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THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA
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RUSSELL H. CONWELL
AND THE CRISIS OF AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM

A DISSERTATION
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DANIEL W. BJORK
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RUSSELL H. CONWELL
AND THE CRISIS OF AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM

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PREFACE

This study of Russell H. Conwell was in the main lines provoked by three recent works which explore the crisis in American individualism between the Civil War and World War I. Robert Wiebe's The Search For Order 1877-1920 brilliantly exposed the social straining which occurred when a society found itself in the throes of a metamorphosis from "island communities" to a "distended society." R. Jackson Wilson masterfully explored the efforts of several American thinkers to redefine a changing relationship between the individual and a society in flux. His book, In Quest of Community: Social Philosophy in the United States, 1860-1920, revealed both the creativity and the contradictions in the attempts of several American thinkers to seek social cohesion without losing individuality. William McLoughlin dealt more directly with one man's adaptation to a kaleidoscope of both social and intellectual change in The Meaning of Henry Ward Beecher: An Essay on the Shifting Values of Mid-Victorian America, 1840-1870. Both because of McLoughlin's biographical focus and his stress on the functional nature of Beecher's role in easing the stress that the impact of corporate capitalism and Darwinism had on romantic individualism and evangelical Protestantism, his study is a rough model for my inquiry into Conwell.

Any parallel to the McLoughlin work, however, should not obscure the centrality to this study of the major problems Wiebe and Wilson pose concerning the meaning of American individualism. This work is not, in any sense, a biography of Conwell. The opening chapter is merely a sketch of certain facets of his life which, hopefully, will relate to the large questions dealt with later.

The assumption will be made at the outset that Conwell faced problems of style and content that were indigenous to an America experiencing a profound crisis and wrenching of the values of American individualism. The questions which Conwell consciously or unconsciously asked were, in the broad lines, questions that both intellectuals and the mass of Americans were concerned with, though in different ways, throughout this period. How to encourage social and economic mobility and retain a community of Christian brotherhood? How to build new social institutions and yet remain individual centered? How to insure material progress without losing traditional idealism? How to keep the common man central in an age of emerging corporate control? There is a certain conceptional melting of each of these questions into wide categories of opposites: change versus tradition, materialism against idealism, and individualism opposed to institutionalization. Yet, each question contains a specificity which was addressed to Conwell's life--or, to which Conwell addressed himself.

As Conwell's life unfolded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and became enmeshed in these contradictions

and ambivalences, he strove to remove the resulting disquietude. Put differently, his life had a functional dimension: his language as well as his institution-building activities show how American society could relax social and intellectual tensions in periods of great transition and confusion. It will not be argued that Conwell's influence was pervasive enough to have dictated the response to these tensions. It is rather in giving clues to a style by which large numbers of Americans tried to reduce the pain of entering an emerging modern society that Conwell's life may prove illuminating.

There are several people who helped this dissertation to become a reality. Among them is Dr. David Levy, my advisor, who must share a good portion of any merit this study possesses. It was through his wisdom in securing the perfect mixture of suggestive criticism and much needed encouragement that my intellectual distortions were hopefully kept to a tolerable minimum. His infinite patience with a writer whose technical difficulties were monumental revealed his ability not to be dissuaded by the impossible. I am also greatly indebted to Dr. Robert Shalhope whose conversations in and out of a seminar on Jacksonian America helped focus my thinking on the historical continuity of the problem of American individualism. I would be remiss if my gratitude was not extended to Professor Henry Tobias and Dean John Ezell, who although they did not directly guide the direction of this dissertation, helped mold the thinking of the writer at an earlier stage of his graduate study. The curators

of the Templana Collection in the Samuel Paley Library at Temple University, Mrs. Miriam Crawford and Mrs. Ray Wiener, both skillfully aided a novice in historical sleuthing by providing valuable research materials dealing with Conwell and his institutions. A special measure of appreciation is extended to my parents, Victor and Grace Bjork and Mrs. Shirley Miller of Toledo, Ohio, and to Alexis Rodgers of the Department of History at the University of Oklahoma for their technical help in the development of the final copy. Lastly, I could never adequately express the full quality of my gratitude to my wife, Rhonda, for the sacrifices she made so her husband might culminate this project, so I will not try.

RUSSELL H. CONWELL
AND THE CRISIS OF AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM

CHAPTER I

Russell Herman Conwell lived a long and what many would consider (and many did) a fully active life. He was born on February 15, 1843, eighteen years before the Civil War began and died on December 6, 1925, slightly more than seven years after the end of World War I. His nearly eighty-three years of life spanned an era of tremendous transition in American life. The change from the America of President John Tyler to that of President Calvin Coolidge constituted nothing less than the shift from an essentially agricultural society to a full-blown corporate system. But that was only the economic side of a transformation which included gigantic intellectual, social, and cultural innovations. It would be foolish to suppose that this frenzy of change did not mightily affect the life and thought of Russell Conwell.

His beginnings belied the tremendous historical pressures which were to churn through his years. He was born the second of three children to Martin and Miranda Conwell on a small farm in Western Massachusetts near the village of South Worthington.

His father was "a tall vigorous man" whose own father had come from Baltimore. Russell's mother, who had migrated to Massachusetts from New York, looked like a seventeenth century New England spinster. Although Martin Conwell was a farmer he also labored as a stonemason and even opened a small store on the Conwell farm. From meager evidence describing the general economic condition of the family during Russell's childhood, it is known the home was "very plain and simple in the extreme," but not poverty-stricken.¹ There is nothing indicating Russell was more attached to one parent than the other.

Conwell's childhood environment was highly work-oriented. In spite of glowing reminiscences of his boyhood activities, the impression lingers that Russell's time was tightly regimented and filled with hard physical labor:

We were kept busy on the farm; . . . We had to make our own implements and do everything connected with every trade which touched our lives. We tanned woodchuck skins and prepared the pelts of foxes and musk-

¹Russell H. Conwell quoted in Agnes Rush Burr, Russell H. Conwell and His Work (Philadelphia: John C. Winston Company, 1917), 33. I have relied heavily throughout this sketch of Conwell on the Burr biography because it is the best available. Sadly, there is yet no full professional biography of Conwell. The shortcomings of Miss Burr's work are severe: it is virtually uncritical and is saturated with Conwell's own remembrances as he told them to Burr when he was in his late seventies. Yet, it is by far the fullest of the remaining biographies, which all suffer from an almost incredible adulation of Conwell. See A. E. Higgins, Scaling the Eagle's Nest (Springfield, Massachusetts: James D. Gill, 1889). Robert Jones Burdette, Modern Temple and the Templars (New York, Boston and Chicago: Silver, Burdette and Company, 1894). Albert Hatcher Smith, The Life of Russell H. Conwell (Boston, New York, and Chicago: Silver, Burdette and Company, 1899). Russell H. Conwell, Acres of Diamonds with His Life and Achievements by Robert Shackleton (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1915). This work was republished by Harpers in 1950.

rats. We stuffed birds, prepared sauces, canned vegetables, dried apples, built sheds and lean-tos, and used the plane and the saw to make stanchions for the cattle. We made wagons, sleds, desks, bedsteads, hoes, plows, and harnesses. We manufactured water pipe, locks, kitchen utensils, blank school books, pens, pencils, sugar-buckets, traps, and maple sugar. We filed saws, hewed lumber, peeled hemlock bark and gathered herbs²

If there was any romanticized illusion about what a life-time of such toiling meant to the human constitution Conwell answered it by noting, "My father died at age sixty and my mother at sixty-three, both of them having been worn out with ceaseless work through many years of struggle with poverty and care."³

The only interruptions in this regimen of hard work, outside of time spent in school, were the pleasures he gained from playing the family organ and the excitement which came to the household because of its association with the underground railroad. John Brown stopped frequently at the Conwell house as he had business dealings with Martin Conwell. The death of Brown was for Russell, as for many New Englanders, an experience of profound moral awakening which contrasted sharply with the routine of the devout but pedestrian Methodism of his parents. Conwell remembered William Cullen Bryant (who lived nearby), and Frederick Douglass also visited his home, but John Brown was remembered as the most momentous figure of his youth.

²Conwell quoted in Burr, p. 39.

³Ibid., p. 40.

The opportunity to play music and meet an occasional celebrity was not sufficiently stimulating to relieve the routine and the toil of his early years. If they had been, his two attempts to escape from home as an adolescent would be more difficult to explain.

Conwell's own recollection of running away from home substantiates the notion that he was tired of the monotony and drudgery of his daily life. The "smallness of our cottage--compared with the wonderful wealth and luxury of the palaces of Babylon [of which he dreamed]--filled me with discontent, and I chafed at our homely labors and rebelled at the fare found on our table." How suffocating his own existence seemed: ". . . there were great worlds for me to conquer, which I could never find in my native hills."⁴

There was little doubt that the contrast between an imagined, adventurous world and the boredom of his work-a-day existence loomed large in his decision to leave home:

One day at a neighbor's house I read a story printed in the New York Ledger, about a runaway boy who had become a comrade of Captain Kidd and had hidden treasures in Florida. The adventures of this boy and the great boxes of gold which he found buried in the sand were a continual harassment to me. One night there came to me the thought that I, too, might run away from home and be as great as those men in the story, and all the next day I pondered over it until I finally resolved to venture forth into the great unknown world and see its beauties and seek its fortunes.⁵

⁴Ibid., p. 68.

⁵Ibid.

Here indeed was a way for a boy to combine his youthful energies with the inspiration of great adventure. How could sawing wood and making household articles compete with Captain Kidd?

Young Conwell's first flight was attempted at age thirteen and got only as far as Boston. Quickly spending his small store of cash on train fare, he unsuccessfully looked for work and ended his first day away from home sleeping in a discarded hogshed. He awoke the next day famished, but was fortunate enough to find breakfast and a friend. The friend, Deacon George W. Chipman, superintendent of the Merrimac Street Mission, furnished the now disillusioned traveler with a return ticket to South Worthington, thus ending his first adventure. But Conwell's roaming urge was still strong. Two years later he left not only his home but his country. The fifteen year old, with parental permission, worked his way from New York City to Liverpool on a cattle steamer and wandered about Europe for several months. Once back in America he was again dissatisfied about the rewards of travel and vowed that, ". . . If I could only get back home I would never leave it again."⁶ His life would show both the symbolic truth and the literal error of such a promise.

II

Since educating youth was to assume much of Conwell's adult energy it is worth taking a close look at his own educational experiences. His formal schooling began at three when he walked

⁶Ibid., p. 74.

with his elder brother Charles to a district school between the hamlets of South Worthington and Ringville. Rote learning was the prevailing educational methodology and Russell did not escape it. He was taught to learn by making "on the mind a photographic impression of the page, so that it could be recalled in its entirety, even to the details of punctuation."⁷ Evidently he mastered the technique well as he later was able to repeat from memory the first two books of Milton's "Paradise Lost," and a goodly portion of Blackstone, and was able to learn several foreign languages while commuting between home and his legal work in Boston.

Conwell never disguised his contempt for what passed for education in his youth: "The New England District School in 1845 was a motley gathering of all ages and grades . . . [whose] teachers were a strange conglomeration of Latin, Greek, mathematics, ancient history, spelling, and whipping" He remembered that he "was whipped eight times in one day, and usually for laughing at something which the teacher did not think funny."⁸ Russell's revolt against family routine was not his only rebellion.

