

Henry Somerville and Social Reform: His Contribution to Canadian Catholic Social Thought

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In 1937 this Association held a symposium on “The Church and Revolution,” to which Professor D.J. McDougall of the University of Toronto, and Henry Somerville contributed papers.¹ Professor McDougall has made a great, and happily, recognized contribution to Catholic scholarship in Canada. Somerville’s contribution to the intellectual maturation of the English-Canadian Catholic Church was equally splendid, but his work in this sphere is less well known than Professor McDougall’s. True, Somerville was recognized as the capable editor of *The Catholic Register* for an unprecedented twenty years, from 1933 to his death in 1953. His interest in Canada, and his contributions to the development of social thought in this country began, however, at a much earlier date. It is my contention that Henry Somerville’s ideas merit the close attention of scholars because they influenced Catholic social thought and action in Canada, and consequently Canadian intellectual history during periods of critical social change. If we are to appreciate his contribution we must examine the nature of the Church in Ontario prior to his first arrival in 1915, the way in which his ideas had developed within the context of Edwardian England, and the direction in which they matured under the influence of his Canadian experiences.

When Somerville arrived in Toronto, in November, 1915, the Catholic Church in Ontario had acquired certain characteristics which distinguished it not only from other Canadian denominations, but also from the Church in Quebec. It had taken root under different circumstances than the French-Canadian Catholic Church, although it was the tacit extension of the religious toleration guaranteed the Church in Quebec in 1774, that stimulated the emigration of the Scots and Irish Catholics to Ontario.² After the Napoleonic Wars, when the economic situation worsened for the Irish,

¹ D.J. MCDOUGALL, “The Political Revolution in the Sixteenth Century;” Henry SOMERVILLE, “Modern Revolution,” *The Church and Revolution*, C.C.H.A. Symposium, October 20, 1937.

² For a discussion of the significance of the Quebec Act see Hilda NEATBY, “Religious Liberation – A Canadian Bi-Centenary,” *The Chelsea Journal*, 1,1, January-February, 1975, pp. 41-47.

the pace of Catholic emigration quickened. The two thousand immigrants from Cork who settled in the Peterborough district in 1825 were the vanguard of the great host of Irish Catholic immigrants who dug the canals, built the roads and railways, and laboured in the first factories built in Ontario in the nineteenth century. They were a pitifully poor and more culturally deprived group than the majority of the British immigrants. They soon discovered that this destitution continued to check their progress in the urban centres where the greater number of them settled. They expressed their disorientation too frequently in violence and lawlessness, and these outbursts, coupled with a higher incidence of illiteracy and disease, made them unwelcome in many communities.³ As they had done at home, the Irish Catholics responded to discrimination by relying on their religious faith not only for spiritual consolation, but also as a means of asserting their social and political identity. The Catholic Church in Ontario was founded and established by poor Irish laity whose personal sacrifices maintained the religious institutions staffed by predominantly Irish clergy. Their social and their religious consciousness gave it cohesiveness and vitality.

Under their determined and capable bishops, these Catholics were successful in establishing a separate elementary school system. But Separate Schools were regarded as a means of enforcing Catholic segregation from an equally vigorous and assertive Protestant community who could not agree with such persistence in maintaining a separate Catholic Christian identity. Because Protestants were the more prosperous majority, they were able to discriminate against Catholics economically and socially. In nineteenth century Ontario, religious differences frequently led to open ruptures in personal and community life.

In these circumstances, and with their limited funds, the hierarchy's priorities were the erection and maintenance of churches, social service institutions and elementary schools which served the primary needs of the Catholic communities. The few Catholic secondary and post-secondary institutions struggled for funds, staff and students. Even by 1900, advanced education was nearly inaccessible for most Catholics. Moreover, in Church colleges, the curriculum was directed towards classical studies for potential

³ For studies of the Irish assimilation in British North America in the nineteenth century see Kenneth DUNCAN, "Irish Famine Immigration and the Social Structure of Canada West," in W.E. Mann, ed., *Canada: A Sociological Profile* (Toronto, 1968), pp. 1-16; Gilbert TUCKER, "Famine Immigration to Canada, 1847," *American Historical Review*, April 1931, pp. 533-49; D.S. SHEA, "The Irish Immigrant Adjustment to Toronto, 1840-1860," *Canadian Catholic Historical Association Study Sessions*, 39, 1972, pp. 53-60.

clergy.⁴ Devotion to the preservation of established tradition made them wary of recent philosophical and theological movements.

