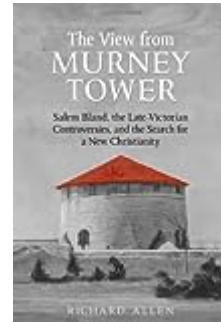




**Richard Allen.** *The View from Murney Tower: Salem Bland, the Late Victorian Controversies, and the Search for a New Christianity.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008. Illustrations. xxxvii + 524 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8020-9748-4.



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## **Richard Allen's Return: An Exploration in Biographical, Religious, and Intellectual History**

After a long detour in Ontario provincial politics, Richard Allen returns to Canadian history with the first of two volumes exploring the personal, religious, and intellectual travails of Salem Goldworth Bland, a notable luminary of Canada's late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century social gospel movement. Rectifying a serious underplaying of the liberal theological tradition in Canadian religious history, Allen explores Bland's creative engagement with the late Victorian controversies of biblical criticism, idealism, Darwinism, and political economy with unparalleled imagination and nuance (p. xix). Based on Bland's sermons, letters, diaries, publications, and reading lists from his early life, Allen's account of the intellectual influences that shaped Bland's social and theological disposition leaves few ideas unturned. Part biographical narrative and part intellectual history, Allen takes readers on a journey of the preacher's formative years of adolescence to his youthful and middle-aged ascent as a leading thinker and minister of the Canadian Methodist confession.

The son of Emma and Henry Flesher Bland, Salem

Bland was born in 1859 and raised in Quebec and Eastern Ontario. Under the disciplined guidance of his father, a Methodist minister, Bland proved a voracious reader and dutiful student. During the mid-1870s, he entered Morrion College in Quebec City where he was introduced to Newtonian mathematical physics and to reworkings of the mental and moral branches of Scottish Common Sense philosophy. After experiencing the exaltation of revival and submitting to the renewal of conversion, Bland followed his father's example and enrolled in the Methodist ministry. As a young probationer, he was assigned to areas throughout Ontario and Quebec—forming, according to Allen, the circumstances in which he articulated for himself and his congregations how to understand faith in a new age of commerce, industry, and science (p. xxiv).

After an account of Bland's adolescent years, Allen loosely follows Bland's development of a theology that reunited Christianity with the contemporary scientific and social ideas and circumstances he confronted as a minister. Among his many itinerant locations, Allen

claims that Kingston was the central hub of Bland's intellectual development. There, he was exposed to the scholarly ferment of Queen's University and allowed his imagination to soar and inspiration to flower upon the parapet of the old defensive bulwark of Murney Tower. Allen recounts how Bland revealed during his early ministerial tenure a desire to lead Methodists on a new spiritual and social path. The challenge, Bland reasoned, "was not one of living the faith and abandoning the world" but of recognizing the intellectual opportunities of the times and articulating how faith might "provide a world regenerating power" that would reorganize the social order based on Christian agency and morality (p. 79). Inspired by George Monro Grant, principal of Queen's University and supporter of critical and scientific approaches to biblical scholarship and social reform, Bland eventually generated a newfound sense of "world" that combined the Methodist doctrine of Christian perfection with the new theories of social progress espoused by such theorists as Herbert Spencer, Karl Marx, Auguste Comte, and G. W. F. Hegel.

Through his reading of thinkers, such as Thomas Carlyle, Charles Kingsley, John Ruskin, and many others, Bland became skeptical of laissez-faire doctrines and was aware of the Methodist forms of social regeneration advocated by Hugh Price Hughes and Mark Guy Pearce. Allen argues that Bland, while assigned to a congregation in Cornwall during the early 1890s, witnessed the extent to which low wages, long workdays, and brutal living conditions afflicted the Canadian working classes. Bland began to question the effectiveness of combating economic disparity through the traditional means of Sabbath observance and personal temperance alone. Studying the political economy of Arnold Toynbee and the Fabianism of Bernard Shaw and Sidney Webb, Bland came to support socioeconomic collectivism. The most insightful aspect of Allen's study is how Bland read and combined the theories of Herbert Spencer and Charles Darwin to argue that "the whole of life was organic and in process" and that the "progress of humanity" relied on a "self-conscious struggle" to "transcend its natural state" and "realize its true identity or ideal" (p. 174). Notwithstanding the principle of the survival of the fittest, Spencer's metaphysical notion of an "Inscrutable Presence" allowed Bland to promote the Gospel as a plan for social improvement.

