

ST. MATTHEW'S HISTORICAL VIGNETTE

George Monro Grant

Minister 1863-1877

To remind you, George Monro Grant was born in Albion Mines (Stellarton), Pictou County, NS in 1835. After being ordained into the ministry of the Church of Scotland in 1861, he was called to the St. Matthew's congregation in Halifax, NS, where he was minister from 1863 to 1877. He quickly gained a high reputation as a preacher and as an eloquent speaker on political subjects. In 1867, Nova Scotia was the province most strongly opposed to federal union. Grant threw the whole weight of his great influence in favour of Canadian confederation, and his oratory played an important part in securing the success of the movement.

One of his parishioners was Sandford Fleming, a Scottish-born surveyor and engineer who in 1858 first proposed a coast to coast railway line spanning all of British North America. The timing was not quite right then, but a few years later, he was appointed as the sole engineer to supervise the survey of the proposed Intercolonial Railway, linking the Maritime provinces with Quebec. He moved to Halifax during the construction of the railway where he built a house (now Fleming Park, or the Dingle), He attended St. Matthew's and became a lifelong friend of George Grant.

When the Canadian government decided to build the rail link to the Pacific Ocean, the job of surveying the route fell to Fleming. In 1872, he organized an expedition to the Pacific and invited George Grant to accompany him as Secretary, which he did. You may wonder why a city pastor and preacher would agree to participate in such a dangerous and arduous journey. Grant subsequently wrote a book "Ocean to Ocean, Sandford Fleming's Expedition through Canada in 1872, by the Rev George M Grant of Halifax, NS". He explained in the book "the writer knew little or nothing of our North-west before accompanying the expedition. To find out something about the real extent and resources of our Dominion...was the object that attracted a busy man from his ordinary work, on what friends called an absurd and perilous enterprise.." The proposed trip would cover over 5000 miles, a great part of it over country unknown, and thus supposed to be dangerous country. (This would be comparable to Rev. Betsy Hogan requesting leave of absence to travel to the moon!)

Grant reported that the party of 7 (all men) completed the trip from Halifax to Victoria in record time, travelling by rail, steamer, wagon, horseback, canoe..."no one suffered from Indians, wild beasts, the weather, or any of the hardships expected in travelling in a new and lone land. Every one was physically better on his return than when he had set out". The party returned to the east coast by rail across the American prairies (the Americans having already accomplished the spanning of the continent to the south). Grant returned to Halifax by November 2 of that year, having travelled 9-10,000 miles in 4 months.

In his book, Grant wrote glowingly of the physical features of the country through which they passed, "from the sea-pastures and coal-fields of Nova Scotia and the forests of new Brunswick...on to the mountains which open their gates to lead us to the Pacific...over all this we had travelled". He included details of the land, forest, with an eye to future farming, mining, development, and of course building of the railway. "We are satisfied that the rugged and

hitherto unknown country extending from the Upper Ottawa to the Red River of the North, is not impractical for a Railway, but entirely the reverse..." He displayed a deep understanding of the relationship of the aboriginals to their land, and wrote of the need to make fair and just treaties with them.

Grant's book was enthusiastically received, and played a role in encouraging the settling of the West. He wrote: "A great future beckons us as a people onward. To reach it, God grant to us purity and faith, deliverance from the lust of personal aggrandizement, unity, and invincible steadfastness of purpose. The battles we have to fight are those of peace, but they are not the less serious, and they are surely nobler than those of war".

Imagine the sermons George Grant must have preached when he returned home to St. Matthew's!