

Reverend William Richard Harris, 1846-1923

by Robert J. SCOLLARD

The subject of this paper is the life and writings of Rev. William Richard Harris, priest of the Archdiocese of Toronto, who was born in Ireland on March 10, 1846, and who died in Toronto on March 5, 1923. Dean Harris, as he was widely known, was an outstanding parish priest, a well-travelled man, an author upon whom the University of Ottawa conferred an honorary doctorate, Nov. 12, 1896, the University of Toronto its LL.D., May 9, 1916, and L'Université Laval a D. ès L., Aug. 20, 1920.¹

No full length biography of Harris has been published. One was written in 1924 by Thomas O'Hagan (1855-1939) for the *Makers of Canadian Literature* series but it was never printed.² An earlier manuscript life is no more than a list of the principal dates in his life down to 1890.³ The first biographical sketch of Harris was published in 1888 and thereafter his name appeared regularly in works of collective biography.⁴ It will be the purpose of this paper to correct inaccuracies in these notices and to fill the gaps in the

¹ I would like to acknowledge the assistance given me in the preparation of this paper by Mrs. Margaret McGrath of the University of St. Michael's College Library, Rev. James McGivern, S.J., Archivist for the Archdiocese of Toronto, the staffs of the Archives of Ontario, the Legislative Library of the Province of Ontario, the Metropolitan Toronto Central Library, and the United Church of Canada Archives.

² Manuscript of 75 typed pages with corrections and additions in longhand. In the Edith and Lorne Pierce Collection of Canadian Literary Manuscripts, Douglas Library, Queen's University, Kingston.

³ Archives of the Archdiocese of Toronto.

⁴ George MacLean ROSE: *A Cyclopaedia of Canadian Biography*. Toronto, 1888, pp. 224-25. This has the fullest account of Harris' work as a parish priest. Henry James MORGAN: *The Canadian Men and Women of the Time*. Toronto, 1898, pp. 442-43; 21 ed., 1912, pp. 5-6. Georgina Pell CURTIS *The American Catholic Who's Who*. St. Louis, 1911, pp. 274-75. *The Catholic Encyclopedia and Its Makers*. New York, 1917, p. 73. Jesse Edgar MIDDLETON: *The Municipality of Toronto*. Toronto, 1923, v.2, p. 18. *Encyclopedia of Canada*. Toronto, 1936, v. 3, p. 116. Walter ROMIG: *The Guide to Catholic Literature*. Detroit, 1940, pp. 497-98. William Stewart WALLACE: *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. Toronto, 1945, v. 1, p. 264. Vernon Blair RHODENIZER: *Canadian Literature in English*. Montreal, 1965, p. 401. A full list of Harris' books is given in the *National Union Catalog, Pre-1956 Imprints*. London, 1972, v. 232, pp. 191-92.

story of his life using archival material, the reminiscences of friends who are still alive⁵ and the glimpses of himself that Harris gives in his writings.

Harris seldom spoke about his family or himself. If the conversation turned on these topics he avoided a direct answer and in a humorous way made it clear that the subject should be changed.⁶ When official requests for personal information compelled an answer he seems to have been careless in providing it. The first printed biographical notice gave the date of his birth as March 3, 1847, and the place as the City of Cork.⁷ Two years later the manuscript biography of 1890, presumably also dependent upon information supplied by Harris gave the place simply as Cork, Ireland, and the date as March 10, 1847, adding that he came to Canada in the same year.⁸ His name does not appear in the baptismal registers of the four parishes then within the City of Cork.⁹ From the parish of Tracton in the Diocese of Cork, Rev. Richard Harris wrote that the name William Richard Harris intrigued him but it did not appear in his baptismal register. He suggested that his namesake, and Harris is a common name, might have been born in one of the other dioceses that are also in County Cork. (He mentioned that the name Harris was a Welsh name which meant son of Harry.)¹⁰ Rev. Edward Kelly who was well acquainted with both Harris and his clerical friends used March 10, 1846, as the date of birth and gave the place simply as Cork, Ireland.¹¹ I am tentatively accepting this date.

Little is known about his family. His father's name was Richard¹² but his mother's name is not known. His Last Will mentioned a sister, Mrs.

