CHAPTER SEVEN

AIMEE SEMPLE MCPHERSON: ‘SHOT IN THE ARM’ FOR FRENCH-CANADIAN PROTESTANTISM

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on one small segment of Canadian Pentecostal evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson’s long, influential, and controversial ministry that merited little more than a paragraph in Edith Blumhofer’s biography – the series of meetings in Montreal in December 1920 and the role this event played in the context of francophone Protestantism in Canadian history.\(^1\) The early Pentecostal movement in North America was essentially borderless. Canadians like Robert E. McAlister, Andrew H. Argue, and Aimee Semple McPherson were early pioneers of the Pentecostal movement that were influential on both sides of the Canada-US border. McPherson became an American cultural and religious icon and could easily have been described (although she was not) as America’s sweetheart. That description was already taken to describe Gladys Louise Smith, better known as Mary Pickford, another Canadian. McPherson travelled widely from the 1920s through to the 1940s attracting thousands upon thousands of followers. She was based in the United States but she never forgot her Canadian roots. This chapter describes her role as catalyst to the fledgling French-Canadian Pentecostal movement in Quebec. Her meetings in Montreal were an historical highlight that not only gave wings to the movement in Quebec but reversed the tide of the dying French-Canadian evangelical movement to make it one

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\(^1\) Blumhofer, *Aimee Semple McPherson*, 154. Another well-received biography is Epstein, *Sister Aimee*. The two preceding books spend much time with McPherson's early life. Matthew Avery Sutton's *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America* on the other hand focuses on the evangelist's last fifteen years, especially her status as an American cultural icon and religious celebrity. Sutton explores her role in converging religion, entertainment, and patriotism and argues specifically that she began the melding of patriotism, American culture, and Pentecostalism.
that has experienced continual growth ever since. The social and historical context of francophone Protestants in Canada will be presented after which the reasons for the decline of francophone Protestantism at the beginning of this century will be outlined. Subsequently, the argument put forth here is that Aimee Semple McPherson’s meetings in 1920 should be considered a major turning point for it not only contributed to the expansion of the Pentecostal movement in Quebec, it also breathed new life into a dying francophone evangelical movement in Canada.

The Three Waves of French-Canadian Protestant Expansion

Scholars of French-Canadian Protestantism have hypothesized about and referred to three different waves of French-Canadian Protestant expansion in Canadian history. The first wave was the Huguenot presence in the founding of New France. The social and political context of the time as well as Roman Catholic hegemony did not permit Protestant expansion by any other means but by immigration. The total number of French Protestants right up until 1760, the time of the British Conquest, was probably no greater than 1000 and even this small number was not reached without difficulty because of opposition from Catholic clergy.

The second wave of French-Canadian Protestant expansion began with the arrival of Swiss missionaries Henriette Feller and Louis Roussy who founded the Grande Ligne Mission in 1835, the first permanent mission whose objective was the evangelization of francophones in North America. This wave includes the evangelizing efforts of the French-Canadian Missionary Society, an interdenominational body begun in 1839. The Presbyterians had already formed a

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2 Smith, ed. *Histoire du protestantisme au Québec depuis 1960* and “Towards a Contextual Praxis for the Urban French World,” 80–87. For further study into francophone Protestantism in Canada a good place to start is Lalonde’s *Des loups dans la bergerie*. It provides an overview of French-speaking Protestant history in Quebec and includes much of recent scholarship on the subject. A brief overview of the available scholarship on the subject can also be found in my article “FLITE,” 49–88.


4 Strout *The Latter Years of the Board of French Evangelization of the Presbyterian Church in Canada*, 2.

5 Strout, 8.