Series Editors:

Terry Cook
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Gabrielle Blais
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Cover photo: Barrington Meeting House, Nova Scotia, the only building extant in which Henry Alline is known to have preached. Courtesy of the Nova Scotia Information Service.
HENRY ALLINE
AND
MARITIME
RELIGION

D.G. Bell

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Among several thousand land-hungry New Englanders who swarmed northward early in the 1760s to settle the fertile dykelands and inviting fishing harbours of the Maritimes was a twelve-year-old Rhode Island lad whom amazed contemporaries came to regard as "the apostle of Nova-Scotia." In his own short lifetime Henry Alline was revered by some and reviled by others as a heart-melting preacher and writer of popular hymns and spiritual songs, whose evangelistic labours touched off a generation-long "Great Awakening" in the late eighteenth-century Maritimes. Two centuries after his death, a lingering "personal" remembrance of Alline the revivalist remains part of Maritime oral tradition. Though children are no longer named for him, his hymns are still sung in New Brunswick's Upper St. John Valley by people who, in the main, have never seen one in print. On a larger stage, Alline's powerful Journal — now ranked among the classics of North American spirituality — has become an increasingly popular vehicle for communicating to a contemporary audience his intense, often rhapsodic, Christian witness. Like Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress and Charles Wesley's hymns, Alline's narrative of spiritual travail has a force and integrity that transcends time and place.

Even the striking witness of the Journal might not have earned Alline notice in the late twentieth century were it not for his role in developments which influenced deeply the historical development of northeastern North America, in both religious and secular affairs. Though himself a Newlight Congregationalist, Alline shaped the emergence of three nineteenth-century Baptist denominations — one American and two Canadian. His extensive theological writings played a brief but pivotal role in the evolution of New England's Freewill Baptist sect. In the Maritime colonies, Alline's continuing influence was felt less in his written legacy than his vivid evangelical inspiration. He served, albeit unwittingly, as spiritual pathbreaker for both the Free Christian and Calvinist varieties of Baptist. So rich was the harvest of souls reaped in his wake that the Maritimes remain Canada's Baptist heartland.

Alline's career also attracts continuing historical interest because the spiritual upheaval he triggered coincided with the political and military crisis of the American Revolution. For several decades in the mid-twentieth century, historians sought to find and understand the link between the Maritimes' ambiguous response to the American revolutionary upheavals of the 1770s and 1780s and the contemporary Allinite religious "reformation." One line of argument suggests that Alline was
able to transmute popular confusion at being sidelined in the revolutionary turmoil into the distinctive, if insular, Maritime identity that is still evident two centuries later. Such conclusions are necessarily speculative. What cannot be denied is his role in moulding Maritime religious culture for generations after his death. Thereby Alline ranks as the first great figure in Canadian Protestantism. The revival of his reputation in the twentieth century confirms him as one of its towering presences.

“MELTED DOWN WITH LOVE”

In considering the lives of great people, it is natural to look to their youth for early signs of the brilliance to come. In Alline’s case the marks of precocity are abundant. He was born in the spring of 1748 at Newport in the British province of Rhode Island, the most southerly and diverse of the New England colonies. His parents, though not above the average in wealth, were able to send their younger son early to school. Here his “uncommon gifts and powers of mind” soon made him “something forward in learning.” Formal schooling terminated prematurely in 1760, at age twelve, when after “long consultation” his parents joined the wave of thousands of migrants flocking northward into Nova Scotia.

Though a British colony since the conquest of 1710, Nova Scotia — then including the present Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick — had never served as an outlet for surplus population in the New England colonies. A century of recurring warfare between Great Britain and France, and their Indian allies, as well as the presence of the large and mistrusted French-speaking Acadian population, kept New Englanders away. With the collapse of French power in North America in 1755-60, however, the military hazards of settling in Nova Scotia were removed. More importantly, expulsion of the region’s Acadian farmers from the dykelands of the Annapolis Valley and Cumberland Basin in the later 1750s emptied the colony’s most fertile lands. When Governor Charles Lawrence proclaimed free farms and other assistance and guaranteed freedom of religion ("Papists excepted"), ambitious New Englanders found the terms wonderfully attractive. As with most eighteenth-century population movements into the Maritime region, the New England exodus to Nova Scotia was a group rather than an individual process. Parties of intending migrants formed in particular areas, sailed northward together, and settled collectively in distinct townships. Some set down in Liverpool, Barrington, and Yarmouth and other convenient fishing harbours on the colony’s Atlantic coast; many more went to farm the newly-vacant Acadian lands of the Bay of Fundy shore. Among the latter were the Allines.
William and Rebecca Alline and their eight children were part of the company of upwards of one-hundred Rhode Island and Connecticut migrants who relocated to Falmouth township (near Windsor) on the shore of Minas Basin in the spring and summer of 1760. Though it was intended that the settlers form a compact community and have the benefit of centrally-located worship and schooling, the inhabitants of Falmouth preferred to build houses on their farm rather than on their less isolated “town” lots. The early years were rather precarious. More than once, Henry’s youthful imagination was stirred by reports that Indians “were about rising to destroy us;” by the mid 1760s, however, the Yankee settlers of Nova Scotia, though poor, had attained many attributes of permanency. Chief among these was a settled minister. Though the northward migration included Quakers, Scotch Presbyterians and a few Baptists, most arrivals were adherents of one of the varieties of Congregationalism, the religion predominating in New England.

As its label suggests, Congregationalism reposed ultimate spiritual authority not in bishops or in presbyteries of ordained ministers, but in the members of each particular “church,” which was defined strictly to include only that relatively small portion of a congregation which had related a conversion experience and been accepted into membership. In theory, Congregationalism was both intensely experiential and intensely democratic, but in its original New England form it was also an “established” religion. Its ordained ministry was supported by town taxes and its meeting houses were community rather than merely “church” responsibilities. By the middle of the eighteenth century, New England Congregationalism, dominated by an intellectually impressive brigade of “able, learned and orthodox” ministers and tempered by the advancing material prosperity of the American colonies, had lost much of its lay orientation and spiritual radicalism. When preaching by the English itinerant evangelist George Whitefield triggered a massive surge of dramatic conversion experiences and an elaborate impulse to piety in the “Great Awakening” of the 1730s and 1740s, New England’s churches, congregations, and preachers divided into “Newlight” supporters of the work and their “Old Light” critics. Many of the Newlights left established Congregational churches to form what they regarded as purer circles of worship, and eventually many of these “Newlight Separates” turned Baptist, adopting adult immersion as the essential rite of Christian initiation. With the Great Awakening, the causes and characteristics of religious “reformations,” the qualifications for the ministry, and the behaviour of converts became issues of hot dispute among North American Protestants.