⁵ Personal interviews with: Msgr. Edward Brennan, Dec. 9, 1973; Msgr. John Corrigan, Nov. 17, 1973; Msgr. William Davis, Jan. 3, 1974; Rev. Robert Miller, Oct. 19, 1973; Rev. John O'Reilly, Nov. 17, 1973; and Rev. Francis Pennylegion, Nov. 17, 1973. Letters from: Brother Cyril Powers, FSC, Jan. 16, 1974; Rev. Walter Forgach, Dec. 8 & 21, 1973; Msgr. Athol Murray, Jan. 26 & May 28, 1974; Rev. Michael Oliver, CSB, Oct. 16 & 24, 1973. These reminiscences cover only the last years of Harris' life, but those of Msgrs. Brennan and Murray give some glimpses of his earlier years because their fathers were friends of Dean Harris.

⁶ Interviews with Rev. Robert Miller and Rev. John O'Reilly.

⁷ G.M. ROSE: *Cyclopedia of Canadian Biography*, p. 224.

⁸ Archives of the Archdiocese of Toronto.

⁹ Letters to the author from St. Mary's Cathedral, St. Finbarr, St. Patrick, and Sts. Peter and Paul Parishes.

¹⁰ Letter to the author, Mar. 29, 1974.

¹¹ "Obituary: Very Reverend Dean HARRIS" in *Archaeological Report* 34 (1923). U. 140.

¹² Treasurer's Account Books, 1864-65, in the Archives of the University of St. Michael's College, Toronto.

William Hickey and her husband living in Chicago and a grand niece, Frances O'Brien of Toronto.¹³ An attempt has been made to link him with Mary Harris Jones (1830-1930), an American labor leader, but her biography gives 1835 as the year when her father came to the United States.¹⁴

Equally little is known about Harris' early life and education in Toronto. The Christian Brothers taught him in one of the Separate Schools.¹⁵ Then he attended St. Michael's College as a day student and he was in 1865-66 a student for the priesthood who received financial help from the Diocese of Toronto.¹⁶ From September 1867 to June 1869 he taught English at the Collège de Sainte-Anne-de-la-Pocatière, Quebec, and also studied theology. Bishop John Lynch (1816-1888) visited the College in May 1868 and on the 21st of that month admitted Harris to first tonsure.¹⁷ During these years Harris grew to be a viking of a man, 6' 4" tall, with broad shoulders and the grace of an athlete. His strength was prodigious. His sports were handball, boxing¹⁸ and rowing.¹⁹

Toronto was a missionary diocese in the 1860's and Bishop Lynch sent some of his students to the Propaganda College in Rome. Harris went there in the Fall of 1869, obtained the B.D. degree in 1870, and was ordained priest on June 11 of the same year by Cardinal Costantino Patrizzi (1798-1876)...²⁰ It is worth noting that Harris was in Rome during the First Vatican Council and enjoyed opportunities, not to be missed by his gregarious nature, of seeing bishops and priests from all over the world.

When Bishop Lynch was solemnly installed as first Archbishop of Toronto on September 11, 1870, Harris carried the pontifical insignia in the entrance procession and then celebrated Mass outdoors for those unable to

¹³ *Toronto Daily Star*, Apr. 11, 1923. This information was supplied by Brother Cyril Powers, FSC, in his letter to the author, Jan. 16, 1974.

¹⁴ *Dictionary of American Biography*. New York, 1932, v. 5, pp. 195-96. Mrs. William D. McLean of Beckley, West Virginia, is researching this possible relationship.

¹⁵ Brother Prudent MacDonald, FSC, letter to the author, Jan. 28, 1974.

¹⁶ Treasurer's Account Books, 1864-66, in the Archives of the University of St. Michael's College. Verified in the Archives of the Archdiocese of Toronto.

¹⁷ Abbé Lionel LÉVEILLÉ, Archivist of the College, letter to the author, Jan. 11, 1974. See also Wilfid LEBON: *Histoire du Collège de Sainte-Anne-de-la-Pocatière*. Quebec, 1948, v. 1, p. 255.

¹⁸ Interview with Rev. Robert Miller, Oct. 19, 1973.

