

COMMENTARY

Rouse's "Trivial Round"

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THE ANGLICAN CHURCH in nineteenth-century Newfoundland grew ever stronger from the first bursts of energy under Bishop Spencer (1839-1843), through the frantic activity of Bishop Feild (1844-1876), to the steady consolidation under Bishop Jones (1878-1918). It saw conflict, antagonism, and sheer mischief-making as well as heroism, altruism, and sanctity. Missionaries lived always in the midst of poverty, pursuing their calling against a background of hardship, cold, and illness. The church's history in the colony is the sum of their biographies, mostly written only in the book of life, and our knowledge of its inner workings comes mainly from manuscript letters preserved by missionary societies and in the published journals of clergymen.

Most published accounts of mission work in nineteenth-century Newfoundland have been partially intended to elicit financial support from church people in England and have concentrated on journeys and interesting incidents. Edward Wix described his travels across Newfoundland in *Six Months of a Newfoundland Missionary's Journal, from February to August, 1835* with the clear intention of raising money. Bishop Edward Feild, in selections from his *Journal* published in the *Church in the Colonies*, had a similar intention, and he too described his travels. J. G. Mountain of Harbour Breton and Julian Moreton of Greenspond wrote as settled pastors and tell us much about parish life, but their work bears the marks of being designed for publication. Oliver Rouse, however, wrote not for publication but for his wife and himself. His account is therefore at times trivial and even boring but it is always authentic, candid, and full of the flavour of life as encountered by an ordinary missionary in a difficult, exacting, and impoverished mission. Indeed its rich detail gives an unrivalled circumstantial account of outpost life.

Oliver Rouse (1820-69) was born in England at Northlew in Devon, the descendant of a long line of Anglican clergymen. After the death of his father, the Rev. James Martin Rouse, he was educated at the Clergy Orphans' School, St. John's Wood, London. He became a chemist, married Maria Damerel of Exeter, and, probably under the influence of the Evangelical Revival, decided to become a missionary. He and his wife offered themselves to the Church Missionary Society but were passed on to the Newfoundland School Society, which in 1843 sent them to St. John's to teach at the Central School. There, according to Mrs. Rouse's published recollections,

They found themselves in charge of a school numbering over four hundred scholars, for the most part of the rougher element of the city . . . [Mrs. Rouse] taught about two hundred girls of all ages. (Browne 502)

In 1846, at the age of 26, Rouse was made deacon by Bishop Feild but he continued to teach until the following year when he was sent to Bay de Verde. There he settled, was ordained priest in 1850, and remained until his death in 1869.

The diary begins in September, 1846, with the account of Rouse's journey to England with Bishop Feild and ends in May, 1850, just before his ordination to the priesthood. Since his death it has remained in the possession of the Rouse family until privately edited and published by his great-grandson, John C. Street, Professor of Linguistics at the University of Wisconsin. Further volumes of the diary, if any, have not survived, but this one illuminates personalities and problems from the point of view of a fairly ordinary missionary.

Street's superb typescript edition is very limited in quantity, and I regret to say this as it has good maps, excellent photographs, and ample notes which are a mine of information about certain aspects of nineteenth-century Newfoundland. Whether on the Central School in St. John's, Bishop Feild's church ship, the intricacies of ecclesiastical politics, events in Bay de Verde, or the details of church finance, Street is interesting, informative and accurate. His "Excursus Concerning the Rouse Family after 1850," which appears after the Diary and is well illustrated by family portraits, is also illuminating to those interested in Newfoundland and North America. It is a pity that there should be only thirty-six copies of such a meticulously scholarly volume.

Rouse confirms much that is known of the character of Bishop Feild. Quick to make up his mind himself, Feild gives the young man exactly two hours to decide whether to leave his wife and family and journey to England in the Newfoundland church ship. Feild, although keen to ordain Rouse to the priesthood as soon as possible, is nevertheless concerned that he should not offer himself for public examination before he can be sure of doing well. The bishop's common-sense approach to problems comes out strongly in diary entries.

22nd September 1847. I asked him whether I should hold a service in the School-room when unable to have it in the Church. He said that he could give no permission or order to that effect. I replied, "You do not object, then, to my doing so?" He answered, "No". He said the same with respect to the Sunday School.

Rouse is amused by Feild's attitude to illness. The bishop was never ill!

2nd August 1847. The Bishop asked Maria yesterday what she had been doing to me, to make me ill again. "I knew it would be so", said he, "as soon as he came again under your and Dr. Carson's care". Leave him to me and he'll do well enough.

He admired the bishop and quotes with approval one of the latter's relatives he visited while in England.