A more serious academic career began when he was fourteen at the Wilbraham Academy forty miles from South Worthington. Wilbraham was the only Methodist college preparatory school in

⁷Burr, p. 75.

⁸Conwell quoted in Burr, p. 76.

New England. Its chartered objectives revealed the educational philosophy of the institution: Wilbraham proudly announced that it was, "Established for the purpose of promoting religion and morality and the education of youth."⁹ Both Russell and his elder brother, Charles, worked at odd jobs in their neighborhood in order to meet tuition costs. Thus, while at Wilbraham they were free to devote full-time to their studies. During the two years at the academy (he took time out for his trip to Europe) he became seriously interested in public speaking. He joined the Old Club Debating Society which devoted itself to the expressive side of elocution. Revealingly, he avoided the rival Union Philosophical Society or "Philo" which "prided itself upon being composed of thinkers."¹⁰

By his second year at Wilbraham young Conwell's debating talent had attracted enough attention to secure him an appointment to instruct in elocution and reading. It did not, however, secure him the financial security he needed to stay in school for the third term. In spite of dropping out, he kept up with his studies and earned extra money by selling James Redpath's biography of John Brown. He was able to combine money-making with public speaking by gaining permission from school authorities to speak on the life of John Brown to local school children while plugging Redpath's book. Thus, by the time he was sixteen, Russell

⁹Burr, p. 93.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 96.

had started developing one of the adult skills he would pursue to near perfection: the ability to persuade with his voice.

In 1859 Conwell graduated from Wilbraham Academy and immediately sought some suitable college in which to complete his education. Being broke, Russell decided that Yale's reputation for helping the poor boy made it the best choice, so in 1860 he enrolled with a special interest in law. He quickly found that, in contrast to the relatively egalitarian atmosphere at Wilbraham, Yale was pervaded with social snobbery. His sense of a gulf between the rich and poor students was accentuated by his own feelings of social and economic inadequacy. He did not fit into the academic and social life at Yale the way he did at Wilbraham. On the contrary, he seems to have been a loner who spent large parts of each day working for "left over" food.¹¹ The only interesting intellectual development at Yale was his brief flirtation with atheism. It is likely that social isolation rather than intellectual questioning was responsible for leading him to the only truly radical idea he had in his life. Conwell's role as a social outcast, however, did not last long, and the start of the Civil War led him to attempt to enlist in the Union army. His father objected and for a brief period in 1861 he was back at Yale, only to reenlist, this time successfully.

¹¹Ibid., p. 102. One recent student of Conwell sees a connection between his subsequent hatred of social distinctions and his lean years at Yale. Clyde Nelson, "The Social Ideas of Russell Conwell" (unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, The University of Pennsylvania, 1962), p. 17.

Of the remainder of his formal education virtually nothing is known. After the end of his military career Conwell went back to Massachusetts and continued to study law, which he had pursued independently in the army. A judge in Springfield, impressed by his ability to quote Blackstone from memory, invited him to join his law office. Shortly thereafter he entered law school at Albany University in New York and was admitted to the bar before 1865 ended. The last period of his education began in 1874 shortly after he married his second wife, the wealthy Miss Sara F. Sanborn of Newton Center, Massachusetts. Newton Center was the location of Newton Theological Seminary. Conwell moved from Boston (where at that time he had a law practice) to Newton Center where he "was at once thrown intimately into the atmosphere of theological study and discussion."¹² Whether or not he attended the seminary full-time for any period between 1874 and his ordination in 1879 is unclear. Since he was practicing law and lecturing it is probable that Conwell was at best a part-time theological student.¹³

Russell Conwell's educational experiences were clearly not the major experiences of his youth. His schooling beyond the primary grades was sporadic and easily interrupted. Furthermore, despite his later role in the development of Temple University, he retained a distrust of formal education. As an old man he

¹²Burr, p. 168.

¹³Nelson, "The Social Ideas of Russell H. Conwell," p. 45.

complained,

Our modern over-emphasis of the advantage of schools, colleges, and universities has gone to such an extreme now that it works a great amount of harm in leading the common people to think that all knowledge worth having is to be secured only in some highly-endowed university. The Abraham Lincolns, the Elihu Burritts and the Edisons who have made the greatest events in the history of mankind succeeded without a university training. It is a great mistake for a young man or woman to think that school instruction is all that is necessary to make a person of refinement, culture and learning. Experience is still the very best teacher and always will be.¹⁴

If Conwell is taken at his word, if experience was "the very best teacher," then it is proper to look outside the school for the key experiences which shaped his life.

III

There is no mistaking that his participation in the Civil War had immense impact on his youth. Indeed, without the aura which surrounded his military image, his life would seem considerably more pedestrian. Moreover, a look at Russell Conwell in the Civil War gives a premonition of the texture of his later ideology as well as a glimpse of the development of his institutional style.

After overcoming his father's objections to his first enlistment, in 1862 at nineteen he was allowed to enter the military. He immediately began recruiting volunteers in the Berkshires

¹⁴Conwell quoted in Burr, p. 79. More of this same notion that "experience" is better preparation for life than "formal" schooling is found in Russell H. Conwell, Observation: Every Man His Own University (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1917), 60-61, 68-69.

of Western Massachusetts. The fervor and excitement of early-war enthusiasm coupled with his speaking talents made his first attempt to convince and organize men a success. Governor John Andrew was duly impressed by Conwell's accomplishment and gave him a commission as captain in the forty-sixth Massachusetts Volunteer Militia. During his first enlistment Conwell saw little fighting. His company spent its first six weeks in training at Springfield. In November, 1862, Company F as his outfit was called, went South and was stationed at New Bern, North Carolina. For over a month they did little but drill and dig trenches. When they finally got closer to the fighting their job "was to carry off the wounded and bury the dead."¹⁵ But although Conwell was not directly engaged in the action he was able to describe what war was really like:

When we arrived at the scene of action, the artillery had driven the rebels from the edge of the woods where they had first entrenched themselves and they were fighting in an open field beyond. Oh, it was a terrible sight to see men's legs, arms and heads shot away, scattering the blood about them like a shower; and to hear the whistle of thousands of bullets as they spread their message of death, while the shell's [sic] with a hellish scream, would burst over and among us, sending consternation and death into our ranks.¹⁶

Such sights however did not drive Russell into despair. He responded to it with a mixture of resignation and regret: "Yet such is war, and we, as patriots, must submit to it. But, oh,

¹⁵Burr, p. 116.

¹⁶Conwell quoted in Burr, p. 118.

it is terrible to see young men with their arms shot off. For I think of friends at home who perchance will grow cold and austere when these young men return as cripples to their homes."¹⁷ Later, his ability to combine the horrors of war with the romanticism of patriotism would land him a job writing battlefield descriptions for a Boston newspaper.¹⁸

It was during Conwell's second enlistment in 1863 and 1864 that the legendary dimension of his military career took shape. When Company F's enlistment term expired, Governor Andrew asked Conwell to raise another regiment. Again the young captain spoke persuasively in Massachusetts for the Union cause. This time he served the Second Massachusetts Regiment. Again, after camping at Readville, Massachusetts, he found himself interned at New Bern, North Carolina. Shortly thereafter his company was removed a short distance to a fort at Newport, North Carolina. This time what action Conwell's company saw involved skirmishes over supply depots which were situated on this part of the Atlantic Coast. Twice he had close calls. Once while on patrol he was hit, only to be spared when his watch absorbed the shell's impact. A second time, while searching the area for horse feed, he was shot in the shoulder. The incident, though it later nearly cost him his life, was thought at the time to be only a minor wound.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 120.

¹⁸For an edited version of Conwell's description of battlefields of the American Revolution while a correspondent for the Boston Daily Evening Traveller in 1869 see Joseph C. Carter, "Massachusetts Battlefields of the Revolution," Daughters of the American Revolution Magazine (January through April, 1966), 5-10, 98-101, 222-227, 346-349, 424, 437, and 442.

The shoulder wound and his other close call merely hinted at the drama which was to follow.

Shortly after his first enlistment the men of his company presented him with a sword. This sword was to become a symbol of self-sacrifice which went a long way toward romanticizing Conwell's war experiences. In his second command one Johnny Ring, a boy of sixteen or seventeen, attached himself to Captain Conwell. For Ring the relationship verged on idolatry. The only fault he found with his captain was the latter's disbelief in the Bible. One of the boy's ways of showing deep affection for his officer was to keep Conwell's sword spotlessly shined. During this period Conwell became ill after drinking some homemade persimmon beer which he had been offered by a Confederate family while foraging for supplies. While he was sick his men became discontented because they had not received their pay. Upon recovering Conwell learned of their uneasiness and offered to go to the paymaster at New Bern to collect their accumulated back pay. He left his command at Newport without asking for a leave of absence. When he arrived in New Bern, he learned that his fort at Newport had been attacked and abandoned to the enemy. Either panicky or harkening to the call of duty, probably a little of both, he tried to return to his command but was unsuccessful and returned to New Bern. There he learned of Johnny Ring's death. The story was told that he was killed trying to return to Captain Conwell while crossing a burning bridge. His dying

words were supposedly, "Tell the captain I saved his sword."¹⁹

What followed Ring's death is still shrouded in mystery and remains controversial. One fact, however, is incontestable: Russell Conwell received a dishonorable discharge for abandoning his command. Laudatory biographers, and Conwell himself, consistently maintained his innocence in the whole affair. They have argued that Conwell was only trying to protect the interests of his men by leaving his post, and that his failure to obtain authorization for a leave of absence was identical to the practice of many officers who traveled between New Bern and Newport without such permission. Moreover, they claim that Captain Conwell's men unanimously testified to their superior's bravery during his valiant attempt to return to them. In their eyes his only mistake was not to have vociferously fought the court-martial upon being accused. If any doubt about his innocence remained, his biographers tried to silence it by claiming that the court's decision was later reversed thereby enabling him to receive an honorable discharge.²⁰

On the other hand, less emotionally-involved students of Conwell have undermined his blamelessness. First these writers claim that Conwell's efforts to get his court-martial reversed were not completely successful. Furthermore, they argue that his

¹⁹Burr, p. 129. The account of the sequence of events leading to Johnny Ring's death and Conwell's discharge is best given in Burr, pp. 125-34, but also see the biography on Conwell in Shackleton, Acres of Diamonds, pp. 63-75.

²⁰Burr, pp. 128-32. Shackleton, pp. 71-75.

final commission with General James McPherson's staff as a lieutenant colonel was, because of his previous dishonorable discharge, either illegal or non-existent.²¹ Added confusion was injected into the matter when it was found that the Big Shanty Hospital near Marietta, Georgia, had no existing record of Conwell's stay there after he allegedly was wounded at the Battle of Kenesaw Mountain during his final commission.²² Of course, given the wartime situation it is possible a statement concerning his treatment was either lost or not filed.

Whether or not "Captain R. H. Conwell, 2D Massachusetts Artillery, did, in the face of the enemy, shamefully abandon his command . . ." will not be decided definitively in this study nor probably in any other.²³ The point is that he was court-martialed

²¹Nelson, "The Social Ideas of Russell Conwell," pp. 24-25. W. C. Crosby, "Acres of Diamonds," American Mercury, XIV (May 1928), 110.

