montreal Witness*

J. I. Cooper

Volume 26, numéro 1, 1947

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300280ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/300280ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

### ISSN

0317-0594 (imprimé)

1712-9095 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer cet article

Cooper, J. I. (1947). The Early Editorial Policy of the *Montreal Witness*. *Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association / Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada*, 26(1), 53–62.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/300280ar>

## THE EARLY EDITORIAL POLICY OF THE *MONTREAL WITNESS*

By J. I. COOPER  
*McGill University*

A CENTURY ago this January, the second volume of the *Montreal Witness* appeared.<sup>1</sup> Dutifully conscious of the favours of "Divine Providence," the editor John Dougall, was encouraged to persevere in his task. The *Witness* described itself as an experiment new in Canadian journalism, an effort to combine the newspaper, the book review, and the magazine and "to invest the whole with a distinctly-marked Christian, but not sectarian character."<sup>2</sup> Two further peculiarities were introduced: Commercial advertising was declined, although the *Witness* was prepared to notice "gratuitously . . . [that] . . . which we think likely to advance the best interests of the people, whether temporal or eternal." Secular politics were banished by the declaration that the *Witness* had no politics but the politics of the Kingdom of Heaven, a statement capable of several interpretations, as the future was to show. For a decade, from 1846 to 1856, the *Witness* continued as a weekly newspaper, and the purpose of this study is to trace its development, with particular reference to its editorial policy, in this period.

Inseparable from the *Witness* was its editor, John Dougall. A Paisley man, he was a splendid example of God's Scot, whose duty was to convert the heathen and reform his ways. The better to accomplish this end, Dougall established himself in Montreal in 1825, where he became successively a bookseller and a publisher. The name of his shop, "The Religious and Useful Book Store," tells a good deal, and the titles of his newspapers, the *Canada Temperance Advocate*, and the *Montreal Witness* tell a good deal more. Throughout his long life (Dougall died in harness in 1886), he was upheld by a remarkable religious faith.<sup>3</sup> This consideration provides the index to his character, and to the formidable journals of which he was the directing force. Originally a Presbyterian, Dougall abandoned the historic, but exceedingly cantankerous, St. Gabriel's for Zion Congregational Church.<sup>4</sup> Denominational affiliations, however, meant little; his cardinal principles probably owed nothing to the churches he frequented. It will be recalled that the *Witness* described itself as "Christian, but not sectarian." Innumerable changes were rung on this theme, "acknowledging no sect but Christianity," and "[the] great truths of the Gospel . . . the principles of the Reformation." The frankness of the latter statement requires little comment. A strong predestinarianism, and an equally strong sense of individual responsibility formed the core of Dougall's Christianity. These coloured all his thinking—political, social, and economic, as well as religious. Political democracy or social equality did not exist, since both, as in the instance of salvation, were for the elect.

<sup>1</sup>The full title was the *Montreal Witness*. For the purpose of brevity, the shorter, and more popular form, the *Witness*, is used in the text of this study. The printer was J. C. Beckett; the format, eight pages of four columns.

<sup>2</sup>*Montreal Witness*, Dec. 14, 1846.

<sup>3</sup>There is no biography of John Dougall. Extensive sketches appeared in the Montreal press on his death in August, 1886.

<sup>4</sup>R. Campbell, *History of the Scotch Presbyterian Church in St. Gabriel Street* (Montreal, 1887), 443 ff.

The attributes of the Godhead which appear to have appealed most strongly, were those of judgment and vengeance, and his numerous invocations were addressed to "the Lord," "Jehovah," or "Divine Providence." The Bible was the foundation of this sinewy and muscular faith. Moral fervour and gloom were present in about equal quantities. A hard faith, yet it reinforced Dougall's belief in his own righteousness, and enabled him to devote a long and stormy life to plucking the mote from his neighbour's eye.

