Book Reviews


The opening sentence in the introduction to the Journals states that “Robert Terrill Rundle has had a poor press.” This is surely a gross understatement; probably one out of a thousand Methodists in the United States ever heard of this man who gave of himself so unstintedly for the cause of Methodist missions in the western prairies of Canada (into Saskatchewan) for nine years. He was related (on his mother’s side) to the famous Methodist lay preacher, William Carvosso, as well as to the Reverend Benjamin Carvosso, prominent minister in England and at one time a missionary in New South Wales. Their memoirs, however, reveal little or nothing about the Rundle family.

Robert T. Rundle went into Canada under an agreement that existed between the Hudson’s Bay Company and the Wesleyan Missionary Society, later the Canada Methodist Conference. From the Journals, carefully kept if not so carefully preserved, and from the excellent introductory essay to the Journals, it is evident that while there was cooperation between these two agencies, there was considerable internal difficulty among the Society itself in Canada. When one has finished reading the Journals, one gets the impression that Rundle either did not know about these difficulties or he chose to omit reference to them in his personal memoirs. Because of diversion of interests and perhaps even lack of integrity among the leaders of the Society, Rundle practically became an institution in himself. The major portion of his difficulties centered around his determination to carry the Gospel to the Indians in the way he thought most effective; and this could have caused problems that led to excessive loneliness in the
Canadian wilderness due, one gathers, from lack of communication or neglect.

Rundle was not the ordinary missionary hero in the sense that every movement he made involved sensational experiences with heroic results. He served the Company, finding the far outposts of great value as points for recruitment as well as recuperation from the long journeys that he had to make from place to place. He preached, read the liturgy, worked very hard in mastering the Indian language (the Cree language in particular). But the overall picture of the man and his work is that of a committed Christian seeking to carry the Gospel to the Indians in the wilderness settlements (rather than remaining within the Bay outposts). And here lay the difficulty that developed to envelop his entire mission: His superiors in the Wesleyan Society apparently intended that Rundle spend the major portion of his time ministering to those who lived in the Bay "Houses" (outposts). Rundle not only disagreed with this policy; he violated it. His work within the Bay posts was absolutely sincere as well as effective (his Journals included a well-documented record of baptisms, marriages, funerals, and other services both within and beyond the outposts).

But Rundle wanted to live among the Indians, to preach to them where they lived, to mingle with them, learn their language and customs. In the Bay outposts there was great difficulty involving Roman Catholic priests and missionaries. He had trouble also with interpreters: at times he felt they were not translating his messages correctly. At other times, he could not keep the interpreter's loyalty to him constant. Thus he was forced to preach and teach in another language than that which the Indians used (there were several tribes in the scattered settlements, and they used various dialects) until he could master the language.

The result of these difficulties was that Rundle went to the Indian settlements, often without permission from superiors who had indicated the dangers involved in such a procedure. He was to stay at the Houses, travel from one to the other, but
not evangelize in the Indian settlements. That this was poor practice is evident in Rundle's own experience; the greatest physical difficulty he ever experienced, other than the extremities of the weather, was a broken arm. He was never attacked by an Indian.

Rundle's diary was not written for the public eye, though his noble sense of discretion marks every entry as honest. He does not make out his life in Canada to be of greatest difficulty physically. About the nearest he ever came to violence on the part of the Indians was a burned-out camp site in which violence had occurred. Extreme cold, loneliness, but nothing approximating a massacre, are mentioned in the Journals. But the suffering was spiritual. Rundle must have seen opportunities for service blocked in several ways. He had to wonder what the ultimate end might be. Toward the conclusion of the Journals, in his account of the last two years, he shows that he expected to be relieved by furlough; but it never happened.

The writer feels that those of the Historical Society of Alberta are to be congratulated for the excellent work they have done in transcribing the rough notes (often mere abbreviations) of the Journals; the incorporation of a corrected section of the Journals by Rundle's daughter Mary (known as the Banft Document, cf. p. 1xi); and otherwise doing a masterful job of presenting the life and labors of a devoted servant of God. It is the most vivid and accurate account of successful evangelization of the American Indian that this writer has ever read. Presumably the second volume of the Journals will deal with Rundle's work at home (England), for he never returned to Canada. Nor did he complete plans to work in Australia. His Journals indicate that he never forgot those whom he loved and served in Christ's vineyard in Canada. Nor was he forgotten by those who were brought to Christ under his ministry.

James H. Overton
Elon College