²²Miss Edith Cheney, the late curator of the Templana Collection, who investigated the whole court-martial affair very thoroughly, found no evidence that Conwell had even fought in the Battle of Kenesaw Mountain. See Albert E. Sargent to Edith Cheney, April 11, 1950 (Sargent was the military archivist for the Adjutant General's office in Boston, Massachusetts). Also see Edward F. Witsell to Edith Cheney, June 28, 1950 (Witsell was the Adjutant General of the Department of the Army in Washington, D. C.). Both letters are in the Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University.

²³From a photostat of the results of Conwell's court-martial at New Bern, North Carolina dated May 20, 1864. Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University. For a detailed description of the military activities which surrounded Conwell's dismissal from the Army, and reference to his court-martial see U. S. War Department, The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, 130 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1891), Series I, XXXIII, 47-103. A reference to Conwell is found on page 59.

and spent some effort trying to get the decision reversed. Furthermore, even if he was successful in legally reversing the verdict--and good evidence indicates he was not--the stigma of a dishonorable discharge could hardly have been taken lightly by Conwell.²⁴ His evangelistic raising of two Massachusetts regiments, coupled with a conviction that the Northern cause was thoroughly righteous, did not mesh with the prospect of being dishonorably dismissed from the glorious Union army. And to make the matter doubly serious he must have had some conception of the harm it could bring to his hopes for a post-war career. The internal anxiety which the discharge undoubtedly cost him must have had a bearing on how he perceived his military experiences. It would not seem outlandish to suggest that the romantic overtones of the story of Johnny Ring saving his sword was a kind of compensation to reduce the shock of being discharged.

This does not deny that the essentials of the Ring story were true. Neither does it ignore what one astute historian of the intellectual reaction to the Civil War has discovered: self-sacrifice in the face of military danger was a highly valued quality in the minds of educated New Englanders.²⁵ What is offered

²⁴Sargent to Cheney, April 11, 1950. In this letter Sargent quotes from a letter received by the Massachusetts Adjutant General's Office dated April 12, 1923 from the U. S. War Department: "It does not appear from the records that the finding of the court-martial were ever reversed. . .there is no authority of law by which this Department or any executive officer of the government can recoke, modify or set aside the duly executed portion of the sentence of a general court-martial." The letter is in the Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University.

²⁵George M. Frederickson, The Inner Civil War: Northern

is simply another dimension to the explanation of why the Ring story, which was incorporated into several of Conwell's lectures and sermons, became legendary, and why it was so often repeated by Conwell who gave immense care to the tale's particulars.²⁶

But the Ring affair did not end the romanticization of his war experiences. Indeed, the climax came after he was (supposedly) wounded in 1864 at the Battle of Kenesaw Mountain in Georgia. According to his best but unduly laudatory biographer, Conwell was left for dead after the battle and passed the night in the field listening to the moans of the wounded. It was during his own agony among the dead and the dying that he began to ponder "the great riddle of life and death--the meaning and purpose of it all" ²⁷ He was rescued and taken to the hospital, where after speaking to a chaplain, he came to a "deeper understanding of life."²⁸ With his conversion came a promise to dedicate his

Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1965), 79-112.

²⁶Russell H. Conwell, Story of the Sword (Philadelphia: reprinted by Grace Baptist Church, n.d.). This pamphlet contains extracts from a sermon, "A Devoted Soldier," delivered at the Baptist Temple on February 20, 1921. Also see, The Legend of Johnny Ring (Philadelphia: Temple University, n.d.). That the Ring affair continued to have an almost mystical hold on Conwell is glimpsed in a visit he made to New Bern, North Carolina. After exploring the battle sites he remarked, "I felt as if the death of Johnny was only last week" even though it was fifty years after the event. Russell Conwell to members of the Grace Baptist Church, July 30, 1914. Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University.

²⁷Quoted in Burr, p. 132.

²⁸Ibid., p. 134.

life to the cause of Christ and the good of others. Here was the fitting culmination to Johnny Ring's sacrifice, to his consternation over his dishonorable discharge, indeed to the whole of his military experience. Conversion in or after battle is not an unusual phenomenon; the stress of war has moved many men to religion. What made Conwell's commitment to Christ doubly predictable was the way it so perfectly annihilated any lingering guilt over his court-martial. The object is not to suggest that he schemed to remove public doubt about his role in the war. Rather, it is to intimate that conversion was an excellent method of soothing the internal strain which would certainly have occurred when a man was accused of cowardice in a social situation which calls for great personal courage. In a sense Conwell merely renewed the war-time idealism by extending his trust to a new cause, the cause of Christ.

IV

When the Civil War ended Russell Conwell was only twenty-three. Even before the end came he had decided to enter a law office in Springfield, Massachusetts. Soon, he enrolled in the law school at Albany University. Before 1865 ended he came back to Massachusetts and married Miss Jennie Hayden from Chicopee Falls. Conwell had met her when she had visited the Conwell home as a friend of his younger sister, Harriet. Jennie had also been one of Russell's pupils when he was teaching at Wilbraham. She was described as a girl with ". . . a sweet and loving disposition that matched and responded to his own affectionate na-

ture."²⁹ In seven years of marriage which ended with Jennie's tragic death in 1872 there is nothing to indicate their relationship was anything but complimentary. She was both devoted and subservient to her husband; Conwell later noted that "she utterly effaced herself in her desire to help me."³⁰ Thus by the end of the war he not only had vowed to help the cause of Christ, but had found a dedicated woman to aid him in his life's task.

Yet, it was to be seventeen years before Conwell found his place at the Grace Baptist Church in Philadelphia. This is not to say that he was essentially unhappy between 1865 and 1882, or that after moving to Philadelphia he suddenly became fulfilled. What it does indicate is that his twenties and thirties were restless. Although he began to gain notoriety as a public lecturer and author during these years his fame was not well established. His vacillation from one occupation to another suggested that neither lecturing nor writing were fully satisfying to his energies. These years were to be a time of searching, a groping for direction.

After Conwell and his new bride were married they decided (or more likely he made up his mind) to move to the growing frontier state of Minnesota. Conwell left first and Jennie followed after her husband secured steady employment. They settled in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area and he began to practice law and dabble in real estate. Evidently these activities were neither lucrative

²⁹Burr, p. 137.

³⁰Quoted in Burr, p. 137.

enough nor sufficiently stimulating to satisfy Conwell for he became a Minneapolis correspondent for the St. Paul Press. Then after making the acquaintance of a certain Colonel Stevens (who probably provided the capital), he and his new friend started their own newspaper. They called it the Minneapolis Daily Chronicle, but later it became the Minneapolis Tribune. A weekly edition of the paper was named Conwell's Star of the North. As editor of the Star Conwell formulated the paper's objectives and policies. There was little doubt that he intended the paper to be morally instructive and tightly controlled by himself and Colonel Stevens:

It will be appropriate in the first number of the Star to state fairly what the reasons were for bringing out a new paper at this time . . . there has been a lack of such family reading as the intelligence and enterprise of Minnesota would seem to demand. The political papers cannot devote much time or space to matters of mental culture and do their parties justice. Claiming to be the organ of no party, bound by no political ties . . . we propose to speak our own mind . . . no 'stockholder' can come in and upbraid us if we differ from him . . . we will try to the best of our ability to carry into the family . . . a high standard of morality, a love of good, . . . and everything that elevates and dignifies mankind.³¹

Even Jennie Conwell contributed to the moral uplift by extolling virtue, domesticity, and the intelligence of women in a section called the "Ladies' Department."

But a law practice, real estate interests, and the editor-

³¹Quoted from the editorial of the first issue of Conwell's Star of the North, Burr, p. 141.

ship of a newspaper were not the full extent of his activities in Minneapolis. Like the enthusiastic military recruiter of the Civil War he still retained a penchant to organize people around good causes. Conwell made a practice of holding regular noonday prayer meetings in his law office. They became so popular that he was urged to head a committee which subsequently organized a Y.M.C.A. Such organizational skills were to be applied to the erection of institutions again and again during his life. They would reach their most spectacular fruition in Philadelphia during the 1880's and 1890's.

Conwell's successes in Minneapolis did not last long. In 1868 a fire destroyed the Conwell home. His attempt to save their belongings (in thirty-five degrees below zero weather) aggravated his old war wound, and brought on severe hemorrhaging of the lungs. His health rapidly deteriorated. Friends secured him an appointment as immigration agent to Germany for the state of Minnesota, a position which would allow him enough relaxation for recovery. The Conwells left for Massachusetts and shortly thereafter Russell went abroad alone. He remained in Europe at least a year in a futile attempt to regain his health. Upon returning to New York he underwent a successful operation and by 1869 was ready to continue his career.

Between 1869 and 1879, Conwell combined newspaper writing and reporting with the practice of law, the writing of books, and public lecturing. He decided not to return to Minnesota but continued to be associated with newspapers and to practice law.

In 1869 he secured a position with the Boston Traveller for fifteen dollars a week. His first assignment was to write human interest stories on Revolutionary War battlefields which were called "Russell's Letters from the Battlefields." The "letters" were colorful descriptions of battle sites along with personal observations of people he met while on the spot.³² These sentimental contributions achieved some popularity because he was shortly thereafter assigned to travel around the world not only as a correspondent for the Boston Traveller, but for the New York Tribune as well. At this time he published his first book, a rambling tract on China and Chinese emigration which also was received well.³³ In 1871 he was offered and accepted an editorial position with the Boston Traveller. He continued to travel in Europe and throughout the United States combining writing with lecturing--a talent for which he was increasingly recognized.

During his travels Conwell met an incredible number of famous people. Moreover, from the way he described their encounters he knew more than a few intimately. He said, for example, that he spent a week with Giuseppe Garibaldi, and that the great Italian patriot sat up with him and talked "half the night." In England he interviewed Charles Dickens whom he thought was wonder-

³²Joseph C. Carter, "Massachusetts Battlefields of the Revolution," pp. 5-10, 98-101, 222-227, 346-349, 424, 437, 442.

³³Russell H. Conwell, Why and How? Why the Chinese Emigrate, and the Means They Adopt for the Purpose of Reaching America (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1871).

ful despite the fact that he was fussy and nervous. He met with William Gladstone who "was a good, kindly old English gentleman" with an amazing knowledge of American affairs.³⁴ He talked poetry with Alfred Tennyson, who happened to be in the company of Harriet Beecher Stowe. In France he met Victor Hugo who told Conwell of his hatred of Napoleon III. While in Europe he also met or saw (which is not clear) Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria and William III of Germany. In the Orient he took tea with the famous Chinese statesman Li Hung Chang, who amused his American guest by pretending he was an elephant while playing leap-frog with his grandchildren.

In fact, Conwell's famous acquaintances extended far back into his youth. It has already been noted his boyhood familiarity with John Brown, Frederick Douglass, and William Cullen Bryant. He also vividly remembered meeting President Lincoln during the war. He acknowledged that he was on more intimate terms with Harriet Beecher Stowe's elder brother, Henry Ward Beecher, than he was with any other public man. Beecher and Conwell became good friends when the latter reported the famous preacher's sermons as a special reporter for the New York Tribune. It was also as an employee for the Tribune that he met the popular poet Bayard Taylor. On one of Conwell's trips abroad he traveled from London to Italy with Taylor. In fact, Conwell published a biography of the poet within weeks after his death in 1879.³⁵ There is no

³⁴Quoted in Burr, p. 153.