## I

Designed so patently for one-way traffic, inevitably the *Witness* figured in violent collisions. At one time or another, it collided with Anglicans, Roman Catholics, and a host of other religious bodies. Controversies with Catholics were the most sustained, although not necessarily the most bitter. Polemics against "Rome" began with the first number of the *Witness* when about half of the editorials and leading news items contained matter offensive to Catholics. During the decade under examination, the newspaper kept up the attack. Finally, Catholics were driven to reply in kind, and, in 1850, there appeared the *True Witness*, whose title suggests an effective use of irony on the part of the editor, George Edward Clerk.<sup>5</sup> Clerk, like Dougall, was a Scot, so for over twenty years, Montreal was enlivened by the spectacle of the expatriates engaged in the national pastime of theological controversy. The *Witness's* battle with the Church of England was more complicated. For the "Crown and Altar" Anglican, such as, for example, the Reverend John Bethune, rector of Montreal, or his rustic ally "priest" Reid of Frelisburg, the *Witness* had no pity. To the "converted" Anglican, i.e., the Low Churchman, it was prepared to extend toleration. Accordingly, it always had a good word for "our Evangelical contemporary," the *Berean* the Low Church organ of the Diocese of Quebec. At one point, the *Witness* tried to stir up strife within the Church by setting the parochial clergy and laity against the bishops.<sup>6</sup> A series of letters appeared signed "An Episcopalian," but as the style and matter were characteristically Dougall, the anonymity was probably transparent.

The violent denominational bias of the *Witness* has been commented on frequently. It is, in fact, one of the few things generally known about the newspaper. Without in any way denying the bias, it is legitimate to suggest that it sprang from several sources. It may be admitted at once that Dougall was incapable of understanding a form of Christianity, sacramental in character, corporate in ideal, and laying stress on historical continuity. Hence, his criticism of Anglicanism and of Roman Catholicism on doctrinal grounds. A critical examination of the *Witness* discloses that other arguments were advanced. As the chief beneficiary of the Clergy Reserves, the Church of England represented an endowed and privileged body, in which the *Witness* professed to see the survival of Old World feudalism. Similarly, the Catholic Church was attacked because it was the Church of the French Canadians and the Irish, whose rising social

<sup>5</sup>*Vide* Agnes Coffey, "George Edward Clerk, Founder of True Witness" (Canadian Catholic Historical Association, *Report*, 1934-5); Agnes Coffey, "The True Witness and Catholic Chronicle" (Canadian Catholic Historical Association, *Report*, 1937-8); and M. P. Reid, "Arrivals and Survivals" (Canadian Catholic Historical Association, *Report*, 1941-2).

<sup>6</sup>*Montreal Witness*, Jan. 23-Mar. 22, 1852.

position challenged the security of the Anglo-Canadian *petite bourgeoisie*. That group, of course, provided the *Witness* with its clientele. "There is," declared an editorial of disarming modesty, "no people . . . among whom there is a greater amount of talent than among the inhabitants of Canada speaking the English language . . . they are mostly immigrants, and it is not the least energetic, enterprising, and enlightened who emigrate."<sup>7</sup> It was to these "intelligent operatives" and "sturdy yeomanry" that the *Witness* catered. Shrewd politics dictated emphasis on points of similarity within this group, and, even more, on points of difference with those outside. Social and economic status, and race, along with religion, were the real determinants of the *Witness's* editorial policy.