22nd February 1847. Having taken off my Garters I proceeded to the house of the Revd. Mr. Feild according to the appointment. He spoke highly of his cousin's (Dr. Feild's) humility—believed it was his earnest wish to do that which would most benefit his people, although he (Mr. F.) did not think his plans for bringing about this end to be always the most judicious—he didn't doubt but that he would learn wisdom from experience. Revd. Mr. F. farther said that his cousin could not have had any worldly motives in view in accepting the bishopric of Newfoundland seeing he possessed every comfort he could wish for at home.

But Feild's assertion of central control of church property made life very difficult for the missionary who had to implement his policy. Rouse was faced with the challenge at the very beginning of his ministry.

16th August 1847. Called on Mr. Bridge to receive instructions previously to my leaving for Bay de Verds. He said it was the Bishop's desire that I should have nothing to do with "Grates" [Cove]. I was not to marry, bury, baptize, or visit any of the people residing there till they had legally by a "deed of sale" made over the ground, on which their church stands, to the Bishop.

The Rev. John Roberts, perhaps the worst mischief-maker in Newfoundland church history, looms large in Rouse's early pages. During his turbulent career Roberts had quarrelled with the Church Missionary Society, had been dismissed as a Tractarian by the Newfoundland School Society, and in 1846 had reappeared in Newfoundland under the aegis of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. Feild said that "he could go no lower than Mr. Roberts" (USPG 1847) but was so short of missionaries that he had to accept even the very ignorant and semiliterate. He made Roberts a deacon and sent him to Bay de Verde, where he soon began to complain about hard work and an unpleasant environment. Putting on a show of persecuted evangelicalism he wrote to the *Record*, an English newspaper, and successfully created an uproar against Feild among the English evangelicals.¹ Having thus ensured discord

between the bishop and the Newfoundland School Society, Roberts was dismissed from Bay de Verde but refused to quit the mission. When Rouse arrived there in August 1847 Roberts continued to perform services in the schoolroom. There followed a highly comic period of friction which had the unfortunate effect of hindering Rouse's attempts to establish himself in his mission. Diary entries give the flavour of the squabble and show that mission work could attract not only the pious and able but also the eccentric.

1st September 1847. Wrote a note to Mr. Roberts requesting him to hand over the Register to me or the churchward(en)s. He wrote in answer that as soon as the ages of some children whom he baptized in March last were inserted he would send the book to me. Afterwards he wrote again saying that he wished me to understand that the book was not a regular "parish register"[,] "but merely a Blank book of a small size which was bought to enter the different events which take place from time to time [at] the Churches of Bay de Verds and Grates Cove". He adds in a postscript, "the law of the land, nor the law of the church cannot interfere with *such* a book, ergo I will allow no commanding in this case. The parties who will do so will be made to eat the fruit of their own way and the place will be too hot for them to remain in".

11th September 1847. Revd. Mr. Roberts wrote a note to Mr. Hutchings desiring him to send up for the old Bed, made with firewood, which was at our house, as he would not "give it to a man who had spoken against him". If I wouldn't pay him 3/- for it, he would burn it, "and says he, Let Rouse remember he has had the use of it, or at any rate, he has had it in his possession; why did he not send it away?" Barter said he made the greatest part of it.

But Rouse persevered, even though Roberts at first persuaded the people of Grates Cove to refuse him admission to their church, and his persistence was rewarded by the departure of Roberts and the undisputed possession of his mission. The people of Bay de Verde had from the first made him welcome.

21st August 1847. They have created a fowls' house etc. We shall, I think, be more comfortable here than in St. John's. We were much pleased with the Parsonage house. The Church is very bad.

22nd August 1847. Attended Sunday School; about 60 present. Had two services in the church, which were well attended. The singing is very bad. May God enable me to speak His words.

But it was not long before the difficult problem of church finance had to be faced. At a meeting of 5th September, held in church on a Sunday with the reluctant consent of Rouse, who accepted that no other time was available, those present agreed to give to the church at the rate of one half quintal of dried fish per male for those between the ages of twelve and seventy. This agreement, however, did not extend to support for the Church Society, which, administered centrally by the diocese, augmented the salaries of the clergy. Bishop Feild made it clear that missions which did not support the Church Society could expect no help from it. Rouse therefore had to keep up a steady

pressure for money.

16th December 1849. Sunday. This morning I published the names of five individuals as refusing to subscribe to the Church Society, viz., James Rodgers, Thomas Critch, David Pryor, Stephen Prendergast, and James King, and gave notice that they, nor their families would hence forth receive any benefit from the Ministrations of their Minister—that I would not baptize their children, church their women etc. May God overrule this for good, for the glory of His great name for his dear Son's sake.