Ontario Catholics were loyal to the Church and devoted to the pious observances promoted by their clergy. But this stance fostered what one Catholic historian has called a 'ghetto complex,' an attitude which was marked by parochialism and concern for the defense and preservation of the faith through the avoidance of social and intellectual contacts which might weaken Catholic solidarity.⁵ True, some Catholics were active and successful in Federal politics, but in proportion to their numbers (nearly 13 percent of the population of Toronto and 20 percent in Ontario),⁶ Catholics remained aloof on the local level from active participation in public affairs unless their educational rights were threatened.

The succession of Irish Archbishops in Toronto under whose episcopates this attitude was nurtured was broken in 1912 with the appointment to the See of Archbishop Neil McNeil.⁷ He was a Nova Scotian of Scottish descent whose excellent academic qualifications included doctoral degrees in philosophy and theology, special studies in mathematics and fluency in three foreign languages. His practical experience was of equal and exceptional breadth – professor and rector of St. Francis Xavier University, newspaper editor and crusader for social justice for Maritime fishermen, Bishop of the missionary diocese of Western Newfoundland and Archbishop of Vancouver. In his personal interests and his official policies, Archbishop McNeil exemplified the two new developments which had revitalized the Catholic Church in the late nineteenth century. The first was the intellectual revival which in Canada would be apparent in the drive to achieve excellence in Catholic post-secondary education. Developing contemporaneously with this was the second, the Social Movement, which was initiated by clergy and laity in Europe, England and the United States. This group was concerned with the deterioration of the social and economic position of the working classes as the pace of industrialization quickened. The premise of the participants in the Catholic Social Movement was that the workers' problems were a consequence of the secular, liberal economic philosophy which had separated the Christian imperatives of justice, compassion and respect for natural rights, from the economic imperatives of unfettered competition in the market place. Their urgent prompting had inspired Pope Leo XIII to issue his

⁴ E.J. MCCORKELL, *Henry Carr, Revolutionary* (Toronto, 1969), pp. 15-16; L.K. SHOOK, *Catholic Post-Secondary Education in English-Speaking Canada* (Toronto, 1971), p. 9.

⁵ SHOOK, *ibid.*, p. 7.

⁶ Calculated from statistics in the *Canada Year Book, 1912*, pp. 28-31.

⁷ The principal autobiographical details for Archbishop McNeil are found in George BOYLE, *Pioneer in Purple* (Montreal, 1951).

great encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891, in which he outlined the rights and obligations of modern industrial workers and employers within a Christian context.

During his two years as Archbishop of Vancouver, Dr. McNeil spoke out on social justice, declaring that decent wages and the right to organize labour unions were basic employee rights. In his inaugural sermon in Toronto in 1912, he served notice that the issues raised in *Rerum Novarum* were still one of his major concerns. The new Archbishop of Toronto deplored Catholic intellectual insularity which hindered their participation in the framing of solutions of local and national problems. He announced that he looked forward to a broader, more apostolic application of Catholic principles to “settle the conflicts between capital and labour and such problems.”

To accomplish these goals he needed an expert to inaugurate courses for the clergy in contemporary Catholic social philosophy at the new St. Augustine’s Seminary in Scarborough, and to instruct and organize the laity in the approved methods of social action. Through his friendship with Cardinal Bourne of Westminster, Archbishop McNeil was familiar with the aims and activities of a “ginger” group of concerned Catholic clergy and laity in England, dedicated to these aims, and who had founded the Catholic Social Guild in 1909. Henry Somerville, a key member of this organization, had been discovered by Father Charles Plater, the brilliant young Jesuit founder of the group. He had assisted Somerville in making the transition from a factory labourer to journalist and influential lay leader. During this period, a time of great social unrest in England, Somerville struggled to find new ways to publicize Christian solutions to the social problems of an increasingly secular world. He would later draw on his own experience in applying the methods of the Catholic Social Guild to a somewhat similar situation in Canada after 1915.

Somerville was born in Leeds in 1889 of Catholic working class parents, the eldest of their eleven surviving children. As his father’s wages as a toy factory foreman were not sufficient to maintain his family, young Somerville, a keen and diligent student, had to leave school at age thirteen to work in the same factory for meagre pay. But he was determined to continue learning and he trudged home from the public library with books on philosophy, religion and economics as well as general literature. Even at fourteen he was interested in religious ideas and their application to social action. Somerville described his adolescence as a time when “I lost love for the pious practices of my childhood [...] as I grew more controversial and militant in temper I grew in enthusiasm for the Church as an institution.”⁸

⁸ Henry SOMERVILLE, “The Confessions of a Catholic Socialist,” *Dublin Review*, 155, 1914, pp. 101-102.