Few residents of New England in the 1740s were untouched by the Great Awakening and, at first, probably most were sympathizers. While
Henry Alline’s parents may not themselves have been Newlights, his autobiography emphasizes that they were pious Congregationalists who upheld daily prayer in the family and, in Rhode Island, attended Newport’s First Congregational Church. Here their younger son first displayed his obsession with both personal salvation and the mysteries of God and mortals, time and eternity. Alline was only nine when he “began to read much” in works of theology and at age ten he “had got something of a theory of religion.” For three years in his teens, he was transfixed by the concept of Eternity. “Often times,” he recalled, “I would sit down in my private hours, or at my work, with a determination neither to leave the place or subject until I had some insight into this infinite mystery.” A near-fatal illness at age fourteen sharpened his disquiet, moving him to intensify his programme of self-education. At length he could say that he had read, studied, and debated so much that “I had a great theory of religion, and spent much time disputing on the controverted points [of theology], such as election, reprobation, resurrection, baptism, &c.”

By this time, his teenage years, Alline was on his parents’ Nova Scotia farmstead. In Falmouth, unlike Rhode Island, the dispersed and impoverished condition of the inhabitants made access to the public exercises of religion sporadic. Although the Yankee settlements of Nova Scotia attracted about ten settled Congregational clergymen in the period before the American Revolution — a fairly respectable ratio even by New England standards — the Congregational clergy of Nova Scotia did not enjoy the benefits of legal establishment in a colony whose rulers were determined to give pre-eminence to the Church of England. Supported by voluntary subscription rather than taxes, the Congregational ministers were often in dispute with adherents over arrears in salary. Moreover, as was perhaps to be expected of those who came as pioneers, their private characters and ministerial gifts were not always of a high order. Falmouth itself never had a settled Congregational minister, the nearest being in Cornwallis. From early 1762, it was occasionally visited by Anglican “missionaries” of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel stationed in the adjacent townships, one of whom may have resided in Falmouth for a short time. During Alline’s youth, the nearest settled minister was a Baptist in the neighbouring township of Newport. Falmouth did, however, contain some Quakers, a people whose radical rejection of formality in religious worship in favour of “the moving of the Spirit” may have encouraged Alline’s own ultimate movement in that direction.

In general Henry Alline would not allow that he ever received spiritual encouragement from his Falmouth neighbours. “I have reason to believe,” he wrote later, “that there were not more than five or six christians [sic] in the whole town, and they sunk into death and formality: there was nothing
of the power of religion, the travail of the soul; and conviction and conversion were scarcely mentioned....” It may be part of adolescent nature to disdain the ways of adults; even so, Alline put what seems to be elaborate emphasis on the secret nature of his spiritual struggles. Prior to the day of his conversion, he never spoke in family prayer. Not once during eighteen years of theological inquiry and emotional turmoil preceding conversion did he share with a friend the groanings of his soul. Though his voracious reading and theological disputations must have been conspicuous, he was anxious to leave the impression that it was mere intellectual exercise and did not engage him emotionally. Far from being a model of quiet piety he was, in his late teens and early twenties, outwardly a “very wild and rude fellow”. Among the youth of Falmouth he was the “chief contriver and ringleader of the frolicks.” So successfully did he “counterfeit a cheerful countenance” to mask a troubled spirit that, following one late-night recreation, his alarmed stepmother warned that if he continued on the path of vice, she and his father would be witnesses against him on the Day of Judgement.

In this manner Henry Alline’s spiritual malaise persisted, from the child of nine in Rhode Island to the adult of twenty-seven on the farm of his aged parents in Nova Scotia. The focus of disquiet was his lack of inner assurance of salvation that others had received through perceptible conversion experiences. Wide reading had made him aware of “many experiences and accounts of a work of grace in the souls of others,” especially in New England’s remarkable “former reformation” (the Great Awakening of his parents’ generation). Further, though probably he had no contact with the Newlight churches in distant Sackville (in present-day New Brunswick) and Chebogue (in Yarmouth township), and though he disdained the ineffective ministry of the neighbouring Newlight Baptist lay preacher, the dramatic aspect of Newlight conversion exercises was known to him, if only as a subject of parody among local youth. In the “Egyptian darkness” of Falmouth, he had “never seen any such work” personally, but overwhelmingly he sensed that principles of piety and morality such as his parents exemplified fell short of “a work of grace in the soul[1],” and that nothing but a dramatic new-birth experience would signify his reconciliation with God through Christ.

The pivotal event in Alline’s life occurred on 26 March 1775. It was the Sabbath. There being no preaching in Falmouth, Alline determined to spend the day in reading, prayer, and meditation. Distressed almost beyond endurance by a sense of his “miserable, lost and undone condition” he recognized anew that all of his learning had brought him no closer to salvation and that no effort or ability on his part could effect it. Alone in his chamber in this agitated and melancholy state, he prayed continually, “O help me, help me ... thou Redeemer of souls.” Then “at
the instant of time when I gave up all to him ... and was willing that God should reign in me and rule over me at his pleasure: redeeming love broke into my soul ... with such power, that my whole soul seemed to be melted down with love, the burden of guilt and condemnation was gone ... and my will turned of choice after the infinite God ....” In once-typical Puritan language that some have misunderstood as homoerotic, Alline recorded that his “soul was inexpressibly ravished with the blessed Redeemer” and “filled with the divine being;” “I enjoyed a heaven on earth, and it seemed as if I were wrapped up in God;” “I was ravished with his love, and saying, go on, go on blessed God in love and mercy to me, and although I do not deserve thee, yet I cannot live without thee, and I long to drink deeper in thy love.” Caressed “in the arms of redeeming love,” Alline arose from his night of ecstasy to face the mundane world.