Allen argues, however, that the secular agnosticism of Fabianism, conjoined with Darwinian skepticism and Spencer's departure from Christian theism, restricted the theological basis from which ministers, such as

Bland, could prove the necessity of Christianity in social progress. A "sense of unity to human experience" was indistinct, and for Bland, there was no coherent framework with which he could reconnect the " yawning chasm" recently established "between religion and science" (p. 221). This problem, Allen contends, was only exacerbated by the growing realization that the well-worn theories of Common Sense philosophy, formerly linking the "older, mechanical conceptions of nature [with] history, biblical revelation, and religion," were insufficient for confronting modern scientific approaches that separated "creation from creator, enquiry from faith, reason from revelation, and mind from matter" (p. 221). Furthermore, the new theoretical determinism of Comte, Marx, and Darwin all subsumed the self-conscious reasoning of human beings within natural laws that obscured the "understanding of the mind, the nature of the sensible world, and of our knowledge of it" (p. 221). According to Allen, Bland bridged this intellectual impasse with the idealist philosophy of John Watson who was challenging the presumption that the natural and social world was reducible to scientific law external to human self-conscious activity. Collapsing the Baconian, Newtonian, Paleyite, and general scientific dualism of mind and matter, Watson insisted that "reality was inextricably bound up with the conditions of knowledge" and that "the world is just intelligence viewed in its concrete manifestations" (p. 223). Equating the world with intellect, it was "but a small step," Allen demonstrates, for Bland to postulate the existence of a "supreme intelligence of which the world was a dynamic expression" and within which human self-consciousness could find "rationality and communion" (p. 227). Consistent with Bland's view of progressive revelation, where only through the "midst of current events and experience" could God "be heard to speak," idealism offered a way to "weave together" elements of Methodism with evolutionary theory, "gradualistic socialism," and new forms of biblical scholarship (pp. 159, 227).

Indeed, the central thrust of Allen's argument lays in his assessment of Bland's confrontation with the higher biblical criticism and the formation of a theology that upheld the basis of Christian morality wedded to a vigorous social conscience. The latest scholarship raised questions regarding the accuracy of the biblical record and discovered some of the "earliest interpretations of the meaning of Jesus's life and work" that illustrated how past theologians forced too many of their own beliefs into the "figure and time of Jesus" (p. 238). By virtue of his endorsement of progressive revelation, Bland was stirred rather

than deterred by these breakthroughs, and he turned to the Christology of Paul to meld idealism and Christianity into a framework that encompassed the movements in science, religion, and society with a more clearly focused centerâ (p. 238). Adopting Paulâs view that Christ was the âembodimentâ of Godâs renewal of humanity and the âwhole of nature,â Bland suggested to his congregations that the âIncarnation of Christ in Jesusâ destroyed the âgreat antithesis of matter and spiritâ and rendered antiquated Christian views that split the world in two and denigrated material and bodily existence (p. 239). This âNew Christianity,â as he described it, infused the notion of Christian discipleship with a significance beyond normative precepts and into communion with the very âcosmic force of life itselfâ; all secular laws, political principles, scientific discoveries, and human activities were, in the end, a manifestation of Christ in the world (p. 240).