¹⁹ Msgr. Athol Murray, letter to the author, Jan. 26, 1974. See also R.S. HUNTER: *Rowing in Canada Since 1848*. Hamilton, 1933, p. 21.

²⁰ Register of Ordinations, in the Archives of the Archdiocese of Toronto. The date usually given is June 21st.

gain admission to St. Michael's Cathedral.²¹ Shortly afterwards he was appointed assistant to Rev. Timothy Sullivan (1842-1923) at St. James Parish, Colgan. Harris' name appears in the register of baptisms between Nov. 3, 1870, and Oct. 9, 1875.²² The archives of the Archdiocese of Toronto mention a temporary appointment as assistant at St. Malachy's Parish, Brock Township, but the parish records there make no mention of his actually coming.²³ From Nov. 25, 1871, onwards Harris signed the Colgan registers as pastor. In this appointment he first showed himself to be a "building pastor" when he erected St. Mary's Church at Achill (West Adjala).

From Colgan Harris went to St. Michael's Cathedral, Toronto, where his name appears as rector in the baptismal register between Nov. 9, 1875, and Oct. 10, 1876.²⁴ Next he moved to the parish of St. John Chrysostom, Newmarket, where his name appears in the baptismal register between Oct. 15, 1876, and June 22, 1884.²⁵ Here he completed the church, built a rectory and a school. For his successor, Rev. Patrick Whitney (1843-1918) he left a note informing him of the ordinary revenues of the parish and also setting forth his personal views on raising money for parish needs:

Experience has convinced me that it is not – religiously speaking – wise policy to harass people with appeals for aid for small repairs, etc. Square dealing on the part of the priest towards his people gives him a great leverage. On a money basis we are all equal.²⁶

Harris' last parochial appointment was to St. Catharine's Parish, St. Catharines, Ontario, where his name appears in the baptismal register between July 6, 1884, and June 2, 1901. He went there as administrator, then was appointed pastor and Dean of Niagara Peninsula on Dec. 17, 1884.²⁷ In St. Catharines he continued his building activities, opening new schools, enlarging and improving the church. The financial policy he enunciated at

²¹ *Canadian Freeman*, Sept. 15, 1870.

²² Rev. Paul Switalski, pastor of St. James Parish, Colgan, letter to the author, Jan. 30, 1974.

²³ Rev. T.J. McManus, pastor of St. Joseph's Parish, Beaverton, letter to the author, Mar. 11, 1974. St. Malachy's Church, Brock Township, is now attended from Beaverton.

²⁴ Msgr. Pearce Lacey, rector of St. Michael's Cathedral, Toronto, letter to the author, Dec. 10, 1973.

²⁵ Rev. Walter Forgach, pastor of St. John Chrysostom Parish, Newmarket, letter to the author, Dec. 8, 1973.

²⁶ Cf. List of Manuscripts in the Bibliography.

²⁷ Msgr. M.H. Delaney, rector of St. Catherine's Cathedral, St. Catharines, letter to the author, Jan. 31, 1974.

New market was developed and led him to publish a “Statement of Receipts and Expenditures for St. Catharine’s Parish, from Jan. 1st, 1885, to Dec. 31st 1888.” In reporting this the *Catholic Weekly Review* observed:

The happy results which have flowed from his generous confidence in his people, first in the method in which he sought their co-operation, and now in the publication of this Statement would seem to argue for a more general adoption of the plan.²⁸

In St. Catharines Harris worked to promote Christian good will but when Rev. George Burson (1833?-1895) attacked the Catholic religion in the local Orange Hall, Harris replied on the following Sunday night in his own church. He ended his sermon by saying he would

leave to the members of Knox Church and the public at large to judge the wisdom or expediency of a minister of the gospel of Christ scattering in the furrow of society the seeds of religious rancour and bitterness that might some day ripen into a hatred from which there would be reaped a harvest of barren regrets.²⁹

He also strove to smooth out private difficulties arising from religious differences. Shortly after his arrival in St. Catharines he wrote to Colonel Charles Clarke (1826-1909), Speaker of the Ontario Legislature, in support of the application of David Boyle (1842-1911) for a position. The appointment was being held up possibly because

In conversation with the Honble Mr. Ross, I was given to understand that he was of the opinion that Mr. Boyle was an agnostic.³⁰

I do not know if Boyle was or was not an agnostic but he did enter the government service and became director of the Ontario Provincial Museum which published each year an *Archaeological Report*. Friendship with Boyle interested Harris in the archaeological remains of the Indians of Ontario.³¹ The first notice that I have found of this interest was in 1890 when the Canadian Institute obtained from Rev. Théophile Laboreau (1837-1908) some relics of the early French days dug from an Indian grave near Penetanguishene.