“A GLORIOUS WORK WAS IN THE LAND”

When Henry Alline related these transactions to his joyful parents there was one thing which instinctively he held back: “in less than half an hour after my soul was set at liberty, the Lord discovered to me my labour in the ministry and call to preach the gospel.” In the practice of New England’s Congregational churches, no man was considered eligible for ordination unless he had been to college, and Alline had last attended school at age eleven. Even supposing he could secure entry at Harvard or Yale, there was the question of opportunity. His parents were of humble means and so old as almost to be past labour. As the younger of only two sons, he was their principal support. For this reason Alline kept secret his call to the ministry, waiting restlessly for God to open the door of opportunity.

Though the beginning of his formal ministry was thus delayed, the change in his life began to have impact on those around him. The first conversion in which he was instrumental proved one of the most important. John Payzant, a French Protestant kidnapped from Nova Scotia in his youth by raiding Indians and reared as a captive in Quebec, had married one of Alline’s sisters. Within days of Alline’s conversion Payzant was inquiring “whether a man might not be born again, and not know it.” When Alline denied this absolutely, Payzant’s concern for his soul was so intensified that conversion followed within a day. Payzant would become among the most prominent of many Alline imitators who followed him into the ministry. This conversion, coming a week after Alline’s own, launched what Payzant recalled as “a Glorious work ... in the land” and what historians have labelled Nova Scotia’s Great Awakening.

The rumour that wild Henry Alline “was turned a New-Light” exerted a profound impact in his Falmouth neighbourhood. “It was astonishing,”
he wrote, "to see how the conduct and behaviour of the young people was changed; frolicking ceased, and many began to seek Alline's advice and summon him to pray with them. Yet so bound was he to the religious culture of New England that it was another year after his conversion, and only after an unsuccessful attempt to travel to Massachusetts to attend college, that Alline began to "improve" his ministerial gift. On 18 April 1776, a day appointed for fasting and public prayer to lament the deepening crisis between Great Britain and her American colonies, Alline first "came out and spoke by way of exhortation [i.e., relating his religious experience and urging others to repent], and had some liberty." Soon after he began to take a Biblical text and preach from it.

Alline's earliest efforts were in Falmouth, where he supplied preaching to the religious meeting established shortly after his and Payzant's conversions. His notoriety brought "whole boat-loads" from neighbouring townships to hear him. Some came hopefully, some merely "to watch for my halting," yet his reputation as a powerful speaker grew. In July 1776, a breakthrough occurred when for the first time he preached outside Falmouth, in the adjoining township of Newport. Here Alline proclaimed "the wonders of redeeming love" with "great boldness and freedom" to a large gathering, many of whom seemed "struck with awe." By September of that year, his admirers in Falmouth and Newport gathered themselves into a church, for which Alline drafted articles of belief. In the tradition of pure Congregationalism, the church was embodied entirely by laity, disdaining assistance from the "Old Light" churches and any ordained ministers in the vicinity. As with all the churches Alline was to foster, membership was confined strictly to those who gave satisfactory evidence of a dramatic new-birth experience.

To this time Alline had continued "to labour with my hands to get a living" as a tanner, currier, and general labourer on his parents' farm. But when his success in Newport was followed by a reception in Horton (now Wolfville) so rhapsodic that the house could not hold all the people, Alline left his chores and commenced an itinerant ministry that consumed the rest of his short life. From 1777 to 1783 he travelled by vessel, horse, and foot to preach — sometimes three times a day — on an ever-expanding circuit of Yankee Nova Scotia: at the head of Minas Basin; down the Annapolis Valley; in the Sackville-Amherst townships; up the St. John River to Gage and Maugerville; to Yarmouth, Argyle and Barrington at the southern tip of the peninsula; and, the scene of some of his greatest successes, among fishing communities along Nova Scotia's Atlantic coast up to the prosperous village of Liverpool. In addition to the Falmouth-Newport church (1776), Alline stimulated organization of seven others: Horton-Cornwallis (1778), Maugerville (1779), Annapolis-
Granville-Wilmot (1780), Sackville-Amherst (1781), Argyle (1782),
Barrington (1782), and Liverpool (1783).

Alline’s success was overwhelmingly among Nova Scotia’s Yankees — those who, like his own family, had arrived in the early 1760s bringing cultural memories of New England’s Great Awakening of a generation earlier. In cosmopolitan Halifax and its rural satellite of Windsor, in the ethnic Presbyterian neighbourhoods of Pictou and Truro and on Prince Edward Island, and among the Loyalists at Saint John, he had no particular success. He never attempted preaching in the largely German settlement of Lunenburg and, though he spoke some French, he is not known to have preached to the remaining Acadians. Apart, therefore, from the English Methodists in Sackville-Amherst and some Germanic families in the Petitcodiac Valley, Alline’s message had meaning primarily to New Englanders who had spent two decades on the Nova Scotia frontier and who, by the mid 1770s, numbered perhaps twelve thousand and constituted something over one-half of the province’s population.

“BITTER OPPOSITION AND MANY OPPOSERS”

Most of what we know of Henry Alline comes from his published Journal, a document that puts disproportionate emphasis on the years 1780-82, when his ministry was at its height. Despite its name, the Journal is not a diary. It is Alline’s conflation of autobiography, meditation, poetry, and selected extracts from an actual journal that does not survive. The published work amounts to the most sustained autobiographical document for any eighteenth-century “Canadian,” but modern readers must be alert to the fact that its purpose was to inspire “saints,” not to inform historians. Checked against other sources, there are occasional contradictions. And when Alline claims that in Horton “there was such a throng of hearers, that the house could not contain them” and that in Amherst “such a number … attended that I was obliged to preach in the open field” and that in Argyle “the people were so engaged, that almost all in the place both old and young attended night and day,” a reader’s scepticism is understandable.