His intellectual development must be seen in the context of the social and political ferment of Edwardian England, a time when class tensions were widespread and acute.⁹ Class divisions extended into Catholic society as well, for the Catholic intelligentsia was mainly drawn from the landed gentry who were socially and economically isolated from the great majority of the poor, ill-educated and outcast Irish who still comprised the majority of the Catholic population of England. Within the Church, however, a small but fervent group of middle class intellectuals, many of whom were converts, had begun a vigorous campaign to promote the participation of Catholics in the mainstream of British political and economic life. They were motivated by the conspicuous success which the Socialists appeared to be having in attracting working class support.

Henry Somerville was not untypical of his class in concluding that Socialism made sense and rejecting the Church's criticism and condemnation of Socialism as inapplicable to the situation in England. Indeed, he feared that the Church's implacable hostility to all types of Socialists would drive the working class out of the Church. To forestall such a disaster in his own city of Leeds, the eighteen year old youth founded the Catholic Socialist Society in 1908. Its fifteen members were all working men whom Somerville later described as uneducated and even illiterate. Their bumptious criticism of the hierarchy, beginning with the Pope, for misunderstanding the true benefits which the abolition of "landlordism and capitalism"¹⁰ would bring, earned them the public condemnation of their bishop. Somerville placed his religious obedience to the hierarchy ahead of his political views and resigned from his society. Shortly after, a sympathetic Jesuit helped him organize the first Catholic working men's study group in England whose purpose was to study economic and political theory, the modern industrial state and the social teaching of the Church. These aims were identical to those of the newly founded Catholic Social Guild whose members were convinced that education of the workers was a pre-requisite for their participation in public affairs.¹¹

⁹ Arthur J. TAYLOR, "The Economy," in Simon NOWELL-SMITH, *Edwardian England* (London, 1964), p. 133. The unrest of the British working class before the First World War has been noted by many authors. See also Standish MEACHAM, "The Sense of An Impending Clash: English Working Class Unrest Before the First World War," *American Historical Review*, 77, December, 1972, pp. 1343-64.

¹⁰ This phrase is taken from a letter to the editor of the Leeds daily newspaper, undated, probably 1908, signed "H. Somerville."

¹¹ The history of the Catholic Social Guild is in J.M. CLEARY, *Catholic Social Action in Britain, 1909-1959* (Oxford, 1961); Georgiana Putnam McENTEE, *The Social Catholic Movement in Great Britain* (New York, 1927) is an excellent study of the Guild up to 1927. Both authors conclude that Henry Somerville was one of the most influential and ablest Guild workers.

When Father Plater met Henry Somerville at the Catholic Congress in Leeds in 1910, he realized that this devout young man of intelligence and determination, who had a talent for writing and a first-hand knowledge of the working man's world, was exactly what the Guild required as a propagandist and organizer. He persuaded him to leave the factory, found him a job writing for a Catholic weekly newspaper and, in 1912, arranged for him to attend Ruskin College, Oxford, on a scholarship.¹² It was during his eighteen months course in social science, for which he received his diploma with distinction, that Somerville became convinced that the refutation of the Socialist premises in *Rerum Novarum* was valid. But he also concluded that in England most of the Church's commentators were doing more harm than good by defining Socialism incorrectly and condemning it unconvincingly. The opinion he expressed in 1914 about such intemperate and ill-advised criticism he held to throughout his career:

I have confirmed my early impressions that the "Socialismmeans-Atheism and Free-Love" type of argument is most mischievous. Catholic and other working men are now educated enough to know that Socialism means the State ownership of the means of production; and working men are clear headed enough to know that though... it may mean many unpleasant things, it does not mean necessarily promiscuous sexual relations, or the abolition of religious worship.¹³

Henry Somerville believed that the Catholic Church should oppose any political or social doctrine, regardless of its name, if it advanced State or corporate interests by infringing on the natural right of the individual to work for an adequate wage, to own property, to establish a family and control the education of his children. He argued that both the radical socialists and the capitalists of his time were guilty of wrong-doing and they must be opposed by educated and involved Catholics who would advocate measures which would be both just and economically sound.