The racial bias merits further consideration. The divine mission of the Anglo-Saxon peoples was one of the *Witness's* most sustained themes. This doctrine might do well enough for Canada West, but it failed completely to recommend itself in Canada East. The presence of a French-Canadian majority and of an increasing Irish minority produced a racial pattern which was the reverse of simple. Yet the solution advanced by the *Witness* was simplicity itself. As far as French Canadians were concerned, it was conversion. Dougall was a force in the French-Canadian Missionary Society, and, as will be seen later, featured the activities of the Society in the columns of the *Witness*. The history of the Missionary Society lies outside the scope of this paper, but it may be said briefly that its purpose was to make Protestants of the French Canadians by means of a programme of evangelization and education. There were probably other motives, as Robert Campbell, the historian of St. Gabriel Street church indicated unwittingly: "The Rebellion of 1837-8 rather shocked the British portion of the population, and wakened many to perceive that there was no safety for the state, except what was founded on intelligence." The selfishness of the scheme, which was patently more concerned with the safety of one group than the salvation of the other, was lost on the *Witness*, which presented it with unwearied regularity.<sup>8</sup> The rise of French-Canadian political parties and party leaders was followed closely, but always with this great end in view. Thus the Liberals of the Lafontaine school were described as good men, except for their religion. The Rouge party was warmly approved; whether the approval was as warmly reciprocated may be doubted. The attitude of the *Witness* towards the Irish was revealing. The mass migration of 1847 and the years following brought them to the newspaper's attention in a most dramatic form. So long as Irishmen were prepared to starve at home, the *Witness* was quite reasonable. When, however, the famishing and pest-ridden immigrants began to flood into Montreal, the *Witness's* line changed. An editorial of midsummer, 1847, entitled pointedly, "The Roman Catholic Irish," concluded as follows: "to this Continent, the hive . . . [Ireland] . . . has poured forth her swarms, and even America, free as she deemed herself, is in danger of having the natives of her soil swamped at every election, and being hampered . . . by . . . ignorant men, who will not learn, and who are at the beck of a designing priesthood. . . . Canada is in the same position." In the early eighteen-fifties, the Irish became the *Witness's* principal *bête*

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, Mar. 2, 1846.

<sup>8</sup>For example, "Thoughts for the French Canadian People," a series of six editorials commencing Oct., 1849.

*noir*. Such untoward events as the Gavezzi disturbances acted characteristically on the *Witness*. It made a sustained effort to throw the complete blame for the tragedy of June 9, 1853 on Irish Roman Catholics, conveniently blind to the fact that the newspaper itself had been the chief instigator in bringing Gavezzi to Montreal.<sup>9</sup> Public men were approved or disapproved on the strength of their association with the Irish. Francis Hincks was held up to particular execration, partly because of his very close connection with the Montreal Irish community; Robert Baldwin was almost given up when it was discovered that he had attended a requiem for Daniel O'Connell in St. Patrick's church. Attitudes such as these were not calculated to win friends, and it must be admitted that the *Witness* left no solution for the perplexing problem of Canadian racial harmony.

## II

In a more positive sense, the *Witness* was active in furthering what it regarded as worthy causes. A marked feature of Montreal life in the eighteen-forties, was the multiplication of societies for the promotion of desirable ends. Thus, there was a Bible Society, a Sunday School Union, a Religious Tract Society, an Evangelical Alliance, a Temperance Society, and even a society for the establishment of universal peace. The annual meetings of all these bodies received ample coverage in the *Witness's* news columns, and their reports provided ammunition for innumerable editorials. With both the organization and the purpose of the societies, the *Witness* was in complete harmony. "There is nothing more cheering," it wrote, "than the extent to which good objects are promoted by private effort."<sup>10</sup> Private effort, of course, was part and parcel of the newspaper's social creed, hence the welcome, accorded. Of the various organizations, the one most favoured was the Montreal Temperance Society. This was only natural, since Dougall had been one of its founders, and, for a long period, the editor of its journal, the *Temperance Advocate*. Tradition in the Dougall family has it that he founded the *Witness* primarily in the temperance cause. Realizing that the title of the *Advocate* was a trifle obvious, he resolved on a more subtle approach. The result was the *Witness*, and, while subtle is scarcely a term to be associated with it, it had no official connection with the temperance organization. "Be this as it may, the *Witness* carried an immense amount of propaganda. This ran all the way from inspired news items, to dire editorial warnings. A good example of the former was the report of the "Juvenile Temperance Pic-Nic" on the campus of McGill University, with the touching note, "the attendance was large as may be inferred from the fact that 4400 buns and cakes disappeared almost immediately."<sup>11</sup> The apparent favour shown the Temperance Society was excused by the ingenious consideration that it was fundamental to every other good cause. "Indeed, all those who wish success to the other Societies should join in this . . . [for how can they succeed] . . . so long as the mass of the people would rather have a glass of whisky than the best tract that was ever written?"<sup>12</sup>

