

## **Henry Alline: Problems of Approach and Reading the *Hymns* as Poetry**

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The cumbersome and rather vague title of this paper reflects a difficulty in reconciling its two focuses. Its primary concern is to discuss Henry Alline's verse in *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (Boston, 1784) as poetry, but it begins by raising the broader issue of finding appropriate approaches to early colonial North American literature, particularly to the poetry of the eighteenth century. In studies of more contemporary Canadian and American literature, it would appear unnecessary, even pedantic, to precede interpretation with an extended discussion of approach. Readers are more aware of the broad social, cultural and intellectual contexts out of which this literature emerged. Good or bad, it is granted a place in a recognized socio-cultural landscape that we accept as our own. Early colonial literature, however, does not have the benefit of this kind of critical support. As a result, the writers who produced this literature often appear emotionally and intellectually facile; their work, scattered across a remote and confused cultural terrain. Their efforts are treated more as documents reflecting patterns of social or literary history than as imaginative works providing insight into the emergence and evolution of an indigenous literature. Not surprisingly, little effort has been made to find approaches that give full credit to the creativity of writers like Henry Alline and that recognize the literary integrity of their work.

To begin with an admission that ignorance and guess-work are major components of the critical frame of reference shaping our understanding of our earliest literature is salutary. It implicitly calls into question some widely-held critical assumptions about the literary nature, intention and value of these works. Because we know so little about the cultural character of eighteenth-century colonial North America (particularly British North America), there is a tendency to assume that its literature was "occasional," written in a cultural vacuum, or worse, that it can only be viewed as seventeenth- or eighteenth-century British literature "writ small." There is no question colonial writers were influenced by British models; the evidence for that is easy to observe. The challenge for the literary scholar — certainly for one interested in Alline — is to understand more fully the cultural intention of this apparently imitative literature and to explore the possibility that the character of these colonial creations was significantly shaped by the intellectual, moral and emotional dimensions of the colonial social environments in which their authors lived and which they knew best.

Regrettably, not much helpful work has been done on how diverse cultural influences were absorbed by emerging colonial societies and translated into a dynamic, integrative force that worked to shape a sense of cultural integrity. By "cultural integrity" is meant the emergence of a complex of critical values (moral, spiritual, social, intellectual, imaginative) which, though perhaps inherently contradictory in some aspects, is perceived to be coherent and is given assent and recognition even while some features are the focus of dispute. While such values function explicitly as instruments of judgement and valuation defining communal norms, the process by which they develop implicitly involves a degree of intellectual tolerance for the sake of a sense of cultural cohesion.

It is the pattern of creative inclusion, not the pattern of intentional exclusion, that most profoundly shapes the character of emerging colonial cultures. This is particularly true for Canadian cultural experience. But most studies of the cultural development of early North America are concerned with cultural identity, not cultural integrity, and are pursued with an eye to justifying incipient nationhood, creating the false impression that there was a kind of cultural manifest destiny in colonial American societies. To identify the development of a sense of cultural integrity with the pursuit of national identity, or to view it simply as a frame of reference in which the processes of social cohesion and national identity unfold, ignores the inherent complexity of cultural activity in emerging colonial societies and the different roles it plays in articulating coherent and meaningful visions of life on which a society may be credibly founded.

As a point of departure, it is helpful to recognize that, in early colonial society and literature, there are at least two major currents of cultural activity evolving simultaneously but quite different in intention. To understand the effect and function of the literary efforts of colonial writers like Henry Alline, it is necessary to distinguish between these two cultural imperatives. One works to identify the particular character of the emerging society and functions in an exclusive manner to distinguish it from other societies; the other is inclusive and integrative, and works to tie the emerging society to a larger, universal frame of reference whose values have a legitimacy necessary to that society's sense of its own integrity. While these currents of cultural activity are related and overlap, the evolution of the values that shape cultural integrity diverge frequently and significantly from the pattern of values promoted and pursued in the process of shaping a sense of national identity. The necessary and usually urgent accommodation of the latter to political and economic forces is incidental to the former. Again, this is especially true in early colonial Canada (or what is now Canada). Cultural forms, including literature, were sometimes pressed into the service of articulating national identity, but they generally functioned to interpret broader worlds of cultural civility to colonial contexts while at the same time projecting the

particularities of colonial experience against universal patterns of life. In the process of expressing these relationships, a selective understanding and interpretation of both points of reference evolved, resulting in an assemblage of cultural values which suited the particular needs of that particular emerging society at that particular time without radically decoupling it from the cultural patterns, tradition, and heritage that gave it authority, validity and integrity. What we are lacking is a thorough understanding of the complexity of these colonial cultural assemblages and their subtle relationships to their sources. We simply do not understand how colonial cultural assumptions worked to tie colonial experience to a vision of universal civility while simultaneously acting as a resource to articulate the particular character of colonial life.