Lack of funds prevented the Catholic Social Guild from hiring the eager young graduate but for three years he lectured and organized for them in return for his expenses. He earned a modest living through his editorial work for a Manchester weekly and occasional writing for Catholic publications. His first lectures and Articles were directed to working men in city parishes to whom he explained the theological basis of the Church's anti-liberal and anti-socialist position. Citing the constructive role of the Church in the economic and social life of Europe in the past, he urged them to study

¹² Ruskin College is a residential college affiliated with Oxford, founded in 1899 especially for adult education. It offered diploma courses in the social sciences and labour studies.

¹³ SOMERVILLE, "Confessions," p. 114.

contemporary economic and social problems and consider Catholic social principles as guides to their solution. But he warned that they would be ignored unless they developed leaders who offered knowledgeable and constructive criticism. Parish study clubs would prepare them for participation in public affairs by providing the experience and education necessary for the assumption of responsibilities in unions, business and government.¹⁴ In the industrial centres Somerville worked tirelessly, persuading weary working men to spend their scanty leisure in parish study clubs preparing for examinations set by the Guild. Progress was sure, but slow, for many clergy were suspicious and even hostile to the new movement which investigated Socialism and participated in projects outside the accepted Catholic devotional tradition.

The curtailment of assignments for the Catholic Social Guild after war began, coincided with Archbishop McNeil's decision in Toronto to "widen the horizon of his flock."¹⁵ Father James Tompkins of St. Francis Xavier University was commissioned to

secure for him a Catholic layman for the Chair of Sociology in his Seminary... a man of the highest ability... a sane man who can be trusted to "pan out"... to take his place in giving tone to the Catholic society of the city and to Catholic thought in general."¹⁶

Although he had recently been hired as a sub-editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, Henry Somerville accepted Archbishop McNeil's offer to "promote social studies in the interests of the working class" at a salary of \$1,500.¹⁷ The young bachelor of twenty-six was convinced Canada's role in Church and world affairs would become increasingly important and he seized the opportunity to play a part in its growth. In addition, this was an opportunity to travel and meet the leaders of the social movement in the United States, particularly the famous Dr. John Ryan, whose pamphlet, "The Living Wage," had been included with his own treatise "Trade Unionism" in a text book written for the Catholic Social Guild study groups.

During the three years he worked for the Church in Toronto, Henry Somerville initiated projects and introduced ideas which he would

¹⁴ *Somerville Papers*. Manuscripts of Speeches, 1913, "The C.S.G. – Its Methods and Aims": "The Social Mission of the Catholic Workman" [sic]; "How To Work Social Study Clubs," *Month*, CXX, August, 1912, pp. 141-152.

¹⁵ In his inaugural sermon at St. Michael's Cathedral, Archbishop McNeil declared this was a pressing need of Canadian Catholics. Quoted in BOYLE, *Pioneer*, p. 127.

¹⁶ *McNeil Papers*, uncatalogued "Social Box," Copy of letter of Father James Tompkins to Monsignor Henry Parkinson, Oscott College, December 4, 1913.

¹⁷ BOYLE, *Pioneer*, Archbishop McNeil to Father James Tompkins. No date quoted, probably written later summer, 1913.

persistently support throughout his career in Canada. They originated in his perception that the primary impediments to Catholic participation in public life were first, lack of interest and knowledge by both clergy and laity in Catholic social thought, and second, the indifference of Catholics to higher secular education. To remedy the first, he lectured, at Archbishop McNeil's behest, on the history and application of Catholic social theory at St. Augustine's Seminary, successfully organized laymen's study groups in a few parishes, and spoke at every opportunity to clergy and laity in Toronto and other Dioceses. To all these groups, he stressed that an essential part of the Catholic's religious obligations was greater participation in public affairs. However, he cautioned that for Canadian Catholics, the first requisite was broader religious and secular education. To this end, their most potent educational instrument was the Catholic press. He candidly pointed out the folly of the current indifference exhibited by most Catholics towards their press and caustically queried:

Whoever heard of any parish in the British Empire that put forward the same effort for a Catholic paper that it would put forward for purchasing a new set of Stations of the Cross pictures or for getting a memorial stained glass window?¹⁸

But he also maintained that this press must merit more support through higher standards of journalism and inclusion of cogent explanations of current social and political problems of the world outside the local parishes' devotional and social activities.