Of far greater historical importance was the *Witness's* concern in

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, June 15, 1853.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, Aug. 6, 1849.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, Aug. 16, 1847.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, Feb. 1, 1847.

schooling. While it may have been a coincidence that launched the newspaper in the year of the Education Act, only sustained interest can explain the attention the paper gave the subject. It was inevitable, that while the *Witness* should support education, it should do so with a difference. The school favoured was the elementary school, and the elementary school maintained by voluntary, preferably by church, support. Until the early fifties, the *Witness* was highly critical of the existing school laws, since they seemed to increase the power of the state, and to relegate religion to a secondary place.<sup>13</sup> In order to show the disadvantages of secular schools, the *Witness* published lengthy accounts of the public schools in New England. Their effect, it was asserted, was "to bring down the whole of society to the same level," an illuminating commentary on the *Witness's* concept of democracy. The solution was what the *Witness* called the "Christian School." "The business of teaching must be taken up by the church . . . denominational societies must share in it."<sup>14</sup> "It is really . . . the people who must pay for education, and they may as well pay for a good system at once . . . the supervision of [i.e. by] the Evangelical Churches is the best guarantee."<sup>15</sup> As well as insisting on the voluntary school, the *Witness* campaigned for the well-trained teacher. It campaigned, also, for the well-paid teacher. In a passage of startling modernity, it lamented the low position accorded the teacher in Canadian society.<sup>16</sup> In the ideal social scale, the position of the teacher should be surpassed only by that of "the pastor, missionary, publisher, and editor."

The attitude of the *Witness* towards university education was curious. In the eighteen-forties, only the most tepid interest was taken in what was called "the university question," the secularization of King's College, Toronto. The assumption must be that Toronto was too far away, and university education too grand for the *Witness* and its readers. In the eighteen-fifties, this changed, and the newspaper devoted considerable space to university affairs. McGill University, especially after the granting of the new charter in 1852, came in for approval. In Sir William Dawson, Dougall apparently found a kindred spirit. Thereafter, the *Witness* was always ready to do a journalistic good turn. An editorial, "A New Era," shows how this was done. "It is . . . in McGill College . . . that the greatest improvement is to be found. . . . Indeed, we know of no institution so free from fault . . . [such as] . . . sectarian character, heretical views . . . low tone of morals . . . but no such objection can be brought against McGill. The University of Toronto has been . . . partially improved—but under its present management we do not expect much from it."<sup>17</sup>

### III

In spite of, or perhaps because of, its religious character, the *Witness* was no enemy of material progress. It could, in fact, have provided Professor Tawney with a few additional pointers on the intimate connection between Protestantism and the rise of capitalism. The *Witness* had no difficulty in associating progress and Divine approval, the elect being

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, Mar. 1, 1847.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, Sept. 28, 1846.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, Jan. 11, 1847.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, Feb. 8, 1847.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, Aug. 6, 1856.

recognizable by their temporal prosperity. One of the best examples of this fundamental truth was provided by an editorial agreeably entitled, "The Hand of God on Popery." After noting the "strife and bloodshed" rampant in Europe, the *Witness* turned to America: "We see . . . Mexico . . . devastated and dismembered . . . [while] . . . the United States is blessed with extraordinary prosperity and stability. . . . In the two provinces of Canada we find the same marked contrast. Upper Canada, chiefly Protestant, is rapidly increasing in all the elements of greatness, whilst Lower Canada, chiefly Roman Catholic, is not only stationary, but is retrograding. . . . Truly, 'Righteousness exalteth a nation'." More domestic in character was the *Witness's* incessant praise of "industry, frugality, and perseverance." The neglect of these precepts roused the paper to indignation. Speculation was roundly condemned, and from the infallible source; "the Bible declares, 'that they who haste to be rich fall into a snare'. . . . When will men believe . . . the Bible . . . [and] . . . act on its precepts?"<sup>18</sup> Turning from the general to the particular, the *Witness* contained an immense amount of information on business conditions. An annual feature was the "Conditions and Prospects of Canada," which usually appeared in the new year. Throughout 1846, the *Witness* carried a series of articles by J. T. Brondeest, who as a power in the Montreal Board of Trade, and as an "Episcopalian Evangelical" made the best of both worlds.

