



**54 WEST GATE
UNIVERSITY WOMENS' CLUB
(RALPH CONNOR HOUSE)**

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

15 November 1982

**54 WEST GATE
UNIVERSITY WOMENS' CLUB
(RALPH CONNOR HOUSE)**

For three decades this riverbank mansion in Armstrong's Point was the home of author Ralph Connor. Using this pseudonym, as was the fashion of the day, Reverend William Gordon became Canada's best-selling novelist.¹

Charles Gordon was born in Glengarry County, Upper Canada, in 1860. The child of a fiery Presbyterian preacher and a good-natured scholarly mother, the youngster was raised to trust in God, love his neighbour and work for his daily bread. To pay tuition, Charles and the other children hired themselves out to local farmers for summer labour. His undergraduate years at the University of Toronto in 1880-83 were divided between scholastic and athletic interests. After a year of teaching, Charles entered theology at Knox College and upon completion of his studies, he and his brother toured Scotland, the ancestral homeland, and Europe.²

Gordon's first ministerial appointment was to Banff in 1890. Here, his parishioners were ranchers, railroaders, miners and cowboys, where alcohol compounded the problems of crude conditions, loneliness and isolation. He managed to reach many of these men, and certainly experienced enough adventures to fuel his first novel later. After four years of circuit preaching by horseback, the young minister was appointed to St. Stephen's Church (now Elim Chapel) in Winnipeg's west end.

Before coming to his Winnipeg posting, Charles Gordon spent another year in Scotland raising money for the Canadian missions. In the same vein, Gordon was asked to write an article for a church publication about his adventures in the west, again to rally support. Pleading on the part of his publisher compelled Gordon to extend the articles into a book, Black Rock (1897). Because writing a novel was hardly appropriate for a Presbyterian minister,³ Gordon used the name Ralph Connor,⁴ thereby launching an accomplished literary career.

Through contact with an American publisher, George H. Doran, Connor released two more novels within three years, The Sky Pilot (1898) and his famous The Man From Glengarry (1901). Total

issue for these two books was over five million copies.⁵

In all, Connor wrote 25 novels as well as his autobiography, Postscript to Adventure (1937). His books were parable-like narratives of adventures in the frontiers of early Ontario and the prairie west. Often, the protagonist was pitted against physical hardship, triumphing with the inner strength that comes from moral fibre. Readers enjoyed learning about the new west, which was then attracting a great deal of attention, and enjoyed the peek at vice which Connor hinted at before the resolution. It was also a period of great optimism, and Connor's novels always expressed his unshakeable faith in human nature. Besides, his wicked characters were generally converted rather than forsaken.⁶

Ralph Connor's novels were circulated around the world, giving him an extended readership and considerable personal influence. Several generations of school children across Canada read the two Glengarry books.⁷ Reprints of several of his books by McClelland and Stewart have placed Connor near the thirty million mark, making him one of Canada's best-selling authors.

How do Ralph Connor's novels stand up to modern literary criticism? Desmond Pacey describes his characters as shallow and utterly predictable, the plots as improbable and melodramatic, and the muscular Christianity which his heroes proffer lacking in theological or ethical subtlety.⁸ His novels reflected their time, and were clearly enormously popular with his contemporaries in the English-speaking world.

Still a dedicated cleric, the Reverend Charles Gordon never permitted his writing to take him away from his vocation. Nominally the pastor of St. Stephen's, which moved to Broadway site in 1928, Gordon was committed to the changing role of the church in twentieth century society. The salient problems of the day: immigration, urban poverty and prohibition captured his energy and time, with his remarkable ability to preach effectively as his main weapon. Both before and after the war, Gordon worked as arbitrator to industrial disputes in which his success spoke well for his understanding and skill.