It was to this latter task that Somerville set himself in 1916 when he was a columnist and staff writer for *The Catholic Register*. His "Life and Labour" series covered a myriad of topics: the rights of the mentally retarded, methods for study clubs, Socialism, post-war reconstruction, economic theory and history. He edited news releases keeping Canadian Catholics informed on social reform in the United States and England. His articles were often in remarkable contrast to the general tone of *The Register* at this time, which was partisan to the Irish Nationalists and vindictively scornful of Protestants. Undoubtedly this was in response to equally abusive anti-Catholic taunts in the Orange-tinted newspapers.

These editorial skirmishes distressed Somerville as he observed that the increasing severity of the war crises was sparking the tinder of the religious animosity which was always smoldering in Toronto. His column frequently contained the only moderate or reasoned presentation of contentious issues in the paper. He always defended Catholic theological and social principles with vigor and clarity, but he did not hesitate to identify and condemn

¹⁸ SOMERVILLE, *The Catholic Register*, December 27, 1917, "What Next."

Catholic attitudes which he felt were outmoded. He declared, for example, that the best rebuttal to Orange accusations of Catholic apathy in the war effort was greater Catholic participation in patriotic civil and military projects.¹⁹ The Conscription Crisis divided Canadians but English-Catholics must resist retaliating against bigotry.

There are Catholics who make this Protestant blindness and consequent bigotry an excuse for every kind of damnable selfishness and narrowness on the part of Catholics themselves, for neglect to share in the nation's work, for refusal to co-operate in patriotic, civic and social undertakings as if they were none of our business. The nation's business is our business. If we serve the nation efficiently we serve the Church.²⁰

But in political action, Catholics must not limit their support to one political party in order to further purely Catholic interests or to achieve public power. This was "the surest way of isolating ourselves from the rest of the nation."²¹

In several of his columns he confronted Canadian Catholics with their phobia about "hob-nobbing with heretics." He observed that this by-product of the ghetto-complex restricted their cooperation with Protestants in social service projects.

I know very many Catholics who ... are concerned about what they can see to be obviously Catholic interests, but they care about no others. This shows a very narrow mind, and what is more, an un-Catholic mind.²²

He pointed out that in England, Catholics and Protestants were now issuing joint statements of Christian social principles, because they realized that by acting together, their views would be more likely to influence social legislation for post-war reconstruction. Theological differences were not a barrier to social co-operation; acquainting non-Catholics with Catholic social principles through their study groups had proven a most effective way of tempering anti-Catholic prejudice. Moreover, joining with Protestants in works for the common good was, Somerville declared, the most legitimate form of missionary strategy, because "it secures respect for Catholicism as a constructive intellectual and practical force."²³

Yet all these issues were, to Somerville, less pressing than that of the desperate dearth of educated Canadian Catholics equipped to be professional, business and union leaders. He bluntly identified the cause of this problem

¹⁹ SOMERVILLE, *ibid.*, June 21, 1917, "Catholics in the Commonwealth."

²⁰ SOMERVILLE, *ibid.*, January 31, 1918, "The Chief After-War Problem."

²¹ SOMERVILLE, *ibid.*, January 10, 1918, "Catholics and Political Action."

²² SOMERVILLE, *ibid.*, February 14, 1918, "Hobnobbing with Heretics."

²³ *Ibid.*

as “dismal and abysmal apathy... to education in general excepting religious education.”²⁴ No branch of education could be safely neglected. Indeed, “under modern conditions a high school education is necessary to all boys and girls who are to have a chance in any state of life above the labouring class.”²⁵

In a series of outspoken articles Somerville admonished those Catholics who blamed deprivation and anti-Catholic discrimination for their inferior social and economic status. The plain truth was less consoling:

Through their own indifference, Catholics in Canada are letting themselves be out-classed by their Protestant fellow-citizens. They are... falling behind whether in the civil service, or professional careers, or in literature, science or industry. We cannot continue in our attitude... unless we are content to be an inferior people in this Dominion.²⁶

In English-speaking Canada to-day our chief lack is not opportunities for higher education, but ... lack of desire... lack of appreciation of its value and power.²⁷

The object of this education should be to develop leaders trained to deal with social-religious questions.