Two of the *Witness's* enthusiasms call for especial attention. One was railways; the other free trade. From the first volume, the *Witness* demonstrated its interest in railway construction. What canals were to Venice, roads to Rome, rivers to Britain, railways would be to Montreal. The *Witness* never forgot that it was the "Montreal" *Witness*, and that railways were the providential means of breaking Quebec and of challenging New York for the control of north-eastern America trade. Railways were both the symbol and the reality of progress. Again and again, in chronicling the opening of a new line, the *Witness* was moved to philosophize on the meteor-like progress of the age. The efforts of other publicists were appreciatively noted, and it was natural that the *Witness* should have a good word for T. C. Keefer.<sup>19</sup> The details of railway building and operation were carefully observed, Dougall probably acting as his own reporter.<sup>20</sup> But while the accounts began enthusiastically, it was rarely that they ended that way. "At this station . . . a lunch was provided . . . and we are sorry to learn that intoxicating drinks flowed freely." On the Grand Trunk project, the *Witness* ran the whole gamut of emotion. It started happily, "the dinner on Friday . . . went off . . . in a very respectable manner, unlike most of the drunken spees dignified with the name of public dinner."<sup>21</sup> Yet, only three years later, it wrote, "the worship of material interest has prevailed . . . and found its supreme idol in the Grand Trunk. . . . Before this new Dagon, the Governor General, responsible Ministers, [and] a whole legislature have bowed." The Grand Trunk episode had one benefit. It served to introduce the *Witness's* political hero, George Brown. Whether Brown was known personally to

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, Aug. 2, 1847.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, Jan. 19, 1853.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, Feb. 4, 1849.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, Aug. 24, 1853.

Dougall, cannot be determined, but he came to occupy a leading place in the newspaper's columns. A devastating candour was the normal manner in which other national figures were discussed, but Brown received preferred treatment. He had, of course, much to recommend him, apart from his criticism of railway monopolists. "His opposition to Ecclesiastical Corporations, and his labours on behalf of the Sabbath are strongly approved."<sup>22</sup>

Of equal interest was the *Witness's* treatment of free trade. It grew up, so to speak, with the free trade movement, and the entire first volume, 1846, is an absorbing commentary on free trade seen through Canadian eyes. The rapid transformation scene in the British House of Commons was characterized as "astounding." Sir Robert Peel instantly became the beau ideal of a statesman, his speech on the Corn Laws being described as surpassing "all that ever were delivered by Cicero, Demosthenes, and all the great orators of heathen antiquity put together."<sup>23</sup> Free trade was speedily translated into the *Witness's* customary moral overtones, "the sublime principles of Christianity." That the adoption of a new fiscal policy by Great Britain might adversely affect Canada, the *Witness* was slow to realize. It fully reported pronouncements of businessmen favouring free trade, and of course minimized, or suppressed, opposing views. More positively, the *Witness* developed its own programme, the repeal of the Navigation Acts, improved farming, and the extension of railways.<sup>24</sup> Yet it was on theoretical arguments that the newspaper chiefly relied. "[Protection] annuls the divine law, that all men should look on each other as brethren. . . . [Free Trade] is the greatest means in the providence of God for promoting peace and good will . . . no artificial system, however skilfully constructed, . . . can in any degree equal the beautiful harmony and perfection of the order established by Divine Providence, which is to let every man carry his industry or the produce of it to the best market he can find, and procure what he needs in return . . . on the most favourable terms." Such an argument, the *Witness* regarded as unanswerable.