It means that, right from the start, there is a problem of finding appropriate cultural and literary contexts in which to read colonial literature. Out of necessity, we tend to latch onto whatever points of reference are most readily available. In Henry Alline's case, there is a significant body of historical and biographical information developed by historians over the last few decades.<sup>1</sup> It gives the reader much more secondary material than is usually available on a colonial writer, but the concerns and perspectives pursued by historians are not always helpful in approaching literary documents as literature. For example, the efforts of historians to come to terms with Alline's biography appear to have produced several versions of Henry Alline. There is the intense, complex, emotional personality, agonizing in the maelstrom of deeply felt religious conviction coupled with an equally strong sense of personal damnation. Then, there is the charismatic evangelical figure preaching a vision of religious life that had unintended political ramifications. On a less scholarly level, there is the dedicated church leader, a mythical, larger-than-life, proto-Baptist who could leap tall Anglicans and Methodists at a single bound, a veritable Paul Bunyan of revival enthusiasm. While these thumb-nail summaries of the historical Henry Alline may be somewhat unfair, there is not much in the prevailing biographical depictions of Alline that is very helpful in reading the *Hymns* as poetry.

A related, but more serious problem with historical studies is their tendency to treat Alline's verse as supporting documentation, adjuncts to the historical, biographical and/or theological hypotheses that are brought to it. Little effort is made to view the poems as imaginative documents with something to offer of their own. Such studies ignore the fact that the imaginative experience of poetry is not constrained by the limitations of historical opportunity or (in this case) even the logic of theology; it ranges beyond the literal and its insights must be sought there.

<sup>1</sup> Of particular note are J.M. Bumsted, *Henry Alline* (Toronto, 1971) and G. Stewart and G. Rawlyk, *A People Highly Favoured of God* (Toronto, 1972).

Of course, interpretation of imaginative expression has its own pitfalls and, ideally, one would like to be able to test and confirm insights and observations in the light of a broader understanding of the literary and cultural contexts in which the works were written. Lack of such points of reference throws us back on the poems themselves and a search for the elements of experience that trigger the poet's imagination.

In Alline's case, it is the energy that flows from tension and struggle — emotional, intellectual and spiritual — that appears to stimulate imaginative response. In his verse, significant experience begins in perceived tension, which is recognized emotionally, depicted as spiritual, and therefore approached intellectually through a theological frame of reference. Alline's infelt struggle with that tension becomes the context in which it is explored and his poetry becomes the medium in which it is most fully known. As an eighteenth-century poet, Alline works to contain, control and articulate that struggle in language and image in order to give it objective meaning and to communicate his understanding of that meaning, simply and clearly. The source of his language and imagery is evangelical religious experience.

It is tempting at this point to proceed by comparing Alline's work and spiritual experience to that of similar religious poets, Isaac Watt and Charles Wesley, for example. But to keep the focus clearly on Alline's imagination, it seems more appropriate to stay with him and begin by looking briefly at his work as a whole. His non-poetic publications consist of a number of sermons and two theological treatises. Scholarly opinion of his theology is not flattering but the unresolved logical inconsistencies that bother theologians are helpful to the literary critic. There is a fundamental tension in Alline's work that flows from a contradiction at the heart of his view of religious life, a tension which affects both his theological and poetic writings.<sup>2</sup> Theologically, he was drawn, on the one hand, toward pietistical views of religious experience, particularly those of the English theologian William Law, and particularly to the mystical and ascetic elements he found there. At the same time, he was moved by the theology of enthusiastic evangelism which demanded active, personal involvement in the proclamation of the gospel of salvation. The broad picture of religious life that emerges from Alline's work is one that turns on an implicit tension between the private character of its pietism and asceticism and the public nature of its evangelism. In his theological writings, Alline was unable to reconcile this duality in his perception of spiritual life. His vision of grace and of divine purpose appears ambiguous at best, and at worst, intellectually inconsistent. In his religious verse, however, this tension becomes a source of dramatic energy as he struggles to balance the

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2 Parts of the following discussion are based on my "Introduction" to *Selected Hymns and Spiritual Songs of Henry Alline* (Kingston, 1982).

private introspective element of his poetry with its public evangelical purpose. The poems that most clearly draw vitality and energy from this effort are those where the tension is channeled into depictions of religious experience as an emotional and spiritual struggle. Religious experience here unfolds in a post-lapsarian world where the potential for good and evil co-exist and meet in the human condition: man is the image of God, yet fallen; man can perceive perfection but is always conscious of his separation from it because of his inherent sinfulness.