The regulations said that the benefits of church membership should be refused only to those who while able to make a minimum contribution yet did not do so, but enforcing such regulations must have been an unpleasant and uphill task made all the harder because of the poverty of the people. Indeed, Rouse soon found himself, as an official administrator of poor relief, doling out meal and molasses to those who could prove destitution. He was not encouraged to be generous.

21st May 1849. Manning brought five barrels of Meal from the Government for the poor together with a letter from the Secretary directing that not more than 8 or 9 Lbs should be given to any man per day in order that they might not be encouraged to depend on [the] Government for relief.

By thus acting as an arm of the state, a situation common to ministers of religion in Newfoundland, Rouse was able to exert considerable influence if not power over his people.

His position was further enhanced by his medical skills. Like the Rev. John Clinch in the eighteenth century, Rouse tended his parishioners for a variety of ailments. He undertook not only the cure of souls but that of bodies.

1st September 1847. Gave a woman a receipt for pills for cough etc.

6th-8th April 1848. Called to see Sutton's wife, who is troubled with fits. . . . gave her some medicine, and then spoke at some length upon the necessity of examining herself as to her true state before God.

24th July 1848. Visited D. Pryor's child: it appears alarmingly ill—gave it some medicine, and ordered them to put its legs into warm salt-water. Endeavoured to impress on the minds of those present the necessity of improving the time which yet remains to the benefit of their souls.

13th June 1849. Blooded Ann Blundon—took about a pint.

Rouse's own health was uncertain and he could not insure his life because insurance companies based in England cited residence in Newfoundland as a ground for refusal to insure. Nevertheless he seems to have been always busy and the diary shows him gradually getting to know the people of Bay de Verde. He did not hesitate to rebuke them, taking a strong line on premarital sexual relations and insisting that the fathers of illegitimate children should contribute to their support. Yet he tried to fit into their lives and held special ser-

vices for those about to take part in the annual seal hunt. Although critical of Roman Catholicism he got on well with its local adherents. The diary shows how Rouse, by solid endeavour as administrator of poor-relief, doctor, and pastor, established himself in his mission.

Yet the diary lasts for only three years, while Rouse remained at Bay de Verde until 1869. He truly believed that "the trivial round, the common task, / Would furnish all we ought to ask" (Keble 3) and his life was like that. Ambitions recorded in the diary remained unfulfilled. He never obtained a share in the cemetery at Grates Cove which the Methodists claimed. He never built a new church and continued to worship in the schoolhouse. Yet he died a hero's death stricken by typhus while ministering to the sick. The *Newfoundland Times* published a lengthy obituary with the heading *Honour to Whom Honour*, paying tribute to one who had served in what it called the "dreary mission of Bay de Verds" (11 Sept 1869). He left behind a widow and four children.

After the text of the diary Street gives an account from sources in his possession of the later history of the Rouses. They remained closely linked with Newfoundland. Mrs. Maria Rouse supplemented the pension received from the Church Society's Fund for Clergy Widows and Orphans by acting as manager of the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge bookshop on Water Street, St. John's. In 1892 the fire destroyed her business and she joined her brother in California, where she stayed until her death in 1912. Her son, John, educated at the Church of England Academy, St. John's, and Bishop Stortford School in England, was financially supported at Keble College, Oxford, by Bishop Jones. There he obtained a first-class degree, the first Newfoundlander to do so, and after serving a curacy in Birmingham returned to St. John's as curate of St. Mary's Church. Called to the rectorship of Trinity Church, Chicago, he was well on the way to episcopal office when in 1897, at the age of thirty-four, he died of appendicitis. His sister Ann married the Rev. John G. Cragg, who became pastor of Bay de Verde in 1894. She returned there to find a new church and a new parsonage. Some of Oliver Rouse's hopes had been fulfilled.

Rouse's *Journal* and the accompanying material give an account of a typical North American missionary family. He was the descendant of clergymen, his son and son-in-law were clergymen, and his grandson was a bishop. They left their mark, they and all the other clergy who served as central figures in their communities, upon a continent. Street says "This book has been assembled partly out of what some may consider an exaggerated respect for the nineteenth century documents entrusted to my care, and partly in the hope that some of the information here presented may be of some interest to historians of the Anglican Church in Newfoundland" (360). The hope is justified.

Notes

¹*Record* [London] 19 Nov 1846, 26 Nov 1846, 30 Nov 1846, 3 Dec 1846, 15 Apr 1847, 19 Apr 1847, 29 Apr 1847, 2 May 1849, 14 Jun 1849. The *Record* was the leading Anglican Evangelical newspaper in England.

References

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