³⁵Russell H. Conwell, The Life, Travels, and Literary Career of Bayard Taylor (Boston: B. B. Russell, 1879).

need to extend the list of his famous friends. The point is that during a ten-year period of travel and lecturing Conwell was able to enrich his storehouse of experience by rubbing shoulders with the well-known. This not only added interest to his own writings and lectures about the famous, but transferred a measure of their notoriety to him. Indeed, one cannot prove but cannot help thinking that Russell Conwell hoped for fame through association with greatness.

Certainly a significant portion of his books were biographies of famous men. He wrote, between 1872 and 1924, biographies of U. S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, James A. Garfield, James G. Blaine, Bayard Taylor, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, and John Wanamaker. He also co-authored with John S. C. Abbott, Lives of the Presidents, and wrote a book of Lincoln stories called Why Lincoln Laughed.³⁶

Each man he chose to write about had not only made a popular reputation for himself, but had mingled with other famous persons. Moreover, each had begun his rise to the top from very

³⁶Russell H. Conwell, Life of General U. S. Grant (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1872); Life and Public Services of Governor Rutherford B. Hayes (Boston: B. B. Russell, 1876); The Life, Speeches, and Public Services of James A. Garfield Twentieth President of the United States (Portland, Maine: G. Stinson, 1881); The Life and Public Services of James G. Blaine (Augusta, Maine: E. C. Allen and Company, 1884); The Life, Travels, and Literary Career of Bayard Taylor, Life of Charles Haddon Spurgeon the World's Greatest Preacher (Philadelphia: Edgewood Publishing Co., 1892); Romantic Rise of a Great American (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1924); Lives of the Presidents of the United States of America, from Washington to the Present Time (Portland, Maine: H. Hallett and Co., 1882); Why Lincoln Laughed (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1922).

modest circumstances. Perseverance, honesty, moral uprightness, the guiding influence of family, and a particular talent made their fame anything but accidental. It is difficult to believe that Conwell did not see close parallels between their lives and his. His fascination with Lincoln was undoubtedly based on the roughly similar experiences they shared as children and young men. Both, for instance, were born into rather poor homes and experienced hard physical labor as young boys. Each lost his first romantic love in early manhood. Both practiced law and made reputations as lawyers for the people. And, both gained reputations for their talents on the speaking platform. Conwell's biography of the originator of the modern American department store, John Wanamaker, shows a striking similarity between the two men's institutional styles. The Romantic Rise of a Great American clearly indicated that Wanamaker's blend of organizational innovation, business efficiency, and religious enthusiasm mirrored Conwell's own approach to these matters.³⁷ It was not accidental that the preface to Robert Shackelton's biography of Conwell was written by John Wanamaker. There are personal parallels with his other biographical subjects. Grant, Hayes, Garfield, and Blaine were all profoundly affected by the Civil War and, of course, so was Conwell. Charles Haddon Spurgeon made a reputation in England as a popular Baptist preacher. Even the poet Bayard Taylor, who at first glance might seem to have little in common

³⁷Conwell, The Romantic Rise of a Great American, pp. 76-99, 132-148, 201-219.

with Conwell, shared important similarities. Both were newspaper correspondents and both traveled to Europe in that capacity-- indeed, both were roamers. Each had lost a wife. Conwell even dabbled in composing poetry, which unfortunately was of a quality even more mediocre than Taylor's.

Taken collectively, the significance of these biographical similarities is that they added up to a definition of greatness which Conwell could and did live up to. By the mid-1870's he must have sensed that his life was filled with many of the experiences which had given fame to theirs. By that time he had suffered through the war, lost his beloved wife, traveled throughout the world, met with the renowned, and discovered an oratory talent that was increasingly in demand. His tendency to often change occupational roles was necessary if he were to achieve social fame. Had not the great Lincoln done the same? There is some indication that people were noticing Russell Conwell's rising reputation during the 1870's.³⁸ In 1872 Grant and, again in 1876, Hayes, agreed to let him write their campaign biographies. By the latter date he was well-known enough for the Republican party to trust him to regularly define their candidates image.³⁹

³⁸As early as 1871 there was one indication that Conwell was gaining renown. His first biographer quoted the London Times referring to the American as ". . . a writer of singular brilliancy and power, and as a popular lecturer his success has been astonishing. He has made a place beside such orators as Beecher, Phillips and Chapin." Higgins, Scaling the Eagle's Nest, pp. 97-98.

³⁹Acclaim for his editorials apparently led to a commission to write a biography of President Grant. Whether or not this commission came from the Republican Party is unclear. See Nelson,

Thus, before Conwell was forty he was closing in on the popularity he so admired in others. His association with greatness helped to develop his own fame.

During the early 1870's his law practice improved until he was able to open two offices, one in the Tremont Temple, a Baptist church in Boston proper, and the other in the outlying city of Somerville. The Conwells had moved to Somerville and were building a fashionable home there when Jennie died suddenly in 1872. Even before her death Conwell had gained the reputation of being something of a people's lawyer. He inserted an advertisement in the Boston Traveller which gave notice that "any deserving poor person wishing legal advice or assistance will be given the same free of charge, on any evening except Sunday None of these cases will be taken into court for pay."⁴⁰ Yet while there is no reason to suspect he did not help "deserving" poor people, he also took court cases "for which he received large fees."⁴¹ His legal specialty was winning jurisdictional disputes for cities and towns. This makes particular sense in view of his interest in local real estate. In order for city services to be extended to new developments, which in turn meant increasing real estate

"The Social Ideas of Russell H. Conwell," p. 43. It is clear that by 1876 a high ranking Republican, Massachusetts Governor Nathaniel P. Banks, helped convince Hayes that Conwell should write his campaign biography. Nathaniel P. Banks to Rutherford B. Hayes, June 19, 1876. Rutherford B. Hayes Library, Fremont, Ohio.

⁴⁰Quoted in Burr, p. 158.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 158.

values, city jurisdiction needed to be established in areas of potential growth. During the 1870's Somerville was a growing suburban community. Conwell "began various real estate operations that materially assisted in the growth of the place."⁴² The fact that he started the Somerville Journal, a paper which undoubtedly had a stake in the continued growth of the community, coupled with his interest in property combine to convince one that his legal practice was not fundamentally grounded on helping the underprivileged.

In spite of his at least mildly lucrative law practice, his ownership of a newspaper, an increasingly heavy lecturing schedule, and his interest in publishing books, Conwell found time for other activities. Again in Boston, as in Minneapolis, and as a young recruiter in the Army he engaged in institution-making. While he lived in the Boston area during the mid-1870's he organized the Boston Young Men's Congress and the Tremont Temple Bible class. The former was a quasi-governmental body with no real authority, but an organization modeled after the National House of Representatives. It functioned as a kind of non-sectarian debating society where young men could gain the live experience of participating in representative democracy. Bills concerning the issues of the day were introduced, debated and compromised. Conwell was later proud that this Congress included a number of young men who were to become prominent in

⁴²Ibid., p. 162.

state and national affairs. The Bible class was associated with the Tremont Temple Baptist Church--the church of his boyhood friend, Deacon Chapman, who had helped the young runaway return home. The Bible class grew so rapidly that two thousand people often attended. Conwell taught the Sunday lesson and discussed everyday problems of life and business. In addition the Bible class distributed charity to the slums of Boston's North side. The Tremont Temple Bible class was a weak prototype of his organizational endeavors at the Grace Baptist Church in Philadelphia some ten years later.

In 1879 after an uncertain period as a quasi-student at the Newton Theological Seminary, and after taking his first pulpit in a Baptist church in Lexington, Massachusetts, Conwell was ordained as a minister. The question which immediately comes to mind is why would he abandon a prosperous law practice to become the pastor of an insignificant church. Part of this seemingly irrational move (some friends and relatives thought he had gone mad) can be explained by his new financial security. A friendly biographer and an acid critic agree that when Conwell married his second wife, Miss Sara Sanborn, he married wealth.⁴³ Moreover, as already noted, there is good reason to believe that he had acquired substantial income from his law practice, to say nothing of returns from books and lecture engagements. The point is obvious; he would not suffer serious economic difficulties by

⁴³Ibid., p. 168. W.C. Crosby, "Acres of Diamonds," p. 11.

entering the ministry. Still there is no indication that he thought he could increase his wealth any faster by becoming a minister than by continuing with his legal occupation. One must look to other factors to explain his change of vocation.

Conwell himself accounted for the move by linking it with the fulfillment of his Civil War conversion experience, with a spiritual force which tugged within him: "Seldom did I ever listen to a religious address or a fine sermon without feeling conscience-stricken and often half inclined to throw away everything and enter upon the humble service of the Lord Jesus Christ."⁴⁴ Such an explanation should not be completely discounted as sentimental camouflage. Conwell displayed from his youth a tendency to be stirred into action by the awareness of moral issues. His home was a part of the underground railroad. He had rushed to enlist for the righteous cause once the war began. And he enthusiastically embarked upon Y.M.C.A.-type projects which were permeated with a moralistic spirit. Finally, his battlefield conversion, if it is taken seriously, was evidence of an earlier abrupt turn in his moral life. By Conwell's own admission, it was the great religious watershed of his life. When he decided to become pastor of a church there was no moral crisis comparable to that of his war experience. A client had simply asked him to find the best way of disposing of the property of a declining Baptist church in Lexington. Instead of selling the property he convinced the few remaining parishioners to begin building a new church with his aid. Conwell became deeply involved in the fi-

⁴⁴Quoted in Burr, p. 172.

nancing, reorganization, and social activities of the enterprise. Indeed, he mixed an interest in the renovation of the church with an interest in the growth of the town. By 1881 he was printing promotional cards which described the salutary environment of the Lexington area and offering to answer real estate inquiries. There is no evidence that he profited directly from this boosterism, but it makes a totally moralistic explanation of his move into the ministry less than convincing. When he afterwards remembered that "I resolved . . . after hours of struggle with myself and prayer to my Lord--to at last dedicate myself to the cause which I should have adopted years before," one suspects an incomplete explanation of his change in professions.⁴⁵

A recollection of his earlier desire to organize people illuminates his change in occupational direction. The law provided Conwell with a limited amount of leverage over specific people but hardly the opportunity to manipulate large numbers into organizational patterns for worthy causes. When he had attempted to use the legal profession as a base from which to expand the law's social dimension he did not always find himself supporting the right cause. For instance, while he practiced in the Boston area Conwell claimed that he never took a case if he felt his client was guilty. His zeal, however, to be on the right side ". . . made evil-doers the more anxious to secure him."⁴⁶ Thus, one suspects

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 174. See the reproduction of one of Conwell's promotional advertisements about the Lexington area, p. 183.

⁴⁶Burr, p. 160.

that his acknowledged defense of a pickpocket who lied about his innocence was not the only time he was duped into defending the guilty. These vicissitudes in the practice of law posed the possibility of clients not being what they seemed, and this must have caused him uneasiness. But the ministry removed the moral vulnerability he found in practicing law. By placing himself at the head of an institution which had clear-cut moral goals he could exercise his organizational talents, which were largely unused as a lawyer, and yet at the same time be sure he was acting righteously. The church gave him moral shelter while enabling him to both create and control a community environment. What made the ministry look even more attractive was the fact that he could make the switch without losing an established affluence.