For this reason, therefore, it is important to note that contemporary reaction to Alline amply attests to the profound stir triggered by his preaching and validates the claims in his Journal. To Liverpool’s leading merchant and magistrate, Alline was a second George Whitefield: “Never did I behold Such an Appearance of the Spirit of God moving upon the people,” Simeon Perkins confided to his journal in 1783, “Since the time of the Great Religious Stir in New England many years ago.” To David McClure, the Old Light Congregational minister in whose New
Hampshire house Alline was to die, the youthful visitor was, like John the Baptist, “a burning and shining light.” Even those who were hostile to Alline stand witness to his impact. For Jacob Bailey, the brilliant but cynical Anglican “missionary” at Cornwallis and Annapolis, Alline was “our famous preacher.” For Aaron Bancroft, sent fresh from Harvard in 1780 to shore up what remained of Nova Scotia’s Old Light Congregationalism, Alline was a man who “by his popular talents made many converts.” Bancroft viewed Alline as so important that he prompted Hannah Adams to give the Nova Scotian greater prominence in her 1784 handbook of world religions than any other North American. At Truro, where Alline was known only by reputation, the Scotch Presbyterians gazed at him “as I passed their doors, with as much strangeness, as if I was one [of] the antediluvians.” To Jonathan Scott, the Congregationalist minister at Chebogue and Alline’s most trenchant critic, he was the “Ravager of the Churches.” The Allinite stir is not, therefore, simply an illusion created by the shortened perspective of the preacher’s own Journal. Even detractors recognized Alline’s contemporary stature.

Detractors were many. Occasionally opponents resorted to outright violence, as when the Windsor house in which he stayed was attacked by soldiers; and he was threatened with the press gang — a traditional way to remove non-conformists from the community. The broad basis of resistance to Alline centred on his role as author of what his opponents saw as “disorder.” On this his Anglican, Congregationalist, and Presbyterian critics were agreed. Much more was entailed in the idea of disorder than the bare fact that most of the original eight Allinite churches stood in opposition to existing religious bodies. Proportion, order, distinction, and hierarchy were concepts of central concern in the North Atlantic world of the late eighteenth century. In a society without police, where the very idea of using the military to keep civil order was hateful, social stability was thought to depend on general acquiescence in the notion that God had appointed some people to be great and others to be obscure, with each station carrying its benefits and its burdens. Hierarchy was natural and necessary. To act in disregard of established distinctions was sinful before God and produced uncouth and dangerous confusion in human affairs.

Henry Alline’s career as a self-proclaimed rebel against “history and tradition” defied these norms. Probably he travelled more than any other Nova Scotian of his day and, equally unusual, mostly by land. This itinerant lifestyle challenged a deeply-rooted cultural supposition that folk should be fixed geographically, and that those who travelled placed themselves suspiciously outside normal social constraints. Itinerant preaching also scandalized the settled pastorate who, in a manner typical of eighteenth-century office-holders, regarded invasions of their neigh-
bourhood as both an insulting trespass to their "property" and a threat to their income. Equally, Alline's celibacy and his willingness to disregard financial security in order to dedicate himself to his ministry marked him, at least implicitly, as one who would not be bound by conventional ties of social stability. Another aspect of Alline's ministry apt to disquiet some was the sheer size of his meetings. Late eighteenth-century power-holders, scarred by a recent series of sensational political and religious riots in England, France, and America, had an elemental fear of crowds as creating an environment which tempted people to throw off the usual restraints to anti-social behaviour. Yet Simeon Perkins' comment that Alline's Liverpool ministry attracted the largest crowd "known in the Place Since the Settlement of it" must have had many parallels, for there can be little doubt that his preaching drew the greatest voluntary gatherings in the previous history of Nova Scotia. Moreover, the very fact that Allinite religious meetings were held at unusual hours and often in private houses and barns rather than in segregated church buildings, that sermons were preached extempore rather than read from a manuscript, that audience members were expected to participate actively through "exhortation," that meetings had no set hour of termination, that females would kneel in prayer in unconventional proximity to men, that religious impressions might be so intoxicating as to set wife against husband or move a child to conversion while leaving the parent weighed down in despair, and that lowly fishermen might be empowered by conversion insights to challenge and reject the authority of the ordained and educated ministry — all this tended to confuse the usual demarcation of sacred and secular space and threaten established hierarchies of age, gender, and education. Allinite services were not anarchic, but their unspoken conventions were not always apparent to astonished or hostile observers.

Beyond these characteristic features of Newlight revivalism, there were ways in which Alline's consciously "Antitraditionist" challenge to norms provoked an even more articulate opposition. The most common attack at the beginning of his career was that he was merely self-appointed, lacking ordination and its usual requisite, a college degree. The first to oppose his arrogating the respected ministerial office were his own parents, who walked out of religious meetings when he spoke. Confronted publicly on this issue in 1777 by two Presbyterian clergymen, Alline responded that his "authority [for the ministry] was from heaven." Warned that he was "breaking through all order," Alline was ready with the time-honoured radical Protestant retort that "the Lord knew before he called me, how unqualified I was as to human learning, and ... would qualify me for whatever he had for me to do." Interestingly, however, all his success was unable to overcome his disquiet that he had never submitted to the discipline of examination and ordination, so that in the
spring of 1779 he was finally ordained by delegates from three churches. It was characteristic of Alline to portray the event solely as compliance with the wishes of his friends, in order that he might be "more useful," thereby obtaining ordination without conceding that he had done wrong to preach without it.

Another fertile source of opposition was Alline's radical insistence that the "one thing needful" for church membership was an inward new-birth experience, and that external forms and ordinances were matters of comparative indifference. This set him against all other religious groups of his day except the Quakers. Ironically, in view of what would occur after his death, among those who found him too extreme in his rejection of formal church rites were many Baptists. In 1778, in the earlier and less theologically assertive phase of his ministry, Alline had given friendly assistance to a group of Horton and Cornwallis residents in forming a distinctive Baptist church, which after some hesitation joined the following year in his ordination. Yet, presaging the coming tensions in the Newlight movement, this group soon became unwilling to extend fellowship to him (as a Congregationalist) and his local Newlight church, some of whom had themselves been immersed. Thereafter, much of Alline's energy was spent in softening disputes among his followers in the Falmouth-Annapolis region over the proper mode and subjects for baptism. The only true baptism, Alline preached, was that "of the spirit of Christ." Water baptism, by whatever manner, was a "small circumstantial" and a matter for private conscience. Allinite churches opened their membership to all who gave credible evidence of conversion, regardless of baptism, and admitted to the Lord's Supper all reputable Christians, whether church members or not.

"A PEOPLE HIGHLY FAVOURED"?