#### IV

As well as being concerned with Canada's internal health, the *Witness* was much exercised by its relations abroad. In the category of external relations, the United States occupied the largest place; hence, reviews of United States news, and comments on United States policy filled its exchanges and editorial columns. Its admiration for the United States was very real. If the *Witness* had a model, it was the American religious journal, such as the frequently quoted *New York Evangelist* or *Boston Independent*.<sup>25</sup> In the United States, the *Witness* found the ultimate of moral and material well-being, "no luxurious aristocracy, . . . no standing armies to live on the sweat of the poor man's brow and carry licentiousness into the poor man's dwelling." Yet, in its admiration, the newspaper preserved a certain critical quality. The United States it so admired, and so ably interpreted, was the "Free North," New England and the East. This reservation was absolute.

The earliest concern of the *Witness* was in Canadian-United States

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, Sept. 14, 1853.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, July 27, 1846.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, June 29, 1846.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, Dec. 13, 1847.



relations, to use the modern jargon. The first issue, Number I of Volume I, carried the leader, "A Voice from Canada to the Christians of the Free States, on the Prospect of War." The reference of course, was to the dispute over the Oregon boundary. From this beginning, the *Witness* sustained the same line, the essential harmony between Canada and the North. Occasionally, the olive branch was waved a bit menacingly, and the United States was warned, "hanging on your frontier, a dark cloud of Indian tribes, the Mexicans, trained to rapine and bloodshed threatens [*sic*] you on the south . . . your northern frontier bristle[s] with . . . bayonets . . . you have in your midst a sleeping volcano of three million slaves." In the main, however, the appeal was to justice and common sense. Such an argument worked both ways. The *Witness* not only spoke to the United States; it spoke of the United States to Canada. To the newspaper's everlasting credit, throughout the crises and near-crises of the eighteen-forties and fifties, it invariably placed a generous and rational interpretation on the actions of the United States. Aggression was a burden that neither country could easily bear. "The evil effects in Canada [of the war scare] have been unsettling . . . engendering . . . an increase of intemperance consequent upon the night musters of volunteer companies in taverns."

Domestic issues in the United States, presidential elections, and the problem of slavery, fascinated the *Witness*. In political matters, the *Witness* took sides with alarming alacrity. It rapidly transferred its allegiance from the Whig to the Know-Nothing, and, finally, to the Republican party. The Whigs, originally in high favour because of their opposition to the Mexican War, were unceremoniously rejected as "dough faces," before the War ended. The Know-Nothings, who were applauded as representing "the old Puritan feeling," enjoyed approbation until the rise of the Republicans. Since it condemned slavery as well as "Popery," the Republican appeal was irresistible. Presidential personalities and possibilities were eagerly canvassed. In the main, the *Witness* was not lucky in its prognostications. In the elections of 1856, it backed Frémont unreservedly. "Frémont is quite a different character. . . . He is the Nimrod, and Crusoe, and Columbus, and Pizarro of the present generation."<sup>26</sup> Equally absorbing was the struggle over slavery. In the estimation of the *Witness*, the issue was slavery, and one will scan its editorial columns in vain for a suggestion of more fundamental causes. Given Dougall's premises, the stand the newspaper took was never a moment in doubt. It was one of uncompromising hostility. The *Witness* began in 1846, with a strong bias in favour of abolitionists, describing them as, "the only class . . . who . . . are discharging their duties towards God and man," and ending ten years later with the gloomy recommendation that it would be better for the North to wreck the Union than to continue to tolerate slavery. Grotesque as such opinions appear today, they must be understood in relation to their times, and to the almost universal condemnation of the north-eastern United States by the English-language press of Montreal. The deliberate singling out of the abolitionists is self-revealing. If the *Witness* had a United States counterpart it was the *Liberator*, and if John Dougall had an American opposite number, it was William Lloyd Garrison.