Lord, what a wretched soul am I;  
In midnight shades I dwell;  
Laden with guilt, and born to die,  
And rushing down to hell.

\* \* \* \*

No hand but thine, O God of love,  
My wretched soul can save;  
O come, dear Jesus, and remove  
This load of guilt I have.

\* \* \* \*

Thy blood can wash my guilt away;  
Thy love my heart can cheer;  
O turn my midnight into day,  
And banish all my fear.<sup>3</sup>

The terms of expression are emotional, and dramatically so, but the level of consciousness is implicitly spiritual: man lives between the terrible misery of deserved damnation and the ecstatic joy of God's gift of salvation. The central image here which most fully expresses both dimensions of this spiritual dichotomy simultaneously is Christ on the Cross. In the image of the Crucifixion, Christ's agony is man's agony, and His triumph, man's salvation.

As near to Calvary I pass,  
Me thinks I see a bloody cross  
Where a poor victim hangs;  
His flesh with ragged irons tore,  
His limbs all dress'd with purple gore  
Gasping in dying pangs.

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3 "A Sinner Awakened," I:xxvi, stanzas 1, 3, 5, (p. 4). The Roman numerals identify the Book and Hymn numbers in the 1786 edition of Alline's *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*; the page reference in parenthesis refers to the 1982 *Selected Hymns and Spiritual Songs*.

Surpriz'd the spectacle to see,  
I ask'd, who can this victim be  
In such exquisite pain?  
Why thus consign'd to woes? I cry'd.  
"Tis I, the bleeding God reply'd.  
"To save a world from sin."<sup>4</sup>

In the poetry that depicts religious experience this way, Alline draws heavily on seventeenth-century English religious verse for his conceptual frame of reference, for his imagery, for his tone and mood. This is familiar ground. However, when he moves from focusing on spiritual struggle to exploring resolution of that struggle, he moves into new and rather different territory, both emotionally and imaginatively. Resolution here comes through acceptance of God's grace as manifested in the loving personality of Christ.

Hark! is my Jesus passing by?  
Methinks I hear him say:  
"Awake, arise, thy friend is nigh:  
"Rejoice and come away."  
O is it, is it Christ the Lamb?  
And does he call for me?  
I come, dear Jesus, glad I come;  
I long to be with thee.  
Let others choose the chains of death  
And tread the road to hell;  
In wisdom's ways I'll spend my breath,  
And with my Jesus dwell.

\* \* \* \*

Christ is my life, my joy, my love,  
And everlasting peace;  
He'll be my all in realms above  
When mortal climes shall cease.<sup>5</sup>

Christ is always at the centre of Alline's best verse, but the image of the crucified Christ and the self-conscious inner struggle it symbolizes gives way at times to a vision of the expansive love of Christ (the Christ of the new dispensation) and the willing service it solicits from man. Implicit in the focus on the person and personality of Christ, is the knowledge that Christ is the medium in which man most clearly perceives God's grace and

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4 "The Great Love of Christ Display'd in His Death," I:lix, stanzas 1-2 (p. 21).

5 "Delighted in the Lord," V:xxxvi, stanzas 1-3, 5 (pp. 9-10).

the means by which man most fully comprehends divine will. In Alline's poetry, the personality of Christ shapes the character of grace. In fact, Alline does not make sharp distinctions between God and Christ and grace. The theological complexities of the relationship between God and man are submerged in the personality of Jesus, a personality characterized by its openness, its approachability and its deep affection for man. The simple intimacy of man's relationship with Christ defines the character of God's love, God's grace, and inculcates a trust that invites simple resignation to the will of God. From acceptance of divine will flows peace, but it is a peace not easily attained and even harder to sustain once achieved. Doubt, willfulness, worldliness — all human weaknesses — undermine its stability and cast men back into the morass of mortal hopes and fears.

There's none can tell, or yet conceive  
What diff'rent scenes I'm carry'd through  
But those who know the Lord believe,  
Are born, and know the travels too.

Sometimes I think the Lamb of God  
Has spoke a word of peace to me,  
Has spent his life and spilt his blood,  
And bore my curses on the tree.

Then leaps my soul with joys divine,  
Long as feel the heav'nly flame;  
I think the blessed Lamb is mine  
And find a sweetness in his name.

But O how soon does unbelief  
Pretend it is too great for me!  
I never found that true relief  
Which real christians know and see.