Why did Alline's seven-year ministry have such a great impact on his Nova Scotia Yankee contemporaries? Much of the answer must lie in an audacious, charismatic personality, and the air of plausibility that an unsystematic but fierce theological learning lent his utterances. Moreover, Alline was a figure of unassailable integrity. It is impossible to read his Journal and letters or Simeon Perkins' detailed account of his ministry in Liverpool without concluding that he was devoted wholly to his ministry, at the cost of family, sexual expression, and his very life. Even when tuberculosis was killing him — even when he "was apparently on the confines of the grave" — Alline rode on relentlessly. The example of a poor, zealous itinerant burning himself out in the cause of Christ and preaching with the "self-driving" brilliance peculiar to tuberculosis victims must have moved audiences profoundly.
It was part of Alline’s genius to employ unconventional means to communicate his message. One was song. In the late eighteenth century, the Church of England and Old Light Congregational churches sanctioned hymns in worship services only rather hesitantly. Alline, in contrast, was the most prolific North American hymn-writer of his day. A posthumous collection of upwards of five hundred of his compositions quickly ran through four New England editions. One of the distinguishing marks of Allinism was its emphasis on song — in religious meetings, in the family, and even in “singing aloud together as they passed along the Highway.” In a culture not yet pervaded by print, the mellifluous Alline seized on hymns and “spiritual songs” as a vehicle to “Stir up and engage the heart” and to adapt the gospel message to an often youthful audience in simple, memorable rhyme.

Alline adopted a similarly “low culture” approach to preaching. Disdaining the prevailing practice of reading an elaborate sermon that parsed a Biblical text, Alline preached extemporaneously, in direct, emotive, colloquial language, and often with the aim of uncovering the “spiritual” rather than literal meaning of the text. Conventional sermons appealed to reason in their hearers; Alline preached to the heart. To his critics, this subversion of the rational faculties was an attack on self-restraint and another dangerous form of Allinite “disorder.” In the caustic assessment of Jonathan Scott, Alline aimed to “excit[e] high and boisterous Affections and Passions” in hearers through the mere “Sound and Gingle of the words,” and he “mightily succeeded therein.” A fragment from a single sentence in one of his three published sermons illustrates how Alline’s breathless rhetoric sweeps listeners from the realms of heaven to the doors of their hearts and daringly blurs the distinction between Christ and the “stammering” preacher himself:

How hath he stooped from his Realms of immortal Glory, waded thro’ the Disorders of your miserable World in the Agonies of Death and Miseries of Hell, with his Vesture dipped in Blood, travelling from Kingdom to Kingdom, from Town to Town, from Village to Village, for to seek his Brethren; knocking from Heart to Heart with bleeding Hands, and an aking [sic] Heart, till his Head is filled with the Dew, and his Locks with the Drops of the Night! yea, and this Night (tho’ by a stammering Tongue) is come to your Doors calling on Sinners, and saying in the Words of our text, I SEEK MY BRETHREN....

Dazzling rhetoric in aid of a charismatic personality helps explain how Alline was able to attract a wide following among Methodists, Baptists, Quakers, and Congregationalists despite some sharply unorthodox reli-
gious opinions. As one of Jonathan Scott’s dissident church members proclaimed, “It was no Matter ... what a Man’s Principles were, if he was but earnest in promoting a good Work.”

Alline’s success in Nova Scotia’s farming townships and fishing harbours occurred among a people attuned to the culture of the Great Awakening in their former New England homes, who had then passed upwards of fifteen years in the comparative isolation and economic hardship of the northern settlement frontier. It is perhaps natural, therefore, for the sociologist, S.D. Clark, and the New England colonial historian, J.M. Bumsted, to conjecture that the Alline phenomenon was produced, in part, by release of long-gathering religious energies that had found no outlet in the frontier colony’s enfeebled Congregationalism. Conversely, one can perhaps explain Alline’s conspicuous success among young people as reflecting the comparative gullibility of a less literate generation, never exposed to adequate schooling or regular ministrations from an able Congregationalist clergy. No doubt Alline’s remarkable success is to some extent attributable to these causes. Yet one can also say that Alline was not the first Newlight preacher in pre-Revolutionary Nova Scotia, nor did his early efforts in Falmouth mark the colony’s first notable religious “reformation.” Moreover, though his admirers may have included some of the least tutored Nova Scotia Yankees, they also numbered some of the richest and most prominent. Only in Alline did evangelical religion find a champion with the talent and energy to raise an intense, prolonged revival encompassing nearly every Yankee neighbourhood from Yarmouth to Sackville, from Liverpool to Maugerville.

How much of Alline’s impact is attributable to the heightening of public tension over the crisis between Britain and the American colonies that led to open rebellion in 1775? Allied emotionally to both Old and New England — tied to Britain by bonds of tradition and the more tangible constraints of the British army and navy at Halifax, but tied also to New England by kinship, trade, and religion — Nova Scotia’s Yankees were perplexed, vulnerable, and impotent spectators of a contest they deplored. Though historian J.B. Brebner — long the pre-eminent authority on eighteenth-century Nova Scotia — denied it, it must surely be more than happenstance that these years of American political and military turmoil coincided exactly with the Allinite awakening. Such was the reasoning that led Maurice Armstrong in the 1940s to speculate that the magnitude of the response to Alline was a product of popular yearning to retreat from the disagreeable dilemmas of the secular world to the inner consolations of evangelical religion. In a now-famous passage, Armstrong, himself a product of Yankee Nova Scotia, declared that:
Thousands gladly turned from the grim realities of their outward environment to find comfort and exhilarating self-expression in a revival of religion. In a state of divided loyalties, the neutral Yankees of Nova Scotia found psychological release in the enthusiasm of the Newlights, and compensated themselves for their political inaction [in the Revolutionary crisis] by their zeal for spiritual regeneration.