The *Witness* carried a great deal of anti-slavery literature, culminating in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The earliest notice of the book came in the summer

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, June 25, 1856.

of 1852, and in August appeared the announcement of the first Canadian edition.<sup>27</sup> As the proprietor of the Religious and Useful Bookstore, Dougall had a very real interest in a best seller, but his enthusiasm was based on principles as well as on profits. In praising Uncle Tom, the *Witness* threw discretion to the winds, even likening it in effect to the Bible. The final recommendation, while negative, was probably decisive, "the Pope has prohibited the sale . . . of Uncle Tom's Cabin."<sup>28</sup>

Occasionally, the *Witness's* preoccupation with the United States got it into hot water. The most serious was the newspaper's participation in the Annexation agitation of 1849. As might be surmised, the *Witness* had a strong presumption in favour of union with the United States, and as English-speaking Montreal moved towards annexation, the *Witness* moved with it. As early as February, 1849, it was dealing tentatively with this "important topic." As usual, moral and material motives were jumbled together: "7th. It [annexation] would introduce us to the sympathy and aid of American [charitable] societies." From this beginning, the *Witness* moved rapidly, asserting in August that it wanted only "the indications of Providence," to induce it to declare itself openly. About a month later (September 24), the desired happened, and the *Witness* announced happily that, "the indications of Divine Providence are pointing directly, confidently, and . . . even urgently in the direction of annexation." At that point the *Witness* was brought up short by the vigorous protest of one of its readers, the Honourable Malcolm Cameron. Cameron charged that the newspaper was violating one of its cardinal principles, abstention from politics.<sup>29</sup> The *Witness* thereupon reversed its stand, covering its retreat by the ingenious excuse that "the line between questions that are political and those of a moral or religious character are [*sic*] often imperceptible." Undignified as the episode may have been, the crawl-back of the *Witness* was less humiliating than that of most of the Montreal press. Looking back a year later, the *Witness* was able to explain its stand by the turn of events in the United States. "We have heretofore advocated annexation . . . but rather than consent . . . while this slave-catching law is in force . . . we would be willing to see Canada ten times poorer . . . than she is."<sup>30</sup> The reference, of course, was to the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. More than any other single instance, the Annexation episode sums up the *Witness's* *Witness*. Annexation was the means of realizing all the *Witness's* dearest hopes, upsetting privileged churches, securing Anglo-Saxon supremacy, and ushering in the *bourgeois* paradise. This constant admixture of moral and material motives was one of the paper's most sustained characteristics.

With the issue of November 1, 1856, the *Witness* became a semi-weekly. It had come far in the course of the first ten years. The subscription rate had been slashed from 17s. 6d. to \$2.00 and the number of subscribers had risen from 1,500 to nearly 8,000.<sup>31</sup> The turning point in the *Witness's* career seems to have been 1850. After that date, circulation grew steadily. The *Witness* had no difficulty in explaining this encouraging progression, "humble dependence on Divine Providence," "the exciting nature of the discussions on which we have been engaged," and "the opening of railways

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, Aug. 29, 1852.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, June 8, 1853.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, Oct. 8, 1849.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, Oct. 14, 1850.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, Dec. 14, 1846 and Oct. 22, 1856.

and the multiplication of Post Offices." The locale and status of the readers is more difficult to determine. In some of the earlier volumes, the *Witness* published fairly regularly lists of receipts and the place of residence of its agents. Judging from these, it appears that Canada East and "the Peninsula," i.e. the Ottawa and Rideau valleys, provided the newspaper with the majority of its subscribers. Unfortunately, comparable figures for the later volumes do not appear, so it is impossible to suggest whether the increased circulation of 1856 was based upon intensification within this area or on expansion outside it. The first decade, 1846-56, perhaps represented the *Witness* at its most successful. It spoke for an established clientele, the farmer, town worker, and small tradesman. It spoke, also, for the Protestant and the progressive, regarding those terms as synonymous. In the eighteen-forties and fifties, these groups were still politically considerable in Canada East, and it may be supposed that the *Witness* voiced their views acceptably. The tone of comfortable superiority the *Witness* habitually used probably merely echoed the confidence of a social type which was not yet superseded by the rising French-Canadian middle class nor abandoned by the Anglo-Canadian capitalist class.

*There was no time for discussion at the end of the session in which this paper was read. [Editor].*