The Identity of A.G. Meacham, Author and Compiler of Canada's First Methodist History

J. William Lamb

A FEW YEARS AGO I CONTRACTED TO WRITE A SIX - HUNDRED - WORD article for the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography/Dictionnaire biographique du Canada* on a rather obscure Canadian author, A.G. Meacham. I had used his 503-page book, *A Compendious History of the Rise and Progress of the Methodist Church, Both in Europe and America* (1832), in preparing a thesis on 'A History of the First Methodist Church in Kingston Township' (Victoria University, 1963). It seemed a simple task, as I knew Ontario's Quinte area, where the book originated, both from residence and research. As one of the earliest denominational histories printed in Canada, it seemed worth investigating. The search has become a passion; the seeming black and white documentary, a full-colour feature film. The author, a peripatetic preacher cum publisher, physician, poet, and postmaster, has been wrongly – I hope to prove – identified; his career spiced with excommunication.

His book is honestly called a compendium. He names at least four of the sources from which he quotes *verbatim* page after page, selecting and editing the material, but adding a few of his own perceptions. These sources include Henry Moore's *Life of the Rev. John Wesley* (London, 1824; New York, 1825), Jesse Lee's *A Short History of the Methodists in the U.S.A.* (Baltimore, 1810), John Emory's *A Defence of 'Our Fathers' and of the Original Organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York, 1827), and James Youngs' *A History of the Most Interesting Events in the Rise and Progress of Methodism in Europe and America* (New Haven, Conn., 1830).

The first half of the book deals with Methodism in Europe, the lives of the Wesleys, and accounts of four British preachers. The second half records the history and government of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America up to the year 1832, the lives of the first three bishops, a twenty-three-page section of original material on Methodism in Canada, and a thirty-four-page appendix listing all the American Methodist itinerant preachers from 1773 to 1826. The Canadian section includes the often quoted prime source material on the Methodist 'martyr' Charles Justin McCarty. (See my article on McCarty in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. iv, pp. 494-495.)

The Rise and Progress was printed by Joseph Wilson, editor and proprietor

of the *Hallowell Free Press*, in the village of Hallowell, Upper Canada, now Picton, Ontario, the seat of Prince Edward County. In 1831 Wilson advertised that he had recently purchased a 'Book binding apparatus' and that he was prepared to print books (*Hallowell Free Press*, November 1, 1831). Meacham may have been his first customer. In any case, it was a substantial book for a newspaper printer in a small Upper Canadian town to undertake. Although the title page is dated 1832, the *Free Press* first advertised its publication on March 12, 1833:

We take pleasure in announcing to the public that a history of the 'rise and progress of Methodism', has just issued from our Press, and is now in the hands of the Binder. It will probably be ready for delivery in the course of two or three weeks.

The Author of the above work is the Rev. A.G. Meacham, a minister of the Methodist Church – his indefatigable exertions, and the extensive research for acquiring appropriate, interesting, and useful matter, will no doubt render it an interesting volume to the public, and especially to the members of that church.

It appears, as far as we are able to judge, to be a faithful and impartial narrative of the subject it assumes. Having the honor of executing the work, we are in some degree prepared to determine as to its merits, and can with confidence recommend it to the friends and patrons of the Methodist church, as well as the public generally. All who wish therefore to acquire a general knowledge of the Methodists will do well to avail themselves of this work.

The volume contains about 500 pages, of an octavo¹ size on fair paper, and is well executed. It will be afforded at the very low price of seven and six pence currency per copy.

Advertisements for the book continued to appear regularly in the paper from April 2, 1833, to July 28, 1834.

The *Christian Guardian* in York took note of the new book with the following comment in its April 10, 1833, issue:

NEW HISTORY OF METHODISM – We have received a copy of the History of Methodism by Mr. Meachem [*sic*] a local Preacher of the Methodist E. Church, printed at Hallowell, and shall give it an attentive perusal. And as it is the first effort at any thing of the kind in Canada we hope it may meet with encouragement so that the publisher may obtain the reward of his labour.

A month later (May 8th), the *Guardian* published a large extract from the book on its front page. The excerpt of pages 443 to 451 described the banishment of McCarty in 1790, a time, noted the editor, 'when Methodism was first introduced into Upper Canada – when there was scarcely any law, and less justice in the land.'