The Higher Command should not be purely clerical. We need laymen... with genius for leadership and large organization, that we may be ridden of that narrowness of outlook that is holding back Catholic progress in Canada.²⁸

This work and his extensive travels in Canada and the United States were major contributors to the intellectual and social maturing of Henry Somerville. He later described it as “the best educational experience of my life,” and Archbishop McNeil as “the greatest teacher I ever had. Toronto gave me confidence in myself. In its democratic atmosphere I learned to deal with people of different social position on equal terms.”²⁹ In return this “poor

²⁴ SOMERVILLE, *ibid.*, February 17, 1917, “Dismal and Abysmal Apathy.”

²⁵ SOMERVILLE, *ibid.*, January 3, 1918, “It Is Mind That Rules.” This theme was stressed in many articles. He was particularly concerned that in 1917, 348 Separate Schools in Ontario had no candidates sitting the High School Entrance Examinations; that less than 200 schools had candidates – only 704 boys and 789 girls had passed from the Separate Schools to High School. *Ibid.*, May 16, 1918, “A High School Education Is Needed For Every Normal Child.”

²⁶ SOMERVILLE, *ibid.*, April 25, 1918, “Progress Or Stagnation.”

²⁷ SOMERVILLE, *ibid.*, March 20, 1918, “The Means to Power.”

²⁸ SOMERVILLE, *ibid.*, April 4, 1918, “The Higher Command.”

²⁹ SOMERVILLE, *ibid.*, December 20, 1947, Address to the Holy Name Society, Toronto.

boy who had spent most of his life at a factory bench and lived in a pretty rough part of an industrial town” contributed insights to Canadian society.³⁰ He pointed out that the rifts that were developing between Canada’s cultural, economic and religious groups, would if unchecked, imperil national unity and progress. With Archbishop McNeil he worked to eliminate parochialism and foster more concern for unity in the Church and the nation. Because his judgments were informed, acute and often prophetic, he became the Archbishop’s chief adviser on social and economic matters.

This sojourn in Canada was climaxed in late 1918 by the award of an honorary M.A. from St. Francis Xavier University. He was always proud of this, his only university degree, for it verified that unlimited opportunities were available for all Catholics if they were diligent.

In December, 1918, Somerville went to England on holiday, intending to return to lecture at St. Francis Xavier. The Catholic Social Guild pleaded that he was needed as organizing secretary, as labour unrest and unemployment were threatening social stability.

He regretfully notified Archbishop McNeil of his decision to accept their offer, although he confessed that after three years’ absence

the English climate is maddening and the general arrangement of things so out of date, so lacking in order and swiftness and the people so slow yet so struggling, that I wish myself back in Toronto with its newness, its quickness and conveniences. However I feel that I have some obligation to work in England for I think that the social problem is such that I am more needed here.³¹

Between 1919 and 1933 his career in England prospered. In 1922 he resigned as paid secretary of the Catholic Social Guild (although he continued as a volunteer) to become the London correspondent of the *Toronto Daily Star*. In this capacity he was able to visit Russia in 1929 and wrote articles for many journals on Soviet economic and social experiments. His books, pamphlets and articles during this period indicated his increasing disillusionment with the prevailing social and economic system in England. He was convinced that Communism was not the answer, but neither was the boom and bust capitalism of The Twenties which had culminated in the Great Depression.

By 1932 he was somewhat dissatisfied also with his newspaper assignments. *The Star*, under Hindmarsh, was not receptive to his condemnation of Russia’s religious policy and preferred that their correspondent supply titillating despatches on the social conquests of the

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *McNeil Papers*, Somerville to Archbishop McNeil, February 3, 1919.

Prince of Wales and his circle.³² He therefore readily accepted Archbishop McNeil's offer of the editorship of *The Catholic Register*, even though it meant a considerable cut in income. He assured his bishop that

as far as breaking up our home here is concerned, my wife and I are quite ready to do that if we felt assured that I could do good work for the Catholic Church in another place.... My wife and I want to do what God wishes, not what is most comfortable and profitable in a material sense.³³

During Somerville's fifteen-year absence, the Church in Toronto had experienced the same financial prosperity and rapid physical expansion as secular institutions. Post-war immigration increased the Catholic population in the Archdiocese from 70,000 in 1913 to 128,000 by 1933;³⁴ new churches and elementary schools had necessitated heavy capital borrowing at inflated post-war interest rates. The social and financial lot of Catholics was improving, but the majority were still employed in factory and semi-skilled construction work; as Somerville had predicted, they were the first victims of the contracting economy.