Armstrong’s seductively simple speculation received sophisticated reworking in the 1970s by Gordon Stewart and the progenitor of contemporary Alline studies, George Rawlyk. In *A People Highly Favoured of God: The Nova Scotia Yankees and the American Revolution*, they argued that the Allinite reformation of the 1770s and 1780s represented not a negative retreat from “grim realities,” but a rapturous response to a message of positive, communal identity. Captured twice by American privateers, Alline himself loathed the war and had refused a militia commission. Far from urging his fellow Yankees to join their New England kindred in resisting British “tyranny,” Alline told Nova Scotians that the rebellion was divine punishment for New England’s sins. Nova Scotia’s Yankees, Alline announced, had been “called away from the approaching storm” of revolution by their timely migration northward. While New England suffered desolation, Nova Scotia was a “peaceable corner” which had been “hedged about with the kind providence of God” and granted a marvelous religious awakening. Surely, he urged, God had now sup- planted New England with Nova Scotia as “the Apple of his Eye;” “O you are a people highly favoured of God indeed!”

In assuring those who felt sidelined in the military events of the American Revolutionary War that they were really at the centre of God’s cosmic drama, Alline enabled his fellow Yankees to cut their psychological dependency on New England and offered in its stead — so Stewart and Rawlyk argue — a positive and distinctively Nova Scotian identity. If this is so, then it follows that part of Alline’s attractiveness was his affirmative explanation for the otherwise confusing and distressing events of the secular world. Stewart and Rawlyk’s elaborate assessment of Alline in relation to his times attracted more admiration than assent and, like most attempts to explain the Alline phenomenon, its case is ultimately speculative. There is, however, evidence that some Nova Scotians in the years immediately following Alline’s death did regard the spiritual life in their adopted colony as markedly superior to that of New England and that some New Englanders visiting the Maritimes were inclined to agree.

**ALLINE AND NEW ENGLAND**

In the fall of 1783, Henry Alline set out to preach for the first time in his native New England. Already on the verge of death, he resolved to push
on “as long as I could ride or stand.” There is a paradoxical aptness in the fact that this self-proclaimed rebel against New England Congregationalism, raised in the despised colony that had refused to join the Revolution, should embark as a missionary to the newly-independent land of his Puritan ancestors. After some months of preaching with great success in coastal Maine, Alline died in New Hampshire early in 1784. He was thirty-six. In words which have resonated across two centuries, his gravestone in North Hampton affirms that he was “justly esteemed the apostle of Nova-Scotia.”

Despite his stance as a self-conscious “Anti-traditionist,” Alline was in many respects a product of New England Congregationalist culture. He readily identified himself under the New England rubric of Newlight, the term “Allinite” being merely its Maritime equivalent. His wrestling with the issue of an unlearned ministry, his submission to formal ordination, his impulse to preserve theological insights in elaborate treatises, his instinct that Christians should keep journals of their religious travel— all these serve to confirm that Alline viewed the world through the lens of New England Congregationalism, even while rebelling against aspects of it. New England’s religion affected Alline deeply; what importance did Alline have for New England? As he spent only a few months preaching there, and only in the remotest part, one would expect to find that he had no impact, but the answer is more complicated and involves notice of Allinite theology.

Most of Alline’s writing is theological. Composed in a forced, defensive style, it is the least impressive part of his legacy. Yet, because he was essentially self-educated and had spent much of his youth pondering the infinite and the divine, Alline’s theological ideas have an aspect of novelty. Above all else, he rejected the Calvinistic notion—still prevalent among eighteenth-century Protestants—that individuals were predestined from before the creation of the world to either salvation or perdition, which nothing occurring in their lifetimes could alter. In order to resolve theological problems involved in the converse theology—that of free will—Alline resorted to a mystical reinterpretation of some of the central features of Christianity. Thus he posited that before the Creation of the world Adam had a spiritual body, that Adam’s nature was both male and female, that all persons were present spiritually with Adam at the Fall, that Christ’s resurrection was spiritual rather than physical, and that the passage of time is only an illusion—for with God all things are “NOW.”

John Wesley’s verdict that Alline’s theology was a crude mixture of “gold and dross shuffled together” has won general assent among learned critics, but such hostility seems to have had only limited impact during
Alline's lifetime. Moreover, his two principal theological works (1781, 1783) were actually reprinted in New England, in 1797 and 1804. They were sponsored by the nascent Freewill Baptist sect whose leader, Benjamin Randal, may possibly have met Alline in Maine in 1783. At the least it is clear that the Freewill Baptist leadership knew and approved of Alline's writings as early as 1784. What most attracted them was Alline's vehemently anti-Calvinistic insistence on freedom of the will — on the individual's ability to accept or reject Christ's offer of redeeming love. The Wesleyan movement in contemporary England espoused the same idea, and it would become the prevalent Protestant view in the nineteenth century. The first North American evangelical to argue the case against predestination was Henry Alline. Benjamin Randal himself adopted more of Alline's theology than just free will. When, however, Freewill Baptists denominationalized early in the nineteenth century, their leaders were so anxious to obliterate any reminder of their debt to the unorthodox, non-Baptist, and embarrassingly unrepulican Alline that further particulars of his influence are now lost. For this reason, Alline's New England legacy ended abruptly about the time of the War of 1812. Yet to the first generation of marginally literate Freewill Baptists, the dying Nova Scotian's appearance out of the North had been a godsend in staking out their key theological distinction.

ALLINE AND THE MARITIMES

In 1839 Hepzibah Marston, then aged ninety-five, could still recall her encounter with Henry Alline. She had known him only briefly, as a nurse during his final illness at North Hampton. Yet she never forgot the "prayerfulness & heavenly frame of mind" with which the humble stranger from Tory Nova Scotia met his death. For every Hepzibah Marston in New England, there were scores of men and women back in the Maritimes who would remember Alline all their lives. Within a few years of his death, his letters and manuscript journal were being copied and handed about like the epistles of St. Paul. Two decades later, admirers still sought out the site of his youthful home in Falmouth. As late as the 1850s and 1860s, Maritime newspaper obituaries continued to boast of their subjects' contact with the great Alline.