There is another factor in Conwell's move to Lexington which makes it even more comprehensible. By taking a church he was able to find an institutional home for his lecturing talents. He remembered, ". . . The hard roads, the poor hotels, the late trains, the cold halls, the hot church auditoriums, the overkindness of hospitable committees, and the broken hours of sleep . . ." which accompanied his travels. His hasty assurance that these "are annoyances one soon forgets" was not a sufficient denial of his distaste for the inconveniences of travel in late nineteenth-century America. Nevertheless, his growing fame was based on his reputation as a lecturer. As an old man he recalled: "When I entered the ministry I had become so associated with the lecture platform . . . that I could not feel justified in abandoning so

great a field of usefulness."⁴⁷ From this angle his change of professions made good sense: on the one hand he would be able to continue and even to enhance his fame as a lecturer; on the other a church home would enable him to preach in an atmosphere of relative comfort and regularity. The point is not that Conwell stopped traveling, for he kept a lecture circuit till he was nearly eighty. The significant fact was that he had now institutionalized his oratory talents. In the course of the next forty years he made lecturing a facet of his institutional life rather than an individualistic sideline.

In a sense he needed an institutional home to make his life consistent with the meaning of his most famous lecture. "Acres of Diamonds" was developed out of a book about Conwell's travel experiences which was published in 1870 called Lessons of Travel.⁴⁸ From then until his death in 1925 the renowned lecture was delivered well over six thousand times.⁴⁹ The message conveyed in "Acres of Diamonds" was that any American could and should seek wealth in his own backyard. To continually wander in search of riches was to ultimately fail and even to court self-destruction.

⁴⁷Russell H. Conwell, "Fifty Years on the Lecture Platform" in Shackleton, Acres of Diamonds, p. 178.

⁴⁸Nelson, "The Social Ideas of Russell H. Conwell." Nelson described the genesis of the famous lecture: "During his world travels in connection with his work as a correspondent, Conwell accumulated much of the information which was published as 'Acres of Diamonds.' This was the message that began to captivate audiences." P. 84.

⁴⁹For contemporary comment on "Acres of Diamonds," see Burr, pp. 313-323, Shackleton, pp. 160-170, and Dale Carnegie, "Has Delivered One Lecture 5,000 Times," American Magazine, LXXX (September, 1915), 55.

By merging his lecture with preaching at an established church he was able to keep on the lecture circuit (irregularly, except in the summers) and yet give the impression of being settled and satisfied in his work. It is a moot question whether Conwell conceived of this advantage when he decided to enter the ministry. Nonetheless, the effect of his decision was to fix a particular coloring to the meaning of "Acres of Diamonds." Henceforth, the famous lecture was to be construed as something more than one man's justification of the perennial American pursuit of wealth. The message, now that Conwell was a minister, would be incorporated into an interpretation of post-bellum conservative Protestantism. "Acres of Diamonds would tell Americans something about the growing materialistic tendencies of their predominant religion.

It is common for historians to talk of the alliance between the giants of American industry in the late nineteenth century and the majority of the Protestant clergy.⁵⁰ "Acres of Diamonds" is used by these historians as evidence of the implications of such an alliance. For example, Irvin G. Wyllie concluded that, "By teaching that Godliness was in league with riches such spokesmen put the sanction of the church on the get-ahead values of the business community."⁵¹ Yet Conwell first delivered "Acres of

⁵⁰Merle Curti, The Growth of American Thought (New York: Harper and Row, 1943), 618-623. Sidney Fine, Laissez-faire and the General-Welfare State: A Study of Conflict in American Thought 1865-1901 (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1956), 117-125. Henry F. May, Protestant Churches and Industrial America (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949), 163-181. Irvin G. Wyllie, The Self-Made Man in America: The Myth from Rags to Riches (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1954), 55-74.

⁵¹Wyllie, The Self-Made Man in America, p. 56.

Diamonds" almost ten years before he became a pastor. One cannot help wonder whether it would have received a different kind of emphasis if he had avoided the ministry. Even his most vitriolic critic interpreted the lecture fully within the ideology of institutionalized Protestantism. Thus, W. C. Crosby caustically suggested that "Acres of Diamonds" gained stature with "smug, thrifty, tightly moral middle-class" Americans because it was ". . . buttered with the authority of a Baptist pontiff."⁵² Conwell's most recent laudatory biographers, Agnes Rush Burr and Robert Shackleton, indicated that the lecture's fantastic success might have rested in part on his clerical position, which seemed to sanction and sanctify the morality of his message. When Shackleton beamed that "myriad successes in life have some through the direct inspiration of this single lecture" one suspects that he felt "successes" and "inspiration" were best exemplified by Reverend Conwell.⁵³ It would be well to remember, however, that for a decade "Acres of Diamonds" was a secular lecture and not a sermon. Its overwhelming popularity and differences regarding its meaning came after Conwell became an institutionalized minister. No historian has dealt with "Acres of Diamonds" as simply a layman's speech, which was the way Conwell first delivered it.

Conwell was not satisfied for long with being pastor of the Lexington Church. Though there was no admission by him that the

⁵²Crosby, "Acres of Diamonds," pp. 104-105.

⁵³Shackleton, p. 167. Also see Burr, pp. 313-316.

growth of his church was limited, he must have been aware of the greater potential of an urban location. There is no evidence that he had any moral hesitation about leaving Lexington and moving to Grace Baptist Church in Philadelphia. Indeed upon visiting Philadelphia before accepting the new pulpit, "He quickly saw that a live church could do much good in the rapidly developing section in which this church was situated."⁵⁴ He had extended his organizational activities to their limits in Lexington and needed more room for innovation.

The Grace Baptist Church was located in what was then the far northern limits of Philadelphia just off Broad Street, the major north-south thoroughfare of the city. At the time Conwell moved there in 1882 residential blocks were being formed in the area and Broad Street turned into a dirt road only a couple miles north of the church. Grace Church had been organized as one of several Baptist churches to serve mushrooming North Philadelphia about ten years before Conwell became its pastor.⁵⁵ Early services were held in a tent which was too small from the beginning, and by 1875 construction had begun on a building. Financial difficulties became acute during the Depression of the 1870's and the mortgage was temporarily foreclosed. When the church's new pastor arrived from Massachusetts in 1882, the building was still

⁵⁴Burr, p. 186. My italics.

⁵⁵The best descriptions of the area in North Philadelphia at the time Conwell took his pastorate, as well as a detailed account of the early history of Grace Baptist Church is Edward O. Elliott, Tent to Temple, A History of the Grace Baptist Church 1870 to 1895 (Philadelphia: by the author, 1946).

uncompleted with fifteen thousand dollars still owed on the mortgage. A church member had passed the story of Conwell's rescue of the failing Lexington Church to the Grace deacons who offered him twenty-five hundred dollars, "and the privilege to lecture to fulfill engagements already made with the Redpath Lyceum of Boston," if he would accept the Philadelphia pulpit.⁵⁶ The offer was later increased to three thousand dollars. Conwell accepted it and arrived in Philadelphia Thanksgiving night 1882. The story of a rather unique institutional development was about to unfold.

V

Before the end of 1882 the new church building was dedicated by its new pastor. Its interior was, "in the form of an amphitheater, and has a seating capacity for between six and seven hundred persons. It is finished with great taste and completeness. The ceiling is frescoed, the windows are of stained glass and the pews of hardwood and handsomely upholstered."⁵⁷ The first records show approximately three hundred and fifty members but the church was badly overcrowded within a few months after its opening. Less than a year after Conwell's arrival some twelve hundred people (most of whom were not members) jammed into the sanctuary for the regular Sunday service. Eventually admission tickets became necessary. Although there was talk that "Conwell's Church" was charging admission, it was actually the only system able to

⁵⁶Elliott, p. 21.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 23.

control the numbers of people that were flocking to see an American orator who was now verging on fame.⁵⁸

By 1884 plans were initiated for another new building. Although the inadequacy of the existing church was apparent to everyone and the construction of another church would have probably been inevitable, a romantic story about the real impetus for the new church was circulated. Supposedly one Sunday a six year old girl named Hattie Wiatt was turned away from Sunday School in tears because of the overcrowded conditions. Conwell, moved by her distress, carried her on his shoulders to Sunday School. Hattie was so impressed by this experience that she resolved to save her pennies for a new church. She had collected fifty-seven cents when she contracted diptheria and died only a few weeks after the incident. Undoubtedly the new pastor saw financial potential in the Hattie Wiatt story as he immediately organized young people between twelve and sixteen into a subscription organization (the Wiatt Mite Society) to continue the collection Hattie had started. Adult contributions followed, money-raising campaigns such as fairs were instituted, and one large gift of ten thousand dollars all combined to successfully finance the dead girl's dream.⁵⁹

In September, 1886 a lot was purchased at Broad and Berks Streets within several blocks of the Grace Baptist Church. Construction began in March, 1891:

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 29.

⁵⁹For various versions of the Hattie Wiatt story see Burr, pp. 197-202, Shackleton, pp. 88-93, and Elliott, pp. 33-36.

The Baptist Temple is of hewn stone, with a frontage on Broad Street of one hundred and seven feet, and a depth on Berks Street of one hundred and fifty feet, and is ninety feet in height. On the front is a beautiful half-rose window of rich stained glass; and on the Berks Street side there are a number of smaller memorial windows, each depicting some beautiful Biblical scene or thought. Above the rose window on the front is a small iron balcony upon which the church orchestra and the choir often played. . . .⁶⁰

Despite the emphasis the above rendering of the temple gives to the windows, the massiveness of the hewn stone exterior gave (and still gives) the building a fortress-like appearance. In contrast, the sanctuary was pervaded by a soft glowing intimacy. It accommodated 3,135 and therefore was the largest Protestant church in America:

The moment one enters the vast auditorium with its crimson chairs, its cheery carpet, its softly-tinted walls, one feels at home. Light filters in through rich windows, in memory of some member gone before, or of some class or organization. Behind the pulpit stands the organ, its rich-looking pipes rising almost to the roof. Everywhere is rich subdued coloring-not ostentatious, but cheery and home-like.⁶¹

Such was the general architectural impression of the building which Russell Conwell would consider his permanent institutional home.

Before the ground was broken for construction of the Grace Baptist Temple another project which was destined to eclipse in size and influence its church cousin was given a Conwellian start. Again as in the case of the Hattie Wiatt story another inspira-

⁶⁰Burr, p. 203.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 206. My italics.

tional tale became Conwell's justification for organizational expansion. Sometime during the mid-1880's a young printer, Charles M. Davies, came to the Reverend Conwell and asked for instruction in Greek and Latin so he could enter the ministry. Conwell agreed to instruct Davies for one hour three evenings a week. Later he said he remembered his own lean years at Yale, and consequently felt a moral obligation to help an aspiring student. When Davies arrived for his first lesson he brought along six other ambitious young men. Conwell explained to them the sacrifices as well as the potential advantages which came with an education. At the second meeting forty boys attended the pastor's lecture. Out of this modest beginning an evening school with volunteer teachers was established. By the start of the second year of instruction over two hundred and fifty students were attending night classes in what by 1887 was known as Temple College. A year later the college was chartered with an enrollment of just under six hundred.⁶²

An early college handbook outlined the operational policies the school would follow. Tuition was free to all employed working people. Temple College was to provide for the higher educational needs of 30,000 "walking workers" who lived in the immediate area and 180,000 others who lived within a half-hour's

⁶²For narrations of the Charles M. Davis story and the beginning of Temple College see Burr, pp. 261-273, Shackleton, pp. 132-147, Elliott, pp. 41-52. Unfortunately there is yet no professional history of Temple College or Temple University, but see Nelson, pp. 145-201.

horse-car ride. Other policies included a night class scheduling, the absence of sectarianism, the necessity for all students to choose a profession upon admission, and financial support by gifts, charity, and endowment funds. The handbook also announced the general objectives of the college. Temple was "to help ambitious working people become useful members of society and prestigious professionals." And, it was "to cultivate a taste for higher learning" so students would be encouraged to continue their education after finishing their formal schooling.⁶³ By 1891 the college was granting degrees, and before 1900 was divided into separate schools--among others, liberal arts, theology, law, and business. There was also a school for physicians and a normal school for teachers. Of course all these policies, objectives, and organizational changes were approved by the governing body, the Board of Deacons of the Grace Baptist Church, of which Russell Conwell was the directing force.