Meacham's book was also issued with the imprint: 'New York: Printed for the Trade. Knowlton & Rice. 1835.' A careful comparison of the two issues

reveals identical typography, layout, pagination, and 'errata' and similar paper. The only difference is in the title pages. The 1835 title page has obviously been re-set, though with similar type, and printed on different paper. It has been tipped-in in place of the 1832 title page. One copy, that in the Bidwell Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, once owned by a Rochester, New York, resident, has both title pages intact; that of 1835 pasted over the 1832 title page along the left-hand margin. In all other copies I have seen, the 1832 title page has been cancelled. Thus, what bibliographies list as two editions are simply two issues of the same printing.

The U.S. 'publisher,' Knowlton & Rice, was, in fact, a papermaking and printing firm in Watertown, Jefferson County, New York, just sixty miles east of Hallowell (Picton) across Lake Ontario. They had begun business in 1824, and they introduced their first papermaking machinery in 1832. The firm continues in existence today under the name Knowlton Brothers Paper Co.

On February 19, 1833, Wilson's paper reported a 'Great Fire at Watertown,' which had started in a tannery on February 7th. Also affected by the fire, according to his quote from the *Jefferson Reporter*, was

the abjoining Paper-Mill of Messrs Knowlton & Rice, in which was a new and very valuable Power Printing Press, in successful operation, together with, as we are informed, from 20-30 tons of Rags, and a very great and valuable amount of paper, of various descriptions. Loss estimated at \$9000. — insured \$5000.

It is possible that Knowlton & Rice provided the paper for the printing of Meacham's book, although paper mills were also operating in Montreal, York, and Hamilton at that date.

Copies of Meacham's *Rise and Progress* are readily found today in university and public libraries. The National Library of Canada lists sixteen libraries holding copies; the National Union Catalog (Library of Congress), ten; and the Methodist Union Catalog, Preliminary Edition (Lake Junaluska, N.C., 1967), five. A few of these overlap, and the National Library did not identify that Queen's University has three copies. In the fall of 1981, an additional eighty-eight possible locations were contacted, including universities in Ontario, New York, and Illinois; Methodist-related institutions in the U.S.A. and United Church-related colleges and seminaries in Canada; public libraries in older southern Ontario communities; major public libraries in cities in Quebec, New York, and Illinois; and a few other institutions. There were fourteen affirmative replies, forty-seven negative.

From all of these sources, I have been able to locate forty-two library copies, distributed from Halifax to Vancouver and south to Dallas. Of the 1832 issue, there are twenty in Canada, nine in the U.S.A.; of the 1835 issue, five are in Canada, eight in the U.S.A. Undoubtedly a few more will turn up. It is difficult, if not impossible, to estimate how many copies may originally have

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Arranged in proper order.

By **A. G. MEACHAM, V. D. M.**

"Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every Creature,"
Mark. xvi., 15.

"We will go with you, for we have heard that God is with you,"
Zech. viii., 23.

HALLOWELL, U. C.
PRINTED FOR THE PUBLISHER, BY JOSEPH WILSON,
1832.

FIGURE 1: The 1832 Hallowell (Picton) issue.

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FIGURE 2: The 1835 Watertown issue.

been printed or sold from these few statistics, but it would seem to be significant that forty-two copies of a 150-year-old Canadian book are still extant. The six or seven copies that I have seen are still in their original full calf binding.

Meacham's book is listed by early bibliographers as follows. Morgan (p. 275) listed it rather inaccurately, suggesting he had not seen the book first-hand:

MEECHAM [*sic*], A. G.

I. Rise and Progress of Methodism in Canada. *Picton, C.W.*, pp.900.

Sabin (Vol. XI, p. 543) lists the American issue and adds Morgan's description:

MEACHAM (A. C. [*sic*]) A Compendious History of the Rise and Progress of the Methodist Church, both in Europe and America. By A.C. Meacham. *New York*. 1835. 12mo, pp. 503.

Also: Rise and Progress of Methodism in Canada.... *Picton, C.W.* [18-] 8vo, pp.900.

Gagnon (Vol. II, no. 1359) lists the 1832 issue and notes Morgan's entry:

MEACHAM (A. C. [*sic*]) A compendious history of the rise and progress of the Methodist Church, both in Europe and America, etc. *Hallowell, U.C.*, Printed for the publisher, by Joseph Wilson, 1832. 503p. in-12.