If New England's Alline was a theologian, the Alline remembered in the Maritimes was, overwhelmingly, the soul-ravishing evangelist and hymnist whose personal impact was unforgettable. It is not surprising, then, that even in his own lifetime Alline's example inspired several young men to venture onto the preaching circuit. After 1784, literally dozens of imitators asserted their claim to fill the void created by his passing. The result was bewildering. The Anglican rector of Annapolis,
attempting a catalogue of Newlight sects in his neighbourhood, found "anabaptists, Pansonites, Allinites, Chipmanites, Kinsmanites, Blackites, Welchites and a number of other[s] ... [denominated] according to the names of their leaders." In 1785 he added, with revealing exaggeration, "We have in this county almost as many religions, as there were living creatures in Noah's ark." The same was true in New Brunswick's central St. John Valley. From Maggerville in 1792, a leading Anglican reported "Hammonites," "Palmerites," "Brookites," and the "Pearlyites or Burpilites." Some of these Alline imitators preached only briefly, lost their enthusiasm, and sank into obscurity. Others had careers lasting decades and became leading figures in the Wesleyan, Congregationalist and, especially, Baptist denominations. The Wesleyan leadership suppressed the Allinism within its ranks by the 1790s, and Maritime Congregationalism melted away before the rise of Baptist sentiment. Therefore, it was chiefly in the two major Baptist sects that Alline's vivid but sometimes troubling legacy was transmitted to the nineteenth century. The ironic relationship between Allinism and the Baptists could not, however, have been foreseen in the immediate aftermath of Alline's death in 1784. The number of white Baptists in the Maritimes before the end of the 1790s was very small, and probably most Maritimers who had been immersed (and who might in that limited sense be called Baptists) were Allinites. Rather, Alline's passing was followed by a decade of intense, sometimes bizarre religious anarchy among his admirers, and it was only as a conservative reaction against these excesses that the greater discipline afforded by Baptist churches became popular.

Alline himself had been irreproachably correct in his moral behaviour but, once his restraining influence was removed, three of his teachings became a pretext for great irregularities. First was Alline's view that the new-birth experience was of such paramount importance that the external trappings of collective religious life — creeds, ordinances, hierarchy, church discipline — were of comparative indifference and often hindered vital piety. Second, Alline regarded the only certain evidence of conversion as a spirit daily in communion with God, so that his converts were attuned constantly to impulses from heaven. Third, Alline followed the Protestant orthodoxy of his day in holding that, once saved, a convert could not thereafter fall from grace. This volatile combination of beliefs in the hands of a generation of Alline-imitators, each trying to evidence more of the "Spirit" than did rivals, bore bitter fruit in an outbreak of antinomianism known in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia under the label "New Dispensationalism."

New Dispensationalists, like other antinomians before them, believed that those filled with the Holy Spirit were no longer bound by moral law,
for they heard God's commands directly. Under the New Dispensationalist impulse, most of the original Allinite churches collapsed, as conventions of collective worship were abandoned as formal and sterile. Prophets appeared. Visions and dreams were pondered. Preachers seduced converts. The line between religion and magic grew sometimes too faint to discern. All was justified as compliance with immediate revelations from God. It would be wrong to think that most Allinites became New Dispensationalists and naive to suppose that most New Dispensationalists were prepared to act out the belief that they had been freed from obedience to moral laws. But some did. The worst episodes of practical antinomianism occurred in New Brunswick. In 1793 two unordained preachers at Waterborough introduced their converts to free love and were prosecuted for rape. In 1802 an Allinite in the Woodstock area was tried for assaulting several Anglicans "under pretense of receiving orders from heaven." Most soberingly, in 1805 an illiterate neighbourhood preacher at Shediac "ordered himself to be worshipped and thereafter divided his sister or cut her [in] twain," for which he was hanged.

Even before the sensational murder at Shediac, several of the most prominent Newlight preachers had moved to put their New Dispensationalist excesses behind them by becoming Baptists. Submission to the visible ordinance of immersion signalled acceptance that some, at least, of the external practices of religion were an aid rather than an impediment to faith. Immersion was also a ritual of cleansing which put symbolic distance between believers and their tainted New Dispensationalist past. By the end of the 1790s, the movement into the Baptist camp had reached such proportions that hostile Anglicans reported a "rage for dipping" in several Annapolis Valley townships. For the first time, British North America had Baptists in significant numbers. By 1809 most of the prominent former Allinite, now Baptist preachers — Joseph Crandall, the brothers Edward and James Manning, Thomas Chipman, Theodore Harding — had been drawn so deeply into the orbit of the New England Calvinistic Baptists and the concomitant quest for worldly respectability that they broke fellowship both with Congregationalists and even with those Baptists who held to Henry Alline's teachings on freedom of the will and open communion.

These "Regular" or "Calvinist" Baptists — predestinarian in theology and close communion (i.e., restricting the communion service to church members) in practice — became the dominant Baptist alignment in all three Maritime colonies in the nineteenth century. In Nova Scotia a series of dramatic conversions within the Halifax Anglican elite in the 1820s, together with the success of what became Acadia University, brought Calvinist Baptists a political and social prominence they would achieve in
no other Canadian province. Unable to deny Henry Alline's crucial role in creating the conditions which led to their rise, the denomination's historians contrived for generations to embrace Alline's prestige while, simultaneously, blaming him — rather than those New Dispensationalist preachers who went on to become Baptist "patriarchs" — for the excesses that flourished for a time after his death.

Those who had resisted the move of the Calvinist Baptist leadership from Allinite sectarianism to denominational respectability in the early nineteenth century included both residual Newlight Congregationalists — of whom the most prominent was Liverpool's John Payzant — and Allinite Baptists (that is, Allinites who had been immersed but who did not regard that as a reason to break fellowship with those who were not). Lacking a significant ordained leadership, these continuing Allinites met informally for religious fellowship in upwards of a dozen New Brunswick and Nova Scotia neighbourhoods for decades until, in both colonies, most agreed to come together in provincial "Christian Conferences" in the 1830s. Adhering to free will in theology and open communion in practice, the two Christian Conferences conformed at first so fully to the Allinite spirit that they declined to take a stand on either the necessity or the mode of baptism. Within a decade, however, both New Brunswick and Nova Scotia organizations adopted baptism by immersion as an article of faith and became "Free Christian Baptist" conferences. These "Free" Baptists (as they became known) proved much stronger in New Brunswick than Nova Scotia. The reasons for this are not clear, but most important may have been the fact that in Nova Scotia the Free Baptists were divided uneasily for decades by the influence of two competing New England-based sects, whereas the lineage of the New Brunswick Free Baptists was almost purely Allinite.