Although Temple College was destined to become his largest institutional creation, both physically and functionally, Conwell was responsible for another substantial and lasting endeavor, the development of Samaritan Hospital. As expected, another story was associated with Conwell's part in its origin. The North Philadelphia Hospital, which was located within walking distance of the Grace Baptist Church, closed its doors because of failing finances. A woman living in the neighborhood wrote Conwell of the need for

⁶³Quoted from "The Temple College. What Is It?" (1888) in Elliott, pp. 50-51.

a hospital in this area and appealed to the pastor to do something. Supposedly, he turned to his church secretary after reading the letter and responded, "Wherever there is a need I am wanted" and left immediately to inquire about the defunct hospital.⁶⁴ He made arrangements to buy the furniture and equipment and had it transferred to a house on Broad Street about two miles north of the Temple. The house was purchased for one thousand dollars down, paid by benefactors among the congregation. In January, 1892, the Samaritan Hospital opened with a large mortgage still unpaid. It served largely the same constituency as the other two Conwellian institutions, and received a substantial number of industrial accidents which occurred frequently in this area. In the twentieth century it evolved into the Temple University Hospital--one of the largest in Philadelphia.

Obviously this is not the place for a complete history of Grace Baptist Church, Temple College, or the Samaritan Hospital. The point is to show the crucial role Conwell took in the birth of each establishment. A pattern begins to emerge. In every case he employed an inspirational fable as the pretext to organize people and raise money. At the same time, with each organizational success he enhanced his own reputation as an innovator, albeit not always an uncriticized one (Grace Baptist Temple was called by some "Conwell's Folly").⁶⁵ Nevertheless, he was known

⁶⁴Russell H. Conwell quoted in Elliott, p. 76. For another explanation of the founding of Samaritan Hospital see Burr, pp. 204-301.

⁶⁵Burr, p. 195.

from the early 1890's, as the pastor of the largest Protestant church in America and the father of an urban workingman's university. Conwell's image, at least in Philadelphia, became inseparably linked with the institutions he had developed. Where did Conwell the person end and Conwell the organization begin? The difficulty in answering the question suggests how thoroughly he had immersed himself in his work.

VI

By 1900 Conwell's role as an innovator of new institutions was exchanged for that of the preacher-administrator, more concerned with consolidating the financial position of the Temple complex than with fresh organizational enterprises. Although buildings and academic programs were added to Temple College, and modern techniques were instituted into the college, church, and hospital, no significant new departures were undertaken. There is evidence to indicate that this policy of retrenchment was not Conwell's but that of the church's board of deacons. In June, 1895, in the midst of another depression, the deacons met to consider a request by the pastor to help relieve the indebtedness of the three Temple institutions by accepting an offer from a lecture bureau agent to speak full-time for one year. The board was adamant in refusing his proposition:

Resolved, that in view of our past experiences, it has been abundantly proven that the pastor's absence from the pulpit even for one Sunday has always been followed by a decrease in revenues, and we greatly fear if his absence for the extended period of one year was agreed to, many of our pew holders would give up their

sittings and the church meet with great financial loss.⁶⁶

Moreover, the deacons had developed strong reservations about the wisdom of his past institutional creations for the welfare of the church community:

Resolved, that we kindly and affectionately remind the pastor that for 12 years his people have born [sic] with the most commendable patience the heavy burdens, and have made great sacrifices to maintain these institutions and have uncomplainingly followed his lead in all the varied undertakings until the strain has become almost unbearable.⁶⁷

Hence, they recommended that in order "to save our church and college; that all schemes to enlarge the church, build the hospital or carry on the rescue mission, or any other work at present (except what is absolutely necessary) be abandoned." If there was any question about who had initiated these "schemes" the deacons answered it by advising Conwell "to give up much of the work he now has in hand, and give his time only to the preaching of the Gospel . . . and during three days of each week take absolute rest from the awful strain under which he is now suffering."⁶⁸

There are indications during the last twenty-five years of his life that Conwell objected to the conservative stance the board of deacons had taken toward his institutional style. A number of letters written to his assistant minister, Arthur E.

⁶⁶Quoted from the minutes of the Grace Baptist Church, June 1, 1895 in Elliott, p. 97.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid.

Harris, between 1912 and 1917 show clearly that he no longer had the unquestioned innovational freedom that was his during the 1880's and the early 1890's. This correspondence shows that Conwell's position as an organizational innovator depended upon convincing conservative parishioners that the financial operations of the Temple complex were sound. In effect he was forced by congregational misgivings to move more cautiously than in the past lest he arouse even more fears of financial over-extension. For instance, regarding some evangelistic work the church had been trying to accomplish, he complained that "the people would not come up to our help. The breaks in our work and financial loss to the church discouraged many, and our people are anyhow so dreadfully slow."⁶⁹ And indeed, by the second decade of the twentieth century the pace of organizational change--at least the change which Conwell could personally direct--had tapered off. It was not an oversight which led both Agnes Burr and Robert Shackleton to end the chronological development of their hero's occupational life with his role in institutional developments in Philadelphia during the 1890's.

It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that Russell Conwell's influence at the Temple complex came to an end by 1900. He was deeply involved in the life of his creations until a year or so before his death. He continued to preach and take a prominent role in the governing of the church. Besides administering

⁶⁹Russell H. Conwell to Arthur E. Harris, March 24, 1913, Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University.

as president of Temple College, he taught elocution as a member of Temple's faculty. The difference was that after about 1900, Conwell contributed his organizational energies to problems within an existing structure rather than focusing them toward the creation of new ones. In effect the Board of Deacons in 1895 was telling their pastor that a certain level of organizational growth required a different kind of individualistic energy. Or, they were letting Conwell know that in order for an organization to become a permanent institution, regularity and security had to take precedence over spontaneity and adventure as the key operating policies.

The remainder of Conwell's life was filled not only with organizational activities, but with lecturing, publishing and commentary on the public issues of his day. Although he was, after the turn of the century, increasingly bothered by frequent attacks of arthritis he lectured regularly during the summers until his late seventies. A sample summer tour in 1915 shows that, between June 24 and August 13, he covered seven states and spoke every evening with the exception of two days reserved for travel.⁷⁰ According to Shackleton, although no one kept a record, "As careful an estimate as could be made gave a conservative result of fully eight million hearers for his lectures . . ." by 1915.⁷¹ In the strictest sense Conwell wrote few if any books by his own hand, normally dictating his thoughts to a secretary. In this manner

⁷⁰Shackleton, pp. 122-123.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 120.

he produced over thirty books, seventeen of which were written after 1900. He frequently showed interest in the political issues of his times during his later years by taking public stands on questions he thought significant. For example, he favored Cuban independence but was worried about the consequences of acquiring the Philippines. After the sinking of the Lusitania he favored a strong American response against Germany. He was troubled by urban crime and racial migration.⁷² Interestingly, although he had authored several campaign biographies for the Republican party in the late nineteenth century, he had no relationship with organized politics during the twentieth. Nevertheless, he was nearly always a conservative Republican.

There is evidence that Conwell's last fifteen years were relatively unhappy ones. In 1910 Sara Conwell, his second wife, died. His letters often referred to a growing loneliness which reflected both her loss and his own increasing infirmity.⁷³ During

⁷²The best source on the full spectrum of Conwell's political positions is Nelson, "The Social Issues of Russell H. Conwell." For his respective responses to the Spanish American War, World War I, and urban and racial crisis, see the following sermons: Russell H. Conwell, "America's Danger," True Philadelphian, II, No. 13 (June 24, 1898), 347-352; "American Victims," The Temple Review, XXIII (May 9, 1915), 3-7; "The Murder of a Policeman," The Temple Review, XXIX, No. 43 (December 16, 1921), 344-347; "Colored Migration," The Temple Review, XXXI, No. 40 (November 30, 1923), 2-8. These sermons are in the Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University.

⁷³See his letter to his daughter Nima. Russell H. Conwell to Nima Conwell Tuttle, April 17, 1914. Also to his church secretary. Russell H. Conwell to Melvin B. Wright, April 8, 1914. And to a young female friend and church member, Russell H. Conwell to Sarah Langstroth, May 26, 1915. All these letters are in the Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University.

his last five years he was able to devote less and less time to his institutional duties. By his last year, 1925, the minutes of the Temple University trustees indicate that policy was being made in his absence.⁷⁴ He died at his home on Broad Street, December 6, 1925, having succumbed to cancer of the stomach.

Conwell was able to leave the world with one more sustaining story which further sanctified his memory. The man who received the Bok Award as Philadelphia's most outstanding citizen in 1922 died three years later with a negligible personal estate. The Philadelphia Inquirer described the condition of his financial affairs two months after his death:

An inventory and appraisal of the estate of Dr. Russell H. Conwell filed with the register of wills yesterday shows that the entire estate will not amount to \$9,000 after payment of funeral expenses and other charges. As a clergyman-lecturer, Dr. Conwell made nearly \$11,000,000 during his life. Yet he left behind him, as an estate, less than one-tenth of one percent of what he earned as a minister, lecturer, and author.⁷⁵

As in the oft-repeated tales of Johnny Ring, Hattie Wiatt, and Charles Davies, the image of inspirational self-sacrifice lingered with Conwell even after his death. If, however, the central experience of his life involved the transfer of individual energies into institutional settings, then the relinquishment of his money to the Temple complex cannot be passed off as mere

⁷⁴Temple University, minutes of meetings of the Board of Trustees, Meeting of July 29, 1924. Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University.

⁷⁵Philadelphia Inquirer, February 19, 1926, p. 8. Conwell was often called "Dr. Conwell" because he was ordained a minister in 1879. See Burr, p. 184.

self-effacing philanthropy. It was merely the logical financial extension of his major talent.

But there was a larger importance to the general pattern of his life. When the organizational innovator of the period up to 1895 was replaced by the organizational bureaucrat of the twentieth century something more than an important shift in Conwell's life was revealed. The switch was no less than a microscopic reenactment of the wider American change from a laissez-faire to a corporate society. As the forces of modern organization and technology closed in on Russell Conwell they tightened around America: His crisis in innovative individualism was also his country's.