In 1899, Gordon married Helen King, a woman of equally strong faith and energy as her husband. Together they raised a family of six daughters and a son. When World I began in 1914, Gordon went overseas as a padre, with his wife's full support.⁹ At the age of 54, Gordon spent the next year in the trenches in France until matters at home called him overseas. Having grown very wealthy from his literary career, Gordon was dismayed to discover that the real estate investments made in his absence had perished. Far from being a millionaire, he was now in debt.

The Gordons built their large riverbank home in 1913 and moved in quite literally on the eve of war. Upon his return Gordon worked all the harder to recoup his finances. He toured Canada and the United States on behalf of Prime Minister Borden to raise support for the allied cause. In 1920, Gordon was appointed chairman of the Joint Council of Industry, a labour negotiation board, which dealt with 117 cases in its three years of existence.¹⁰ In 1921, the Presbyterian Church of Canada elected Charles Gordon as Moderator to garner support for their entry in church union with the Methodists. Once again, Gordon stumped the country and brought thousands over to his camp by virtue of his clear commitment and powerful oratory. The United Church of Canada came into existence in 1925.

Throughout these years, Ralph Connor used his experiences as material for his novels, which were inevitably personal and topical, and covered a range of social issues. Church work, writing and involvement with the League of Nations in 1932 occupied his time and many honours were bestowed upon him.

The Gordon family home, with its seven children and swirling activity, was a warm centre for the busy minister. The Gordon children all attended university, and two were recognized with honorary degrees by the University of Manitoba for their contributions.

Charles Gordon died 31 October 1937. He was a man of great energy and strong obligations tempered with a genuine love for his fellow man. From his books and speeches, we can see his

middle-class bias and rigid values but unquestionably he was a leader in his time. His life's work was recognized with a provincial government plaque at St. Stephen's Broadway Church.

The Gordon home at 54 Westgate was the design of architect George W. Northwood. Although he designed several fine buildings on his own in the early years.¹¹ Northwood is best known for his partnership with C.W.U. Chivers. Northwood and Chivers were Winnipeg's chief architects of the late 1920s and 1930s, and their work reflects the popular art deco style. Their best known works are the Canadian Wheat Board (1929), the Winnipeg Auditorium (1932) and the Federal Building at 269 Main (1935). A graduate of McGill University, George Northwood was elected a fellow of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada in 1936 but soon after entered the field of business. When he died in 1959, he was president of the Canadian Mortgage Company.¹²

Northwood teamed with the prominent contracting firm of J. McDiarmid to construct the Gordon residence. With dimensions of 67 feet by 62 feet, the three-storey house is brick on a foundation of concrete and stone. Estimated to cost \$29,000, the final figure for its construction was closer to \$50,000,¹³ which makes it one of the city's most expensive houses to date. A garage erected at the rear of the property for \$2,000 was more in keeping with average house prices at the time, but this garage also contained an apartment facing the river.¹⁴

In massing and roofline, the style of the Gordon house is chateau, but individual elements were borrowed from other orders. The architect made considerable use of the contrast between the fossiliferous limestone of the base and windows and the warm red-brown hues of the brick, the whole further set off by the whites of the window mullions and the bracketed eaves. While the front entrance is formal and ponderous, the carriage entrance on the side, which is less formal, was used more by the Gordon household. A two-storey veranda and sleeping porch on the south-west corner provides balance to the rear elevation but is otherwise out of tune with the rest of the house.

The interior of the house is equally formal. Bay windows faced in stone look to front and rear with the living room and the dining rooms both leading from the centre hall. There is a den or office, a

library, a sunroom and a second living room in the public areas, all finished in warm wood with beamed ceilings and fireplaces. Leaded-glass windows and bookshelves are featured on appropriate places. The rooms are well lit and spacious. The kitchen and serving areas are scaled for a family with servants.

A double return staircase provides an inglenook that was an architectural cliché at the time. The second floor has several large bedrooms and a sunroom. Rooms on the third floor reflect the varied roofline, and are smaller. There is a second staircase.