²⁸ *Catholic Weekly Review*, Feb. 16, 1889.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, Nov. 17, 1888.

³⁰ ARCHIVES OF ONTARIO. Cf. List of Manuscripts in the Bibliography.

³¹ Other mentors of Harris in this field were John Henderson (1846-), Principal of St. Catharines C.I., and Frank Hayward Severance (1856-1931), Secretary of the Buffalo Historical Society.

Dean Harris, of St. Catharines, an authority on such matters, thinks it probable that they were sent to Canada during the regime of Cardinal Richelieu.³²

Harris had a larger than average clerical library and his included books on ethnology and Canadian Catholic history. The first published fruits of his reading and his conversations with experts in these fields was an article “The Indian Missions of Western Canada” that appeared in 1892.³³ The title needs a word of explanation. Ignoring the entry of Manitoba into Confederation and recalling his pre-Confederation postal address, “Toronto, Canada West,” Harris passed up plain “Ontario” and used “Western Canada.” He expanded this article into the book, *History of the Early Missions in Western Canada*, Toronto, 1893. In the preface he described it as

a beginning and [it] will, I trust, be an incentive to others who have time and talent to lend their aid in gathering material for the Ecclesiastical History of this Province.³⁴

We can only regret that his invitation was not accepted and that the ecclesiastical history of this Province has still to be written. Two years later, just before the 25th anniversary of his ordination, he published *The Catholic Church in the Niagara Peninsula, 1626-1895*.

Harris was now at the peak of his pastoral career, an orator who was called upon for special sermons,³⁵ the leader of Catholic works in the Niagara Peninsula,³⁶ and at the same time continuing to participate in many other activities of the Archdiocese of Toronto.³⁷ He was a delegate to the Pan-American Congress of Religion and Education held at Toronto, July 1895, and read a paper on “The Mission Work of the Catholic Church in

³² *Catholic Weekly Review*, May 17, 1890.

³³ In the *Jubilee Volume, 1842-1892, the Archdiocese of Toronto and Archbishop Walsh*. Toronto, 1892, pp. 1-36. Harris’ contribution dealt with the years 1615-1760.

³⁴ p. v.

³⁵ E.g. He preached at the opening of St. Helen’s Church, Toronto. *Catholic Weekly Review*, June 1, 1889.

³⁶ The only mention of Harris in the *Annual Reports* of the Canadian Catholic Historical Association records his lead-off contribution to the building fund of a new retreat house at the Shrine of Our Lady of Peace, Niagara Falls, Ontario, v.21 (1954), p. 58. His letter accompanying his donation, May 30, 1890, was published in *The Carmelite Review*, 1 (1893), p. 46.

³⁷ E.g. The organization meeting of The Catholic Truth Society. *Catholic Weekly Review*, Jan. 18, 1890.

Western Ontario.” The Buffalo Historical Society invited him to read a paper at their meeting of March 23, 1896, and in the same year he was a delegate to the Irish National Convention in Dublin. In 1898 J. Castell Hopkins (1864-1923) asked him for an article on the Catholic Church in Ontario for his *Canada: An Encyclopedia of the Country*. As the century drew to a close the strain of administering a large parish, the burden of outside engagements, and his efforts to do some writing took their toll on Harris’ health. A division among the people of his parish^{38 38} led to his resignation on April 26, 1901.³⁹

Harris left St. Catharines in the first week of June and, obtaining leave from the Archdiocese of Toronto, travelled widely during the next few years. In a book based on articles contributed to the Toronto *Mail and Empire* he described himself as:

an exile from my own land, driven to the South by a northern specialist.⁴⁰

During these years he kept up his love of learning.