The Register during the first four years of the Depression had reflected the bewilderment of Canadians as they sought for the causes of the crisis and groped for a way out of the maze. It commiserated with the suffering and destitute, counselled prayer in adversity, deplored the greed of the profiteers, but warned against "pulling down the whole system of capitalism and replacing it with some other system... too radical and too dangerous."³⁵

Somerville's return was signalled by the re-appearance of his "Life and Labour" column in October, 1933 in which he noted the evidence of the new trend to the Left in Canada with the appearance of Communism and the "serious challenge to the economic order" made by the C.C.F.³⁶ In subsequent columns he explained the application of the principles of *Quadragesimo Anno*, noting that its most enthusiastic supporters were Dr. John Ryan and Dr. Francis (later Bishop) Haas of the National Catholic Welfare Conference in Washington. Throughout the Depression, Somerville extensively reported and extolled their involvement in the Roosevelt National

³² The first cause for his discontent is cited in Ross HARKNESS, *J.E. Atkinson of the Star* (Toronto, 1963), pp. 292-3; the second cause was given by Mrs. Henry Somerville in an interview, February 9, 1973.

³³ *McNeil Papers*, Henry Somerville to Archbishop McNeil, July 28, 1932.

³⁴ Statistics from *The Official Catholic Directory* (New York, 1913 and 1933).

³⁵ *The Catholic Register*, June 15, 1933, Editorial.

³⁶ SOMERVILLE, *ibid.*, October 5, 1933, "Life and Labour." A more detailed analysis of the events surrounding the C.C.F. will appear in the July-August, 1976, issue of the *Chelsea Journal*.

Recovery Programme. It was one aspect of his and Archbishop McNeil's campaign to educate Catholics to the relevance of the Social Encyclicals to contemporary North American problems. For Canada, Somerville repeatedly proposed measures such as family allowances, government-subsidized fixed low-interest housing loans, government-sponsored capital building projects to relieve unemployment – expedients whereby the State could guide the economy yet not remove the incentives which private enterprise required to retain its viability.

After the founding of the C.C.F., Canadian Catholics were uncertain, in view of the papal anathemas against Socialism, whether it was licit to support a political party advocating such extensive state economic regulation. As early as January, 1934, Somerville declared unequivocally that this party was not Socialist in the sense proscribed by the Church. Indeed “the basic declarations of the C.C.F. are capable of an interpretation consistent with Catholic doctrine.”³⁷ He noted that the Canadian founders of the party derived their ideology from the British Labour Party, not Continental anti-clerical socialists, and that Cardinal Bourne approved of Catholics who sat in the Commons as Labour Party members. Especially following the condemnation of the C.C.F. by the Quebec bishops in March, 1934, Somerville repeatedly defended the right, even the advisability for Catholics to work for the new party to thwart the ultra-radicals who might attempt to foist their ideologies on its executive.

The Register was politically neutral, but Somerville wrote scathing denunciations of those corporations which the Stevens Commission revealed as unprincipled gougers of the public and ruthless exploiters of labour. Protecting citizens from such corporate immorality by state legislation was not Socialism!³⁸ He was particularly concerned that the Church not be associated with protecting the rights of these large corporate monopolies because it vigorously defended the inviolability of private property; he cautioned Archbishop McGuigan against premature condemnation of the C.C.F.³⁹

The differing diocesan policies on the C.C.F. troubled the Papal Nuncio and he requested the Provincial Council of the Ecclesiastical Province of Ontario in December, 1938, that they direct their attention “Upon the C.C.F., its nature, its finalities, its standing in regard to religion and the Church.”

³⁷ SOMERVILLE, *ibid.*, January 4, 1934, “Catholics and the C.C.F.”

³⁸ The above is a summary of a number of articles Somerville wrote in the *Register* during this period.

³⁹ Archbishop McGuigan who succeeded Archbishop McNeil in 1935 continued to use Henry Somerville as his chief adviser on economic and social policy. *The Register* continued its probing and critical editorials and news commentaries. As the official Catholic newspaper for the Diocese (circulation 19,000) it carried the Archbishop's imprimatur.

Msgr. Antoniutti reminded the bishops that no statement had been issued at their June meeting “on such a momentous question of actuality.”⁴⁰

Archbishop McGuigan replied on behalf of the five prelates at the Council that

as far as our own Dioceses are concerned the C.C.F. has not been sufficiently prominent to necessitate a complete and exhaustive study of its social doctrine... or the context of its programme.... Considering however the evils of the existing social order we feel ... according to our present knowledge ... that we could not positively condemn this political party as holding a social doctrine opposed to or unacceptable to the social teaching of the Church as revealed in the Encyclicals.