The very size of the magnificent house was nearly its downfall. When Charles Gordon died in 1937, the family agreed to dispose of the home, which was burdened quite heavily with back taxes. When the trust company found it impractical to split into suites, the City of Winnipeg took it over. Intending it for demolition, the City was glad when a feasible tenant appeared: the University Womens' Club.

The UWC was formally chartered in May 1909 as a vehicle for the new outgoing professional woman. Its early membership included such activists as Lillian Benyon Thomas and Dr. Mary Crawford. Besides the lighter aspects of social and literary functions, the University Womens' Club sponsored meetings with such figures as J.S. Woodsworth, Nellie McClung and the famous British suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst.¹⁵ They pressured the government on its Dower legislation and contributed toward the formation of a minimum wage law.

This was an organization of a different nature to most other womens' groups. In the struggle for the vote and prohibition, middle-class women banded together for strength and discovered the rewards of joint action. This was the institutionalizing of their new camaraderie, without the need of a proclaimed cause. It was an intellectual break from the 'womens' auxiliary' state of mind. Without question it was private, vaguely elitist and thoroughly middle-class. While espousing limited reformist aims, the ladies stayed clear of the kind of change demanded by society's radical groups.

After years of meeting in rented rooms, it was a major commitment for the University Womens'

Club to rent the Gordon House, but the gamble paid off. Within six years of the club's formal opening in May 1939, membership in the UWC tripled.¹⁶ On a shoestring budget, the group furnished the house and kept 10 rooms for private residences. With space to pursue different areas of interest, the UWC flourished. A book group met to discuss literature, while groups to study music, art, poetry, legal problems and child psychology were formed. A scholarship fund, input into study groups on a range of issues and the recognition and support of women's contributions to society form the basis of the serious work of the UWC today. The membership is now at around 500 women.

Responding to pressure by the City, the UWC purchased the former Gordon house in 1945, then undertook alterations to make the clubhouse specifically suited to their needs. A crisis occurred in 1962 when the third floor partially collapsed, dropping a ton of plaster in the second storey. The situation had seemed previously to be in hand when a steel beam was run under the ground floor the year before.¹⁷ Tie rods were used to restore the upper floor structure but it looked for a while like the house may have to come down. It survived that crisis but the house continues to settle on its riverbank site.

Despite the financial burden that these problems placed on the organization, the University Women's Club have done a fine job of maintaining the house. They have consistently kept it in a good state of repair, maintained the interior much as it was and have cherished the fine woods and other ornamentation that make the house a showpiece. In 1976, Heritage Canada commended the conservation of the house with a plaque, proudly displayed on the front of the building.

Both the exterior and the interior of the house have retained a great deal of its original fabric. The carriage entrance on the east side has been removed, and adaptive reuse has made for limited alterations to the interior. In fact the house is remarkably similar to its condition in 1914. For twenty-five years it was the home of Reverend Charles Gordon, a social activist, leading churchman and one of Canada's most famous authors. Since 1938, the mansion has been the location of the University Women's Club, a fitting adaptation to the modern era for this symbol of Winnipeg's early

urban prominence.

FOOTNOTES--

1. Beth Paterson "Ralph Connor and His Million-dollar Sermons" MacLean's Magazine 15 November 1953, p. 26.
2. Keith Wilson Charles William Gordon Peguis Publishers Winnipeg 1981 p. 3-8.
3. Novels were generally viewed as a cheap and vaguely tawdry literary form to be eschewed by 'proper' people. See Victor E. Neuberg Popular Literature. A History and Guide Penguin Books Ltd. Great Britain 1977 p. 217-234.
4. Charles W. Gordon Postscript to Adventure Farrar & Rinehart New York 1938 p. 149.
5. Ibid., p. 150.
6. Desmond Pacey Creative Writing in Canada Greenwood Press Connecticut 1952 p. 105.
7. Paterson, op. cit., p. 26.
8. Ibid., p. 104.
9. Postscript, op. cit., p. 212.
10. Wilson, op. cit., p. 40.
11. The Heubach house on Park Boulevard, the Northern Crown Bank, and the second Assiniboine Park Pavilion.
12. "George W. Northwood Dead at 83" Winnipeg Free Press 15 December 1959.
13. City of Winnipeg Building Permit No. 2053 18 July 1913. Occupancy was permitted as of 30 October 1914.
14. Ibid., No. 4014 4 December 1913.
15. Elsie Moore and Avis Clark McWilliams 1909-1959 University Women's Club p. 4 & 5.
16. Op. cit., p. 11.
10. Edith Paterson "Connor House May Close" Winnipeg Free Press 31 May 1962.

