BOOKS IN REVIEW

While reviews of books which are no longer recent, or even in print, may still serve a useful and interesting purpose, news of bibliographical work in progress is of no value whatsoever to our readers when such news appears after the bibliographical work being reported is already published. Worse, it is an embarrassment to the reporters. In an annual publication such as these Papers, there are limits to the timeliness of what is printed. Under these circumstances, the Council of the Society has recognized that the Work in Progress notes which have preceded the reviews here over the last few years, would be more useful if transferred to the pages of the Society’s more frequent Bulletin. In this issue of the Papers, therefore, Work in Progress has been dropped, and members are referred to the Bulletin.

Readers are reminded that suggestions of titles for review here will be gratefully received. Publishers are invited to send copies of Canadian works of bibliographical interest to the Review Editor. Reviews will be printed, whenever possible, in the language of the book under review: French or English. We shall be especially pleased to hear from subject specialists who are willing to review new publications in their field, as they are published, for we are concerned that our reviews be authoritative. ‘Notes for Reviewers’, a guide to the length and format of reviews, will be sent to reviewers with a copy of the work they have undertaken to appraise. In general, full reviews should be about 300 words in length, or 500 words for more substantial or controversial works, and from 100 to 150 words for works Briefly Noted.

I should like to thank our reviewers for their contributions to the Papers, but opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the Bibliographical Society of Canada.

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Bruce Peel has relied heavily on the journals of the Reverend William Mason, one of three young theologians sent from England in 1840 to assist James Evans’ missionary efforts in northwestern Canada. William Mason and his companions,
Robert Rundle and George Barnley, had no prior experience with the native people of Canada, and Mason who has always been credited with much of the translation of the Bible into the Cree syllabics, was dependent upon his wife Sophia, and several Indian teachers at Norway House (the Hudson’s Bay Company post, two miles from the Rossville Mission), for a good deal of his education in this field.

Other sources listed by the author are the Reverend Egerton Young, and Dr. John McLean who appeared on the scene some twenty years after Evans’ residence at Rossville. These men did not have access to confidential letters that appeared after the death of those involved at the Rossville Mission printing-shed. Principally the Donald Ross Papers are missing from the booklet’s bibliography. James Evans named the island ‘Rossville’ in honour of his one-time friend and Chief Factor at Norway House.

Not until after his resignation in 1854 did William Mason give whole-hearted approval to his superior’s invention. In 1854 Mason wrote to the Secretary of the Church Missionary Society in London:

It will perhaps be advisable for me to say a few words regarding the printing of books in the syllabic characters . . . I do think that for grammatical and phylogial [sic] purposes the Roman characters are decidedly the best.

Evans had discarded the Roman characters as far back as 1836, when he invented an Ojibway syllabic alphabet, to the great delight of American teachers. Unfortunately, it was rejected by the London office as being “too limpid”. What Mason failed to recognize was the vital fact that the Indian people required no schooling at all to memorize Evans’ simple signs, while a certain amount of education was necessary to read and write Roman characters.

In 1854 William Mason resigned from the Wesleyan Methodist Church, rejoining the Church of England of which he had been a member prior to 1840. He wrote in 1855, after meeting Indians at York Factory and elsewhere who had taught themselves to read and write the Cree syllabics:

It is truly astonishing how extensively these characters are used, and with what ease the Indian becomes master of their sounds and how well adapted they are both to his circumstances and his language.

Mr. Peel makes no mention of the fact that, when the Reverend Thomas Thurlburt replaced Mason at Rossville Mission in 1855, he had been an aide to Evans on a trip to Fort William in 1838, and was thoroughly familiar with Evans’ work on the Ojibway language. Huruburt remained only one year at Rossville, and with his departure the whole printing and translating effort ended at this site.

The booklet contains one error, on page 8. There appears the line: “Evans arrived at his new post by canoe from York Factory on the evening of Sept. 5/1840”. This mistake is doubtless owing to the fact that the family furnishings were shipped from Rice Lake, Ontario, to England, where they were placed abroad the Hudson’s Bay Company annual supply-ship bound for York Factory.
This was the custom at that time, as bulky objects and heavy boxes could not be transported in birchbark canoes. In Evans’ diary he writes of the family’s arrival at Fort William “Aboard the steamer New England on the 2nd of June”. Two days later the party left by canoe for Norway House via the Lake of the Woods and Lake Winnipeg water-route — a journey of 52 days, reaching Norway House on the morning of July 25, 1840. Transportation from York Factory inland was by freight York boat, manned by nine men, to handle trade goods and heavy items. For speed Evans used a light canoe, and he had waited several weeks at York Factory to claim his property from England.

One might wish that greater credit had been given to the inventor and the native teachers he taught, who were translating the Bible and printing booklets before Mason’s arrival at Rossville, but Bruce Peel’s comment in opening: “Mr. Evans’ invention of the Cree syllabic characters was an act of genius”, may be sufficient praise for a great achievement.

Nan Shipley

(Mrs. Nan Shipley devoted almost twelve years to searching for unpublished letters and diaries relating to James Evans, and in 1966 Ryerson Press published her James Evans Story. She is also the author of numerous other books, as well as radio and T.V. programmes, on the history of Manitoba and its Indians.)


Le répertoire de La chanson au Québec, 1965-1975 aura fait couler beaucoup d’encre lorsque paraîtra ce compte rendu. Comment ajouter ou retrancher sur tout ce qui a été dit?