Cast down, and mourning then I go,  
And feel the borders of despair;  
My bleeding heart o'erwhelm'd with woe  
Is drove from place to place with fear.

\* \* \* \*

And thus I'm tossed from hope to fear,  
As faith or unbelief prevails;  
But still my God is always near,  
Though clouds so oft his face may veil.<sup>6</sup>

At this point, there is a great temptation to freeze the picture: to see man as doomed by the weakness of his will to cycles of struggle, and as being essentially passive in the face of Christ's love. But the strength and confidence of the poet's voice (reflected in the tone of the poetry) suggests a degree of spiritual consciousness which goes beyond passivity into a condition that is active and creatively so. There is a point at which the dramatic energy generated by spiritual struggle is translated through the vision of Christ's love and the poet's imagination into what might be called the "adventure of discipleship." It implies active service, but the poetic focus here is not on evangelizing (that is in the background). The focus is on the working environment of discipleship: on the sense of the immediate presence of Christ, the special openness and approachability of his personality, and on the easy intimacy and freedom of the relationship that exists between the disciple (the speaker of the poem) and Christ.

All this unfolds against a backdrop of service and purpose, but the immediate focus of the poem offers an imaginative vision of life inside the circle of discipleship.

Should I be call'd to distant wilds,  
 Or station'd on some foreign shore,  
 If there I found my Saviour's smiles,  
 And liv'd with him, I'd want no more.

Tis all alike a heaven to me,  
 If I might there enjoy my God;  
 Cheerful I'd tread while Christ I see,  
 O'er rocks and hills by feet untrod.

\* \* \* \*

The moss should be my downy bed,  
 Through silent watches of the night,  
 And Jesus guard my slumbering head,  
 Till morning rays restore the light.

Then should my sweet and morning lays  
 Send echoes through the silent grove;  
 Jesus would hear the notes I raise;  
 My song should be redeeming love.<sup>7</sup>

It is as tangible and intimate as the love of Christ gets in Alline's poetry, and the confidence, the hope, and the faith that flows from it are reflected in the calm strength of the voice of the poet.

The ultimate reward of this "adventure of discipleship" appears to be the

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7 "The Christian Happy in Any Place, if They Enjoy God's Presence," III:lxxxv, stanzas 1-2, 4-5 (p. 36).



attainment of "humility of spirit." It is a condition of being that is positive and active, yet without conflict, tension free.

O for the spirit of the Dove,  
To bow this heart of mine!  
Lord let my soul enjoy thy love,  
And find a peace divine.

O for the meekness of the Lamb,  
To walk with thee, my God!  
Then should I feel thy lovely name,  
And feed upon thy word.

Jesus, I long to love thee more,  
And life divine pursue;  
I love thy worship, name adore,  
In songs forever new.<sup>8</sup>

This humility or "meekness" seems to imply an imaginative fusion of evangelism and pietism. It is the "pilgrim's" dream of becoming Christ-like through living the life of Christ in service to Christ. As such, it represents a reconciliation of both public and private religious imperatives. For Alline, his poetry itself was a part of this process, and in his best verse there is a "meekness" in the tone of the voice of the poet that the reader must hear for him or herself.

It is interesting to explore the patterns of Alline's religious experience and to see how in poetry he was able to resolve and articulate imaginatively aspects of experience that he was unable to express in theology. Moreover, to some extent, demonstrating something of the complexity of Alline's imagination and art elevates the dignity of early colonial verse. But what is missing from this reading is an insight into how Alline's imaginative patterns of tension, struggle and resolution in his religious verse reflect the broad character of colonial imaginative experience discernible in other dimensions of colonial cultural life. We sense a coherent vision of experience in the patterns we see, but we do not know how meaningful that vision may be. This is where our lack of a fuller understanding of the cultural dynamics of colonial life is crippling. We cannot judge how instructive Alline's poetic vision is in giving us insight into the conceptual nature and order of his cultural world. We know his verse performs a cultural function in his own time to the extent that it coherently interprets the relationship between particular experience in colonial Nova Scotia and universal reality as his readers perceive it. But we have no scholarly context in which to evaluate the sophistication and appropriateness of his vision. We also know that his art should perform a cultural function in our time to

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8 "Longing for Meekness and Humility," II:lxxxviii (p. 18).

the extent that it offers particular insight into a continuum of human perceptions which is pertinent to our understanding of ourselves. In a real sense, our failure to understand Alline's poetry as fully as we might is a serious cultural deficiency for it is a reflection of our failure to understand ourselves as fully as we might.