54 WEST GATE – UNIVERSITY WOMENS' CLUB (RALPH CONNOR HOUSE)



Plate 1 – R. Connor House, 54 West Gate during construction in 1914. This is the carriage entrance, now removed, on the east side. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 2 – The rear elevation from the river. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

54 WEST GATE – UNIVERSITY WOMENS' CLUB (RALPH CONNOR HOUSE)



Plate 3 – 54 Westgate from where the Maryland Bridges now stand, ca.1915. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

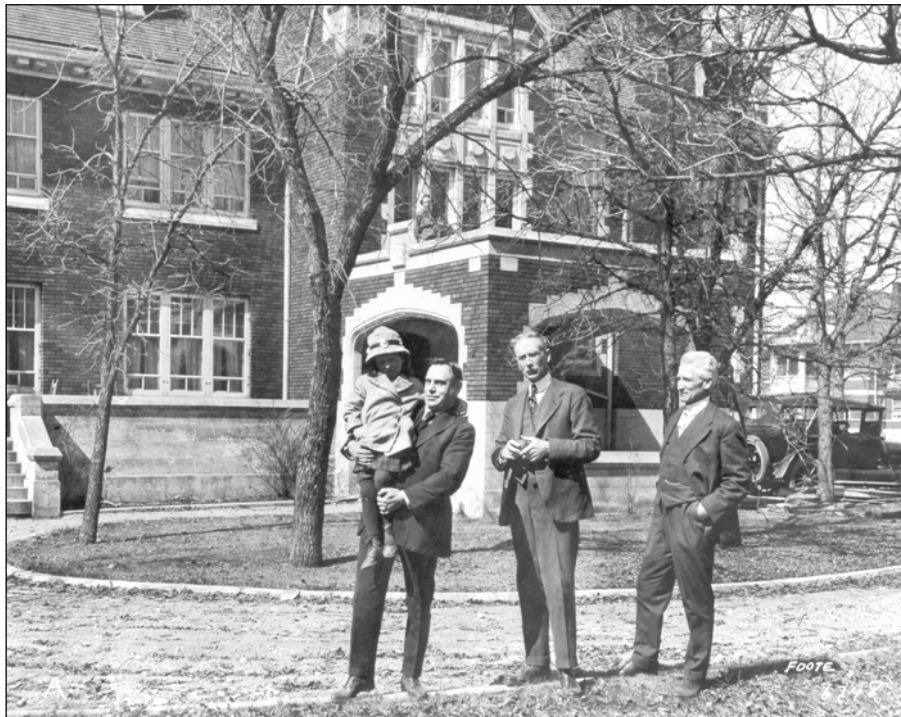


Plate 4 – The Rev. Charles Gordon, centre, with friends, April 1920. One of the Gordon daughters is on the balcony over the carriage entrance. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

54 WEST GATE – UNIVERSITY WOMENS' CLUB (RALPH CONNOR HOUSE)



Plate 5 – A remarkable fireplace in the Ralph Connor Room of the University Womens' Club, 1951. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 6 – The sunroom, 1934. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

54 WEST GATE – UNIVERSITY WOMENS' CLUB (RALPH CONNOR HOUSE)



Plate 7 – The drawing room, 1934. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)