Conscious of their anti-formalistic origins, the Free Baptists denominationalized more slowly than any other major Maritime religious group. One consequence was that members were apt to be lost periodically to new religious enthusiasms, such as the Second Advent craze of the 1840s and the arrival of Mormonism in the Maritimes in the 1840s and 1850s. Another reflection of the comparative strength of the radical tradition among Free Baptists was the persistence of female preaching. Among the most extreme of the New Dispensationalists had been women, some of whom preached, prophesied, and claimed theological insights. One contemporary account makes reference to three female Allinites preaching in a rather small area of New Brunswick in 1802, and there is extensive evidence of the favourable reception accorded an itinerant female preacher among Allinite Congregationalists and Baptists in Nova Scotia in the late 1820s. By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, the
Free Baptists were following steps taken decades earlier by other religious
groups in suppressing the role of women in the worship service, paying
salaries to preachers, launching denominational newspapers, opening
Sunday schools, supporting foreign missions, and adopting other badges
of "efficient" conservative denominationalism.

As formalism increased, Free Baptists, like their Calvinist rivals before
them, refashioned their collective memory of Henry Alline. By the 1860s
the example of Alline's anti-formalism had come to seem dangerous and
embarrassingly old-fashioned, and Alline himself was criticized often in
the denominational newspaper for his exaltation of the dramatic new-birth
experience, indifference to formal qualification for the ministry, and
unsound over-reliance on leadings of the "Spirit." As the Free Baptists
struggled to survive in an "age of progress" and generalized education by
becoming a denomination like the others, the legacy of Henry Alline was
downplayed, denigrated, and suppressed. By the 1880s the Free and
Calvinist Baptists together numbered 25 per cent of New Brunswickers —
where they were the largest Protestant grouping — and 19 per cent of
Nova Scotians. Both alignments had become so similar, so indifferent to
the legacy of their respective pasts, and so anxious to cope with the
challenges of a rapidly changing world, that their leadership agreed in
principle to unite into a single religious body, a move at last consummated
with the formation of the United Baptist Convention in 1905-06.

BEING DEAD ... YET SPEAKETH

It is a measure of Alline's genius that, two centuries after his death, he
holds an expanding place in both popular culture and academic historiog-
raphy. The Henry Alline most easily comprehended by historians is an
eighteenth-century Maritime variant of that more famous prophet/poet,
Louis Riel. Unlike Riel, however, the Nova Scotian preacher turned his
back on rebellion in order to forge a collective identity for his people
through evangelical religion. Because the work of Armstrong, Stewart,
and Rawlyk allows him an important place on the agenda of secular
events, Alline will never be ignored as long as the question of Nova Scotia's response to the American Revolution remains of interest.

It is, however, Alline's relationship to the nineteenth-century Maritime
religious tradition which is the most promising field for Alline studies.
Much of this research appears in print sponsored by the United Baptist
Convention of the Atlantic Provinces. Thus the denomination which — in
both its Calvinist and Free Christian forms — turned its back on Alline in
the nineteenth century became the most important force in rebuilding his
reputation in the twentieth. Blurring the fact that Alline himself treated
the immersion issue with indifference, influential Atlantic Baptists may have come to see in Alline's very unorthodoxy a way of educating a generation of neo-conservatives in the pluralistic and tolerant nature of the authentic Maritime Baptist tradition. Moreover, emphasis on the indigenous Alline serves as a defence against the alarming Americanization of Canadian evangelical culture.

Improbably, the late twentieth century is also experiencing revived interest in Alline as an inspiration to personal piety and theological reflection. His *Life and Journal* has come to be recognized as no mere artifact of the eighteenth century, but as a lively Christian witness. Reprinted three times, in whole or substantial part, during the 1980s, it is now read more widely than at any time since his death. A comprehensive selection of all of his writings has also appeared, with the professed purpose of enhancing its readers' spiritual life rather than their historical knowledge. Contemporary poster art proclaims Alline's indifference to the American Revolution as the prototype for Maritime pacifism, and (like Louis Riel) he has been made the subject of an opera. Even his abstruse theology — with its bisexual Adam and its speculation on the nature of time — may have a meaning for the twentieth century that it did not have in the eighteenth. Women, in particular, will find in the early history of Allinism a degree of openness to leadership from females that can surprise and inspire. A life and legacy that can be read in such different ways by religious inquirers, academic historians, and contemporary intellectuals transcends ordinary categorization. "O what a mystery am I to myself!" Alline exclaimed in 1780. Two centuries later the fascination remains.
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ALLINE BIOGRAPHIES — There is no comprehensive account of Alline’s life and legacy. John M. Bumsted’s *Henry Alline, 1748-1784* (1971) (Hantsport, 1984) is a brief, accessible study. More sophisticated is the latter half of Gordon T. Stewart and George A. Rawlyk, *A People


Among Alline contemporaries, the figure who would most repay further study is Jonathan Scott. The Chebogue pastor — Newlight but decidedly not an Allinite — features largely in the work of Armstrong, Stewart, and Rawlyk, but not very sympathetically. Henry Scott’s edition of the Journal of the Reverend Jonathan Scott (Boston, 1980), supplanting the seriously flawed 1960 version of C.B. Fergusson, allows Scott to be considered less as a foil for Alline partisans and more as a personality whose obsessive conformity with the culture of New England Congregationalism has its own allure. Scott’s narrative of his confrontation with Henry Alline, written in the guise of Chebogue church records, is printed in Stuart and Gwen Trask, eds., Records of the Church of Jebogue in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, 1766-1851 (Yarmouth, 1992), supplanting the less accurate version in Stewart, Documents on the Great Awakening. Other important studies of Allinism’s early opponents include Matthew Richey, Memoir of the Late Rev. William Black, Wesleyan Minister (Halifax, 1839); Thomas B. Vincent, ed., Narrative Verse Satire in Maritime Canada, 1779-1814 (Ottawa, 1978) (on Jacob Bailey); George A. Rawlyk, “Freeborn Garretson and Nova Scotia: The Methodists and Baptists,” in Rawlyk, Wrapped Up in God; and Brian Cuthbertson, The First Bishop: A Biography of Charles Inglis (Halifax, 1987).

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Alline’s legacy in nineteenth-century Nova Scotia and New Brunswick and, through population movement, in Upper Canada, is also a field of