The closing parts of Allenâs narrative explores Blandâs participation in the activities and internal struggles of the Methodist Church as it intersected with both his renewed sense of the Christian faith and the political controversies of the early twentieth century. Projecting forth a full-fledged social gospel, Bland supported the interdenominational struggles of the Christian Endeavour and Church Union movements, along with the YMCA. Reasoning that independence from external authority was necessary for promoting social change, he also pushed for a relaxation in the churchâs moral rules and, consequently, confronted an emerging conservative and Calvinistic backlash in Methodist and other evangelical circles. Confident that âGod was weaving the ways of humankindâ toward a progressive peace between capital and labor, Bland also used the pulpit to support socialistic goals of economic justice and labor union rights (p. 339). He furthermore placed his notion of socio-spiritual improvement on the divisive stage of British imperialism—considering the empire an instrument for righteousness, self-transcendence, and social elevation.

Allen concludes with a meticulous discussion of the new German criticism of the New Testament that conflicted with Blandâs understanding of Pauline Christology. Avidly absorbing the latest material, Bland realized that Paul only considered Christâs incarnation as a practical sacrifice in the âdrama of justificationâ and did not in fact see the manifestation of Christ in secular responsibilities (p. 379). In response, Bland sharpened the theology of his New Christianity by emphasizing the Christology of Johnâs Gospel that considered Christ to be the incarnate manifestation of God whose sacrifice offered

absolution from sin while elevating âessential human natureâ through a self-giving love that brought to it âlight and abundant lifeâ (p. 380). Allen ends by arguing that John simply became âPaulâs successorâ in Blandâs continuing and evolving âquest for a holy worldlinessâ (p. 379).

Readers will be impressed by the depth and deftness of Allenâs analysis to which even a long review cannot do justice. His study follows a prolonged polarization between conservative evangelicalism and liberal theology that has led in Canadian religious historiography to an indictment of the liberal critique as a harbinger of secularization. Allen offers a much more nuanced treatment of how progressive ministers, such as Bland, came to consider revelation in an evolutionary sense and developed the theological means of maintaining Christianityâs relevance in a rapidly changing intellectual and social world. He resurrects the rich creativity and inner logic of progressive religion and how it entered the tumultuous twentieth century with a unifying vision of social reform. He demonstrates, through the intellectual struggles of a single figure, how the development of this rejuvenated Christianity was as much rooted in the âreligion of experienceâ and biblical revelation as its contemporary, conservative-evangelical critics.

Hopefully Allenâs biography will inspire a renewed interest in the scholarly study of notable Canadian characters, but certain caveats concerning his methodology remain. There are numerous instances where Allen, faced with a gap in the historical record of Blandâs thinking and experiences, inserts his own conjectures. There are also places in the narrative where the reader loses a sense of time and place and may get confused with whose opinions are under consideration—Blandâs, Allenâs, or a major intellectual theorist's. Allenâs hope of offering a concise, rooted, and accessible religious biography is also weighted down with his oftentimes exhausting delineation of Blandâs scholarly forays into the views of âinfluential thinkers.â Readers may experience frustration seeking to ascertain the relevance of Blandâs personal and professional life to his âNew Christianityâ that often seems less the result of his social interactions and church activities than simply an independent melding of theories from a smorgasbord of opinion—necessitated by an opposition to the socio-industrial order that Allen tends to assume rather than explain. Thus, while Allen admirably avoids categorizing Bland within a straitjacket of any particular â-ism,â his methodological focus on Blandâs exposure to an endless number of contemporary theories only muddles, especially for nonspecialists,

what he intends to clarify. We are not, moreover, systematically introduced to the popular climate of opinion in which Bland is contextualized as concepts regarding religion, political economy, and social change were undoubtedly negotiated and molded on a broad social and discursive scale rather than at the desks of a relatively limited number of thinkers—Bland included.

Nevertheless, Allen establishes what he sets out to prove—that the basic tenets of Christianity did not peter out at the end of the nineteenth century but rather retained their social relevance through a renewed theological rigor inseparable from modern evolutionary theory and idealism. *The View from Murney Tower* is an excellent study, not simply of a ministerial life, but of central questions within Canadian religious and intellectual history.

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