While I resided in Guatemala City I was a daily visitor to the library of the university, where are shelved many of the books carried away from the monasteries when the property of the Church was secularized in Guatemala.⁴¹

In 1905 Harris settled down in Salt Lake City as editor of the *Intermountain Catholic*. The masthead of this newspaper did not carry the name of its editor and there are no official records for the next seven years of his life.⁴² In 1909 he published *The Catholic Church in Utah*. A large part of this book is a translation into English of the *Diario* or Journal of the Franciscan priests Francisco Atanasio Dominiguez and Silvestre Velez de Escalante (fl. 1668-1679) who entered Utah in 1675-76. With the approach of the American Bi-Centennial this translation is attracting interest in that State.⁴³ While in Salt Lake City he contributed three articles to the *Catholic*

³⁸ Interview with Msgr. Edward Brennan. His father was a member of the deputation seeking to retain Harris as pastor.

³⁹ ARCHIVES OF THE ARCHDIOCESE OF TORONTO.

⁴⁰ *Days and Nights in the Tropics*, p. 17. There is in the Archives of the Archdiocese of Toronto a letter from Dr. J. Sheehan, 31 Church Street, St. Catharines, May 23, 1901, advising “change in your conditions and surroundings is imperative.”

⁴¹ *Days and Nights in the Tropics*, p. 171.

⁴² Very Rev. John J. Hedderman, letter to the author, Feb. 4, 1974.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

Encyclopedia and in 1908 he published another travel book, *By Path and Trail*. After his history of the Catholic Church in Utah appeared, Harris resigned as editor of the local Catholic newspaper but remained in the diocese as chaplain of St. Ann's Orphanage until 1910 and for some months more in the same capacity at Judge Mercy Hospital.

He was now an aging man whose thoughts went back to his first book. In 1912 he published a new edition with a new title, *Pioneers of the Cross in Canada*. He had been away from Toronto for eleven years and now at the urging of Msgr. Martin Whelan (1867-1935) then rector of St. Michael's Cathedral, he took an appointment as chaplain of St. John's Industrial School on Jan. 18, 1913. He resigned as chaplain on April 16, 1921, but remained in residence at the school until his death on March 5, 1923.⁴⁴ He was buried in Mount Hope Cemetery, Toronto. On Oct. 29, 1932, his remains were removed to St. Augustine's Cemetery on the grounds of St. Augustine's Seminary, Scarborough.

The chaplaincy at St. John's School gave Harris leisure for writing. A contemporary Catholic writer, Thomas O'Hagan, was of the opinion that Harris' best writing was done in his travel books.

In his descriptive writing the Dean is most happy. Here he gives proof of the accuracy of his observation. We must confess that we have rarely come across a finer bit of descriptive characterization than the following "certificate of character" which our author gives that little semi-tropical beast of burden, the burro, and which gives title to one of the chapters in *By Path and Trail*: The burro is not as Sunday School books picture him, the clown and puppet of domestic beasts. He is the imperturbable philosopher of the animal kingdom, the wisest thing in his own sphere of existence, and the best and truest friend of mountaineers. He is a stoic among fatalists, a reliable staff in emergencies, and an anchor of hope in dangerous places. Like the Champion of the prize ring, Joe Gans, or the sporting editor's 'King of the diamond turf', Cy Young, the donkey 'neither drinks nor smokes, nor chews tobacco'; in a word, he's a brick.⁴⁵

One historical reviewer was less appreciative of Harris' style:

The popular narrative is set in florid descriptions of natural scenery... In spite of repetitions and of an irritating

⁴⁴ Brother Cyril Powers, FSC, letter to the author, Jan. 16, 1974.

⁴⁵ Thomas O'HAGAN: *Dean Harris. Appreciation*, pp. 6-7. Unpublished manuscript in the Edith and Lome Pierce Collection of Canadian Literary Manuscripts, Douglas Library, Queen's University, Kingston.

peculiarity of style which seeks to provide for almost every noun a superlative qualification, the book possesses interest which belong to sincerity and enthusiasm.⁴⁶

Harris also offended historians by never compiling an index for his books and offering either a short bibliography or none at all. The weaknesses of his historical writings were due to an excessive reliance on his memory and to his lack of a thorough training in research which would have made him more critical in his use of sources and more precise in the presentation of his narrative.