Comprend l'histoire des premiers temps de cette secte au Canada. Morgan en mentionne une édition imprimée à Pictou [*sic*], C.W., sans indiquer la date de son apparition.

Staton and Tremaine (no. 1723) were the first bibliographers to ascribe Christian names for Meacham. They also gave a careful description of the Toronto Public Library copy:

MEACHAM, ALBERT GALLATIN.

A compendious history of the Rise and Progress of the Methodist church, both in Europe and America, consisting Principally of selections from various approved and authentic documents. Arranged in proper order. By A.G. Meacham, V.D.M.² ... *Hallowell, U.C.*, Printed for the Publisher, by Joseph Wilson, 1832.

503, [1] p. 12mo. Preface signed A.G.M. ... p.443-465 gives ... A historical account of Methodism in Canada. 18 x 11.2 cm. Original calf binding.

Who, then, was Albert Gallatin Meacham? Was he named for Albert Gallatin (1761-1849), the Swiss-born American politician who served with great distinction as the Secretary of the Treasury from 1801 to 1814 and later as U.S. minister to France and Great Britain? The peak of his fame would seem to come a bit late for our author.

Genealogical research proved a dead end. The *New York Genealogical & Biographical Record*, Vol. LXVI, has an extensive Meacham family tree going back to a seventeenth-century Jeremiah Meacham of Somerset, England, who

settled in Salem, Massachusetts, but nowhere is there an Albert Gallatin Meacham mentioned. A search of all books in the card file of the Genealogical Section of the Library of Congress relating to Meacham or its variant spellings revealed no Albert Gallatin Meacham.

In pursuit of the Staton and Tremaine listing, an authority card of 1935 date, possibly compiled by them, was discovered at the Toronto Public Library. The card indicated that their sources were:

N.Y. Public Library

Inf. from U. of T.

L.C. (Information from N.Y. public lib.)

But enquiries to these sources brought no light. A recent reply from the New York Public Library was typical: 'The card in our catalogue gives the full name as Albert Gallatin Meacham, but our authority file does not give a reference to the source of this full name.' The identity of Albert Gallatin Meacham remains a conundrum; his name appears nowhere but in bibliographies and library catalogues and there – I believe – wrongly.

The *National Union Catalogue, Pre-1956 Imprints* (Vol. 372, p. 371), however, lists another work by an A.G. Meacham:

MEACHAM, A.G. Sumner; a poem. Rushville, Illinois, November, 1856. 32° pp.16. The lines were suggested by the affair of Brook's attack upon Senator Sumner. Dedication.

Rushville is in Schuyler County in west-central Illinois. Nine hundred miles away, twenty years later – but could it be the same person? Cecil K. Byrd, in his *Bibliography of Illinois Imprints* (Chicago, 1966), p. 469, identifies this author as Ahira G. Meacham, a retired Methodist minister who was postmaster at Mount Meacham at the time of this publication. The U.S. Census records for Schuyler County for 1860 confirm him as AHIRA GRISWOLD MEACHAM, age 57, born in Vermont, and list his wife and two children. The Archives of the Central Illinois Conference of the United Methodist Church (as the denomination is now called) in Bloomington reveal many references to Ahira Griswold Meacham in the Conference minutes for the years 1836 to 1839. Deeds for his properties in Schuyler County up to 1868 are in the County Records Office.

But could these two Methodist preachers with the same initials and surname be one and the same person? I believe they are. Two other sources of information provide the links.

The name 'A.G. Meacham' appeared frequently in the pages of the *Hallowell Free Press* other than in connection with his book. For example, in the January 22, 1833, issue, he was one of thirty-two persons declaring their intention to prosecute persons running horses in the streets. During 1832 and

1833 his name regularly appears on the 'List of Letters remaining in the Post Office at Hallowell.' Usually his name appears as A.G. Meacham, but on one occasion, March 20, 1833, as 'Ahira G. Meacham'! This one variation is a prime clue when dovetailed with our other sources. And, of course, the name never appears as 'Albert G. Meacham'.

Our other source is the privately published Mormon clan genealogy, Leonidas DeVon Mechem's *Family Book of Remembrance* (Salt Lake City, 1952), which I discovered in the Library of Congress. It contains a very extensive family tree that includes Ahira Griswold Meacham, tracing him back six generations to the aforementioned Jeremiah Meacham of England and Salem, Massachusetts. The abundance of dates and places of family-life events enables us to reconstruct the following biography of our subject. Although Upper Canada is not mentioned, the few years when we know he was living there fit well into the other data.