CHAPTER II

If beneath the kaleidoscope of roles which Russell Conwell assumed there is an "essential" Conwell, it is an illusive element to capture. Being a soldier, editor, real estate promoter, writer, preacher, lecturer, teacher, and administrator demanded a multifaceted individual who could adapt himself to almost any social situation. That he was recognized as a man of wide experience undoubtedly added power to both his public image and the content of his lectures. Yet remove the aura of success surrounding Conwell and the movement from one calling to the next could easily be perceived as lack of purpose. Indeed, lateral movement from job to job without "moving up" has been a common American way of distinguishing failure from success. Put another way, role mobility divorced from a rise in social standing could have easily tarnished his image with the opprobrium of 'bum' or 'con man.' In fact the feeling that Conwell was a phony--a man who masked with altruism his desire for wealth and power--is not simply one historian's hunch.¹

¹My conversations with Templana Collection librarians, Mrs. Miriam Crawford and Mrs. Ray Weiner, indicated that even now there is some local feeling (but not theirs) that Conwell masked his true motives. For an older view of this general view see W. C. Crosby, "Acres of Diamonds," pp. 104-113.

But rather than being drawn into trying to prove or disprove a man's genuineness, which, as social-psychology has suggested, is extremely difficult, why not ask some related questions?² Was there not a consistent strain in Conwell's writings which seemed troubled by an environmental in flux? Was there not an essential tone to his rhetoric which resisted being sucked into the swirl of change? The answer to these questions is crucial in the search to find a man behind the roles--if there be one. For if there is no unyielding principle in Conwell, then he becomes a plastic, modern man, always in step with his times and showing little desire for linkage with a fading American past. This kind of malleability would make Conwell easier to understand as an unambiguous functional figure eagerly helping to orient liberal Protestantism in a materialistic direction. Of more significance is the implication of such a conclusion for understanding Conwell's undoubted popularity. Once one admits his popularity (his influence is another question) and if that popularity is even remotely representative of common conceptions, then his image as a restless and changeable modern man could be held to mirror popular American tendencies. Conversely, if the core of Conwell's message was backward-looking and did not slide easily and frictionless with the times, then the implication is that the wider popular tendency was never, at its core, as earnestly and wholeheartedly modern

²An argument for the fictitious nature of role playing and of all social reality is superbly drawn in Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, The Social Construction of Reality (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1966), 47-128, 173-183.

as some have judged.

The point, however, is not to prove the popular mind modern or backward; even if it were, a study of Russell Conwell would prove little in this regard. Rather, the hope is to expose, if there be any, certain tensions, strains, contradictions, and doubts which huddled together in one man's life. That such dislocations could reflect a broader popular malaise is a possibility, not a conclusion. Such a possibility could shift our understanding of popular ideology in the period between the Civil War and World War I from a search for descriptive categories like "liberal," "conservative," "backward" or "modern" to a quest for predicament. For although historians have admirably revealed existential crises for particular intellectuals and for groups like Populists and black Americans, the popular mind of this era has not been subjected to such an inquiry.³

The assumption seems to be that the popular ideology of the period was simple and quite apparent, even though the social, political and economic processes through which it was filtered

³See R. Jackson Wilson, In Quest of Community: Social Philosophy in the United States, 1860-1920 (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1968), 1-174 for one crucial discussion of the predicament of intellectuals. For populists, the best example is Robert H. Wiebe, The Search for Order 1877-1920 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 11-75. For blacks, see an illuminating dissertation, Cornel Reinhart, "Populism and the Black: A Study in Ideology and Social Strains" (unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 1972), i-198. A suggestive beginning on the popular malaise of the late nineteenth century was made by William G. McLoughlin, The Meaning of Henry Ward Beecher: an Essay on the Shifting Values of Mid-Victorian America 1840-1870 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 3-260.

were complex and hidden. The result of this understanding is that the thrust of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American history is preeminently upon the processes of change-- industrialism, social mobility, and political organization. The popular mind becomes the "skin" of history: available for all to see and to stereotype without difficulty, while the "guts" of history lurk submerged under the skin, awaiting the most skillful probing of the historian.⁴ But, if the popular ideology is not so simple, if it is intertwined in the agonizing processes of change, if it is rent by the agonizing spectre of doubt, then simple characterization becomes difficult.⁵ The search for an essential Russell Conwell in the midst of the cross-currents of truly transitional change reminds us of the ideological complexity of even one popular man of the time. Nonetheless, a quest for Conwell's consistencies must be hazarded if there is hope of finding his predicament.

II

One of the most obvious and consistent themes in Conwell's writings was suggested in a 1918 sermon:

⁴For two good examples of many general studies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which deal with the processes of change as the central historical problem of this era, see Charles A. and Mary R. Beard, The Rise of American Civilization, 2 vols. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927), II, 52-800; Samuel P. Hays, The Response to Industrialism, 1885-1914 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 1-210.

⁵A brilliant study of early nineteenth century America led the way in focusing central attention upon the tensions and uncertainties within the popular mind. See Marvin Meyers, The Jackson-

Dear old home! Do you remember it? Were you born in the country, upon a farm? Blessed indeed is the thought! . . . Do you remember the barn, the cows, the oxen, the horses, the flowers and the old fashioned front yard? . . . If you remember these things, you recall the blessings of God . . . oh, just once more to kneel at my mother's knee! Once more to hear my father read the Bible! Once more to sit around the fireside and eat at the old family house and see the playmates of my youth! Oh! To see it, to feel it, to live it once more!

In sermon after sermon he proclaimed the moral and social virtues of a good home:

Nothing in the world, is so influential in reforming the world from sin and wrong as the memory of a good home. It is God's great argument. The memory of home has no peer as a measure to tell men what is right. [It] . . . is the greatest moral power we know, and when we speak of Christ's great heart, broken because of our sin, it brings us into close association with home ties, without which we would not understand.⁶

Futhermore, each of his biographies devote substantial attention to the influence of home life on its subject. Indeed, "home" was an essential part of Russell Conwell's beliefs. It lay close to the heart of his social thinking, and examining his conception of home makes the core of his predicament clearer.⁷

ian Persuasion: Politics and Belief (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957).

⁶Russell H. Conwell, "Home Next to Church," The Temple Review, XXVI (February 24, 1918), 4-5. Also see Russell H. Conwell, "Children," The Temple Review, XI, No. 36 (June 5, 1903), 3-5, 8; "Marriage and Divorce," The Temple Review, XII, No. 33 (May 13, 1904), 3-5, 11-14; "What is a Church For," The Temple Review, XX, No. 38 (July 25, 1912), 3-5; "Begin at Home," The Temple Review, XX (November 24, 1912), 3-5, 14; "An Ideal Democracy," The Temple Review, XXVI (November 3, 1918), 3-6. These sermons are in the Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University.

⁷Note particularly the great attention payed to the influence of "home" on shaping the lives of American Presidents in

There was an unmistakable relationship between Conwell's idealization of the home and his living institutional sense of "homeness." There had to be some nexus between life and home for the latter to have played such a pivotal role in his thinking. What were his experiences of home? It is already clear that Conwell's childhood home was not the ideal home to which he later paid homage. The simple fact that he ran away to Boston at age thirteen and again to Europe two years later hints that he did not find the Conwell household fully satisfying. That he spent his early years on a poor farm in western Massachusetts in an age increasingly conscious of the lure of social and economic mobility, does much to explain his attempted escape. The inability of his home to supply him with "the things that really count" in the outside world led young Conwell to flight.⁸ For the things which really counted in the America of the early 1850's were not the stern Calvinistic reminders about the inherent necessity of hard work, the virtue of thrift and the earnest religion which Martin and Miranda Conwell tried to imbue in their children. By

John S. C. Abbott and Russell H. Conwell, Lives of the Presidents of the United States of America, from Washington to the Present Time (Portland, Maine: H. Hallett and Company, 1889 [?]), 9-663. Also see Russell H. Conwell, Life and Public Services of Rutherford B. Hayes, 17-65, 190-200; Life, Travels, and Literary Career of Bayard Taylor, 13-41; and The Romantic Rise of a Great American (John Wanamaker), 1-19, 149-170. It is clear from his biographies that he felt success in life was impossible without the example of a proper home.

⁸Burr, p. 43.

1850 the internal dogma of Puritanism had long since disintegrated. Its tightness of control had been abandoned for the freedom of various secular and theological adventures. Work was now primarily a means to social and economic mobility; thrift was a way of expanding your credit; and earnest religion was only earnest if it was earnestly enthusiastic.⁹

In short, the spirit of America was open and expansive while the spirit of Conwell's home was closed and constricting. Russell's abandonment of his home was but a tiny reenactment of strains which tore thousands of households apart in nineteenth-century America. Indeed, a liberal ideology and an abundant environment had traditionally strained the cohesion of the American home.¹⁰ Yet by his early act of desertion, Conwell was beginning the search for a new model of homeness--a search which would culminate with his creation of the Grace Baptist Temple and Temple College.

⁹The best analysis of the decline of Puritan dogma which preceded the opening up of the American experience to the social flux, economic expansion, and religious mysticism of the early nineteenth century is perry Miller, Errand into the Wilderness (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1964) 184-203.

¹⁰The most revealing historical perspective in forces shaping the cohesion of the American home has been done on the colonial era. See Kenneth Lockridge, A New England Town: The First Hundred Years, Dedham, Massachusetts 1636-1736 (New York: Norton, 1970); John Demos, A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony (London: Oxford University Press, 1970). For the nineteenth century, note Joseph M. Hawes, Children in Urban Society: Juvenile Delinquency in Nineteenth-Century America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971). David J. Rothman, The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic (Boston: Little Brown Company, 1971; and Richard Sennett, Families Against the Cities: Middle Class Homes of Industrial Chicago, 1872-1890 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

Conwell had three children of his own,¹¹ but a larger family in his life dwelled in his Philadelphia institutional home. Such a "home" sheltered a community which was virtually an extended family. There can be no doubt that Conwell perceived the Grace Temple congregation as such. The church's community cohesion resulted from the broadly functional and cross-institutional activities of its membership. The Grace church was involved in many activities which touched the everyday lives of its parishioner. Whether it was a social function like a church bazaar, charity for the unemployed, hospitalization for the sick, or the education of the young, the church ministered to needs of its members--much the same way a father and mother would provide for the wants of their children.¹² This paternalism was enhanced by the fact that both Conwell and his congregation lived in close proximity to their church. For a time in the 1880's and 1890's the situation was analogous to a frontier neighborhood where co-operation and interaction were working to define a community.¹³

¹¹Conwell had two children, Nima and Leon, by his first marriage to Jennie Hayden and one daughter, Agnes, in his second marriage to Sara Sanborn.

¹²The best source showing the complexity of the social involvement of the Grace Baptist Church is May Field McKean, "Organization and Activities of the Baptist Temple" (unpublished manuscript, Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University, 1916).

¹³The high degree of social interaction and cooperation in North Philadelphia in the 1880's and 1890's was strikingly similar to the kinds of activities which two perceptive historians believe typified community behavior in the American north and northwest in its frontier stages of development. See Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, "A Meaning for Turner's Frontier," Political Science Quarterly, LXIX (September and December, 1954), 321-353, 565-602.

Furthermore, there seemed to be little division between Conwell's nuclear home and his perception of the church as a living extension of it. It is easy to imagine Mrs. Conwell and her husband eating countless meals at the church, organizing church social affairs, teaching Sunday School, and spending incalculable time gossiping with church members. The feasibility of such a close relationship with an institutional family becomes even more plausible when one realizes that by the time of his early tenure at the Grace Baptist Temple all his natural children were grown and in their twenties.

As the leader of a close-knit community Conwell's life was saturated with homeness. When his experiences as builder of the Grace Baptist Temple are combined with his tightly-controlled childhood and the emotional shocks of the deaths of two wives and a child, it is clear he had lived with the significance of home imbedded deeply in his mind.¹⁴ But these immediate personal and occupational experiences were only one side of his intense regard for home.