As the movement is nation-wide ... we respectfully suggest that the question be very carefully studied by a Committee of expert representatives of various sections of the country... Meanwhile we do not think that Catholics should be hastily condemned for joining the C.C.F. nor should they be forbidden to do so... This will avoid disunity, unfair criticism of the Church and confusion on our own social ideas.⁴¹

In view of Somerville’s statements on the C.C.F. in the Register in 1934, this declaration indicates that his views regarding the party had been accepted by Archbishop McGuigan. He realized, however, that the Quebec prelates’ condemnation of this party was being touted by its political rivals as the official policy of the Canadian Roman Catholic Church and he convinced Archbishop McGuigan that this must be publicly disavowed. In 1943 he found an ally in Murray Ballantyne, the editor of the Montreal edition of *The Register* who had arrived independently at the identical conclusion. His position and influence as lay adviser and confidant of Archbishop Charbonneau of Montreal was similar to Somerville’s in Toronto.⁴² The collaboration of these two laymen and their Archbishops to remove the Quebec condemnation of the C.C.F. was revealed in 1963.⁴³ In the long run this was work of inestimable importance. It assured a new generation of educated and publicly active Catholics of their freedom to participate in trade union and political organizations.

This group, many of them the children of that generation that Somerville

⁴⁰ *Archives of the Archdiocese of Toronto*, Msgr. Antoniutti to Archbishop McGuigan, December 9, 1938.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Archbishop McGuigan to Msgr. Ildebrando Antoniutti, December 17, 1938. This letter noted that present at this meeting were Most Rev. J.J. O’Brien, Most Rev. Felix Couturier, Most Rev. John T. Kidd, Most Rev. Joseph F. Ryan and himself.

⁴² Interview with Mr. Murray Ballantyne, July 19, 1974.

⁴³ Murray BALLANTYNE, “The Catholic Church and the C.C.F.,” *Canadian Catholic Historical Association, Study Sessions*, 30, 1963, pp. 33-45.

had pressed so ardently to support higher education and public involvement, achieved the goals he envisioned for the Catholic community. His contribution was that he was the first layman in English-speaking Canada, who because of his training and the support of the hierarchy, was able to introduce Catholics to a different pattern of ideas. At a time when they were unaware of their potential, he encouraged them to examine critically the larger world beyond their local parishes and dioceses, to examine the new ideologies, and to consider new solutions to social and economic dislocation. But he was not timid about stating that ideological controversy required intensive study; Catholics must eschew irresponsible and rhetorical clichés and cultivate the clarity of thought which only advanced education could bring.

He provided his readers with reasoned explanations of new economic theories which could contribute to changing the social order. He did not believe that the introduction of lessons in Keynesian economic theory was inappropriate in a Church newspaper for he held that all knowledge assisted the Church's mission to benefit people materially and spiritually.

In introducing these ideas Somerville was amplifying the papal directives in the Social Encyclicals which articulated a social outlook critical of both the liberal capitalist system and of some forms of socialism, but which asserted that if the generally accepted values of justice and charity were taken seriously, it would be possible to change the social order without radically changing its structure.

These aims were admirable, but this notion of changing habits of mind that the social order might be improved, is not new nor has it been conspicuously successful. Disaster more often than conversion seems to have produced measures for overcoming man's social ills. In retrospect, we can see more clearly that neither the Catholic theorists, nor the liberal economists, nor the socialists were able, during the Depression, to identify the causes of the collapse. They all accepted some assumptions, such as the inevitability of continuous growth, about which we are now less certain.

Nevertheless Henry Somerville did provide an impetus for his own generation, and those who followed him, to abandon the traditional ruts in the political and economic road and at least to consider what could be achieved in the social order if higher values were given priority over individual selfish objectives. He was also saying that on non-doctrinal issues, a less dogmatic and more flexible Catholicism could be more influential and therefore beneficial to all men. As the social concern of *Rerum Novarum* was the culmination of a century of debate by clergy and laity, so too, the emergence of the socially flexible and concerned Catholicism of the 1960's reflected the work of men like Henry Somerville who, as *The Register* declared, "perhaps more than any other layman, helped to form the minds of Catholics of his time" in the English-Canadian Catholic Church.