Ahira Griswold Meacham was the first of fourteen children born to Jacob Meacham (1782-1839) and Lucy Simonds (1783-?), of Benson, Vermont. His birthdate, July 18, 1803, tallies with the 1860 Census data. His middle name, Griswold, is a well-known Connecticut name, but no intermarriage with the Meachams has been established. There were, however, two or three men by the name of Ahira Griswold listed in Census returns as living in Vermont at the beginning of the nineteenth century. He may have been named after one of them. The Meacham family joined the tide of New Englanders migrating westward to new lands in western New York and beyond, leaving Vermont about 1808, perhaps after the death of Ahira's grandfather, John Meacham.

They settled, along with many other Vermonters, in Jefferson County, New York, by at least 1815, when Ahira's brother Joel was born. On September 25, 1825, Ahira married Polly Knight Gault (born December 24, 1804, in nearby Lewis County), at Alexandria, Jefferson County. Others of the Meacham clan also settled there. Ahira and Polly named their first recorded child, Eliza Ainsworth Meacham (born July 19, 1827), after his aunt Eliza Meacham, who had married Parley Ainsworth there in 1813.

Religious revivalism, spearheaded by the Methodists and greatly fanned by Presbyterian lawyer-turned-evangelist Charles G. Finney, swept through western New York in the thirties. It spawned several movements, including Shaker-style religious communities, the Mormons, anti-Masonry, millennialism, and temperance groups. Meacham enlisted in the ranks of Methodism as a local preacher. One unique original section of his book (pp. 423-4) describes in vivid detail revival meetings in Moscow (now Leicester), New York, at a District Conference of local preachers and in a church in Rochester in 1830. One can only conclude that he was present as an eyewitness.

The earliest record of his being in Upper Canada is his name on the letter

list in the *Free Press* of October 30, 1832. A search of land titles in the Hallowell area gives no mention of his name, suggesting he was a transient boarder. He may even have left his wife and children with relatives and friends in the Watertown, New York, area. One extant page of minutes of a Quarterly Meeting Conference of the Hallowell Circuit, Bay of Quinte District, of the Methodist Church, dated November 25, 1833, now in the United Church Archives, lists a 'Mechum' [*sic*] as a local preacher. The publishing of his book must have been a time-consuming labour during this period. The last advertisement for the book, in July 1834, may have presaged his departure for the States and the subsequent re-issuing it in Watertown in 1835.

The birth of his son, Ahira Gault Meacham, in Monroe County, New York (Rochester area), on July 12, 1835, indicates another westward migration. In October 1836 he was received on trial as a Methodist preacher by the Illinois Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, meeting in Rushville. He was appointed to serve churches in Palestine, then later at Shelbyville. During this period, he also practised medicinal arts and was referred to as a doctor. In 1839 he was charged with immoral conduct, tried by the Conference, and suspended. His subsequent written confession brought about his expulsion from the ministry. The details of this trial have been published on pages 648 to 659 of William Warren Sweet's *The Methodists* (New York, 1964), in the Religion on the American Frontier, 1783-1840, series.

From 1856 to 1861 he was the first and last postmaster of his self-named hamlet, Mount Meacham, near Rushville. In 1850 he was married for a second time to Mary Etta Hubbard, also a former Vermonter. He died on May 20, 1876, in Brighton, Macoupin County, Illinois.

In summary, it would seem that we have fairly clear evidence that A.G. Meacham, the author of *A Compendious History of the Rise and Progress of the Methodist Church ...*, was properly named Ahira Griswold Meacham; and that he was also the author of *Sumner: A Poem* in 1856. Unless someone can resurrect Albert Gallatin Meacham – if there ever was such a person – and give proof of his identity with our A.G. Meacham, our case rests. This colourful, creative pioneer paused long enough in our country, in the midst of his restless early years, to produce a very significant volume and claim his place in the annals of Canadian bibliography.

NOTES

1. Although described in the *Free Press* as 'of an octavo size,' the book is in fact a large duodecimo as indicated by Staton and Tremaine.
2. V.D.M. (Verbi Dei Minister) means Minister of the word of God. The initials were sometimes used by New England clergy.