Harris was aware of his limitations as a historian and he sought guidance from well-known authorities. The acknowledgments in the preface of his first book show that he sought help from the beginning.

In the collection of material for this volume I have received valuable help from Father Jones, of St. Mary's College, Montreal; Father Rouxel, of the Seminary of St. Sulpice; Mr. J.H. Coyne, St. Thomas; Mr. James Bain, of the Toronto Library, and Mr. John Henderson, M.A., of this city.⁴⁷

One of his travel books pictures him as a typical modern tourist.

I remember well the day I came down from the Sieretta mountains and was passing on foot through the little town of Aguas Coloradas, the church of which was well worth seeing. I had my camera and the field glasses hanging from my shoulders, some few samples in a canvas bag, was wearing a suit of rough khaki and was not altogether the figure for the inside of a church.⁴⁸

Another book shows that he did not cease to travel after his return to Toronto.⁴⁹

From the first years of his priestly life Harris took an active part in community affairs. At Newmarket he impressed people with the value of the Public Library, lectured for the Mechanics' Institute, and was active in the Association of Mechanics' Institutes of Ontario where he served on the

⁴⁶ W.P.M. KENNEDY, Review of "The Cross-Bearers of the Saguenay" in the *Canadian Historical Review*. 2 (1921) p. 79.

⁴⁷ *History of the Early Missions in Western Canada*, p. vi.

⁴⁸ *Travel-Talks*, p. 139.

⁴⁹ *Here and There in Mexico*, p. 163.

executive and was President in 1886.⁵⁰ At the time of his death he was President of the Ontario Archaeological Association. There were three public dinners that he always attended: the St. Andrew Society, the St. George Society, and the St. Patrick's Society.⁵¹ One cause he never espoused was that of total abstinence.

Harris made friends easily and one of the obituaries written at the time of his death gave as the secret of his widespread friendships, "his unflinching kindness and courtesy."⁵² Another added:

His was the good humour and soft word that always turned wrath away and disarmed resentment.⁵³

Harris lived in an age when the personal magnetism of the orator and the author was a source of influence. In his historical books he met a need of his time, recapturing in a romantic and appealing way the lives of the natives and the first missionaries to Canada. His *Prehistoric Man* reacts to the newly popularized teachings on evolution and his *Essays in Occultism, Spiritism, and Demonology* show him to be a man attuned to the needs of his time. But he does not seem to mean very much to later generations and neither the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* nor the *Encyclopedia Canadiana* devote an article to his life and writings. Perhaps the judgment of these editors is correct; nevertheless, when the Ecclesiastical History of Ontario that he envisioned is written his life will have an honorable place in its pages as a parish priest ahead of his time in the handling of parish finances, in ecumenical matters, as a community leader, and his writings will present him as a pioneer in adult education.

Let us bring this paper to a close by quoting the thoughtful words of his Presbyterian friend:

The dead priest, scholar, traveler, friend, now lies "in the pomp of eternal silence." But his memory leaves no sting. Protestants and Catholics alike will follow him to the tomb. The light of love he kindled in many a heart and home will still burn and although that kindly sun has set,

⁵⁰ Annual Reports and Minute Books of the Association of Mechanics' Institutes of Ontario. In the ARCHIVES OF ONTARIO.

⁵¹ Interview with Msgr. Edward Brennan.

⁵² "An Old Friend" [pseud.]: "The Late Dean Harris" in *The Year Book of St. Michael's College, Toronto*. 14 (1923) p. 19.

⁵³ Rev. Michael CLINE, "Death of the Very Rev. Dean Harris" in *St. Joseph Lilies*. 11 (Mar. 1923) p. 13.

the afterglow is rich and radiant to many an unforgetting heart like mine.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ R.E. KNOWLES, “Light of Love He Kindled In Many Hearts Still Burns” in the *Toronto Daily Star*, Tuesday, Mar. 6, 1923, p. 17.

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