Throughout his life in Philadelphia, Conwell's idealization of home remained central to his thinking about the role institutions assume in any society permeated by Christian brotherhood. In 1918 he earnestly announced that, "We believe that the church should be a home, and that the home should be a church; we believe that God commanded it to be so." Hence, God had told Solo-

¹⁴His youngest child, Agnes, died in 1901 at age twenty-six.

mon to put the home and the church close together, later adding the school so that, "We have the ideal arrangement, the triune combination--the church, the home and the schoolhouse."¹⁵ Conwell tried to fulfill the commandment by making a home-like atmosphere an integral part of the religious functions of the Grace Baptist Temple. From the beginning in the early 1880's, visitors to Grace church were struck by a particular quality which pervaded its services:

There was an unusual spirit of homeness about the place, such as I never felt in a church before--I was not alone in feeling it. The moment I stood in the audience room, an agreeable sense of rest and pleasure came over me--and everyone else appeared to feel the same. There was none of the stiff restraint most churches have. Everybody moved about and greeted each other with an ease that was very pleasant, indeed.¹⁶

Another visitor could not quite say it, but there was little doubt about which human community best exemplified the atmosphere he found at the Baptist Temple: ". . . there is something more than happiness; there is a sense of ease, of comfort, of general joy, that is quite unmistakable, and with it all there is full reverence, it is no wonder that he is accustomed to fill every seat of the great building." Indeed, Conwell himself with "his fund of personal anecdote, or personal reminiscence, . . . gave . . . vivid and homelike . . . pictures . . . of the famous folk of the past that he knew."¹⁷ Here was a man as well as a setting which

¹⁵Conwell, "Home Next to Church," p. 3.

¹⁶Burr, p. 188.

¹⁷Shackleton, p. 101-102.

could create a new model of homeness, a model which contrasted sharply with the "stiff restraint" of his childhood home. Who would want to run away from this kind of a community?

A new free and relaxed home gave focus to Conwell's thinking and to his role as an organizer. An absence of tension in his ideal home made it immune to realistic analysis. The ideal Christian home was given a strictly Utopian rendering: "If heaven ever shines through and lights up any place on earth more than another it is the Christian home where there is harmony, where there is no duress, where there is no force." In such a pristine environment the only control was a law of love which "makes law the duty and joy of everyone in it."¹⁸ In no way was a "law of love" a potential source of friction for those who might disobey it because it operated as automatically as the seasons and pervaded every being and every action. And indeed, a frictionless harmony was a key characteristic of Conwell's vision of home.

His fear of a rising tolerance for divorce exposes his acute sensitivity toward social changes which might threaten his model of homeness. "The most dangerous thing in society, the most efficient weapon the devil wields, is the weapon of irreverence for the marriage relation. To make divorce easy is to create a feeling of suspicion concerning the binding power of the marriage tie, and is to show profane irreverence for one

¹⁸Conwell, "An Ideal Democracy," p. 5.

of the holiest things. . . ." To relax divorce laws would threaten the cohesive harmony of the one social institution which could serve as a popular model for a wider Christian brotherhood. After all, anyone who was decent had a home. Divorce would destroy the home as a superior social model and usher in all sorts of crimes: "How many a man is intemperate because there is not love at home; how many children are bad . . . how many crimes . . . originate from the fact that the man has no home, no wife to love; or no children to care for. . . ." Christian civilization itself would face "awful dangers" if home and marriage were eroded.¹⁹

The special emphasis Conwell gave to a loving, harmonious, cohesive and yet relaxed home gave it a halo of unreality. Conwell's impossible home would need to remain impervious to unwanted historical change and yet help to morally transform the world. As an ideal it would point the way to a Utopia where all social institutions would be essentially homelike. His notion of the perfect church was very similar to the ideal frictionless nature of the home: ". . . the ideal church is the church in which there are no bad characters, no disposition to do wrong, no sinning there, and is the ideal toward which we are working, and heaven itself is filled with only volunteers. . . ." ²⁰ Christian homes and homelike churches would show America and the world the road to lasting social peace. Did not the living example of his own

¹⁹Conwell, "Marriage and Divorce," p. 3.

²⁰Conwell, "An Ideal Democracy," p. 5.

institutional home in Philadelphia begin to prepare the way?

Russell Conwell did not suggest that each American community formulate its own working sense of homeness. He was quite sure that his model was universally applicable. Indeed, his vision of the perfect home and church showed how securely Conwell's mind was anchored in the metaphysical absolutism of an earlier age. His fear of the effect of easy divorce laws on his vision of the perfectability of society through home and church exposed a more general anxiety: the specter of relativistic morality. He believed all the more earnestly in the reality of absolute truth because he lived in an era when men were extremely vulnerable to changing values. There would be no relativistic anti-Victorian "revolt against formalism" in Russell Conwell's ideology. Quite the contrary, he would use his oratory and institutions to retain an older structure of beliefs. His thinking about home pointed to an important immutability in his mind-set.²¹

III

The tenacity with which Conwell held to his ideal of home exposes a major tension in his thinking. Since it was frequently

²¹The best general description of the metaphysical stance of English Victorians who were uneasy about the emergence of relativism in the nineteenth century is Walter E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957). Particularly good is the first chapter (pp. 1-23), which I believe is cross-cultural in its generalizations about the vulnerability of the Victorian mind to the new intellectual climate of relativism. Houghton's insights would apply best to America in the late nineteenth century as the impact of relativism came somewhat earlier in England. Also note Morton G. White, Social Thought in America: The Revolt Against Formalism (New York: The Viking

necessary for him to emphasize the home and its values, he must have felt some threat which was undermining "homeness" in America. And, he did. The key to understanding Conwell's positions on social issues was his conviction that American society, between the Civil War and World War I, was a society "overreaching" itself. The meaning of this conception is crucial because it was the axis around which revolved his anxieties about American life. It was as central to his social fears as the home was to his social hopes. The fear of "overreaching" constitutes a strain of anxious tension in his frame of mind, an uneasiness which might well have reflected the state of the popular mind.

Conwell gave two meanings to his sense of overreaching, but they penetrated each other and captured two sides of the thrust of a period of gigantic historical transition. One meaning caught his distrust of selfishness. It was entangled in his distaste for the naked pursuit of something without regard for social and spiritual considerations. He warned his congregation to be wary of the man who over-estimates his value: "Selfishness begins with the tyrant, selfishness begins with the murderer, the robber and the thief--with the man who overreaches his neighbor. There is the great sin. The man who claims from society more than he is worth is a selfish thief in heart, because he is claiming something for which he has given no honest equivalent." In the same sermon, however, he is careful to mute his opprobrium of selfish-

Press, 1949), 3-246, for a fascinating discussion of the revolt from Victorian thought by five American thinkers.

ness so as not to tarnish his belief in self-assertion: "We talk about people being humble--the Uriah Heeps, who are so humble, all the time underestimating themselves, saying they cannot do this, that or the other . . . but that is not humility. Humility is the disposition to value one's self at his true valuation--not one iota added or taken away." Conwell's desire to avoid an "over-reaching" kind of selfishness is therefore not a call for self-effacement, but a plea for a constrained kind of selfishness, a selfishness which will preserve the social community and the spiritual imperative. His warning that ". . . sinful selfishness begins where truth, equity and love cease," can be understood as an attempt to contrast the selfishness of an "overreaching" America with an ideal social entity which combines liberty and love: the home.²²

He knew precisely the kind of balance he wanted.

Where is the place for a home in which you can be most happy? It will be halfway between the great city and the wilderness of the country; halfway between the valley and the mountaintop. The place where we find the most health is among the middle class of people. The homes we have in Philadelphia where men are earning from fifteen to fifty dollars a week are the happiest homes in the world. . . . A home that is too rich becomes a prison, and so it is if it is too poor.²³

The point was that in America a "steady, permanent advance is . . .

²²Russell H. Conwell, "Definition of Selfishness," *The Temple Review*, XVII (June 13, 1909), 3-4. My italics. Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University.

²³Russell H. Conwell, *The Angel's Lily* (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1920), 18.

. much better . . . in business than is any sudden speculation . . . which overloads a man with responsibility and anxiety."²⁴

A grasping society, an "overreaching" population, would disorient American individualism and create dangerous social tension.

A second meaning of overreaching which at once amplifies and yet tightens his idea of selfishness or grasping is directly related to Conwell's uneasiness about America's great social and economic transition. Its most direct manifestation was his fear of the growth of financial machinery which got beyond the control of individual responsibility, the creation of a society which depended on impersonal processes rather than on personal contact in the conduct of its daily business--an "overreaching" society. In 1893, a year when this development seemed politically explosive, Conwell posed some timely questions to his congregation which must have seemed discomfiting: "I ask all these experienced men here . . . , have you gotten your money dishonestly? Did you secure it by unfair means, by overreaching other people? Have you oppressed the widow, the orphan, the poor, to obtain your money? If the money you now possess has been obtained by any such methods . . . Oh my friend, you are poor; you don't sleep in peace. . . ." What Conwell wanted instead of business that profited by bypassing people was business which undertook, ". . . in an honest way to deal with . . . fellowmen, and supply what they need fairly and

²⁴Ibid., p. 16. My italics.

squarely."²⁵ The trouble was, however, that the business machinery of the late nineteenth century increasingly prevented the personal contact which Conwell thought necessary for honest dealing and honest profit. Nationalized banking and distended marketing made Conwell's notion of personalized business another Utopian dream.²⁶

Philadelphia in no way escaped these fundamental business changes which had begun well before the Civil War and which were accelerated thereafter.²⁷ Yet when one considers that urban growth in the late nineteenth century was often irregular and disorganized, and yet bustling with social cooperation, it is clear that personal contact was still a part of everyday life.²⁸ Con-

²⁵Russell H. Conwell, "Religion and Business," The Temple Magazine, V, No. 11 (March 16, 1893), 122-123. Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University.

²⁶There is a good discussion of the impersonal dimension in the growth of corporate capitalism in Wiebe, The Search for Order, pp. 11-43.

²⁷In examining late nineteenth-century Philadelphia, urban historian Sam Bass Warner, Jr. notes the distended quality of business: "Philadelphia's downtown was merely the local center for regional and national transactions . . . for a growing number of Philadelphia businessmen the city was but a place of congregation." Sam Bass Warner, Jr., The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of Its Growth (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968), 85.

²⁸For an example of growing urban disorder in a socially alive urban area see the description of Halstead Street in Chicago in the late nineteenth century in Richard Sennett, The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life (New York: Knopf Company, 1970), pp. 53-57. Also note the rendering of Robert K. Merton's study of "Crafttown" in Elkins and McKittrick, "A Meaning for Turner's Frontier," pp. 326-328. As a new community with problems and the necessity of solving them if individual gain and social existence were to be maintained, "Crafttown" found a rich basis of human interaction and cooperation. It seems likely that Conwell found a similar milieu in North Philadelphia in the 1880's and early 1890's.

sider, for example, the neighborhood around the Grace Baptist Church just before Conwell's early tenure:

At this period [1870] the northern limit of the built-up residential portion of the city was along the line of Columbia and Montgomery Avenues and Berks Street [precisely the northern line along which the Temple was built]; to the east of the Reading Railroad on 9th Street it extended slightly further north and eastwardly to the Kensington District which was thickly settled . . . and the seat of many industries; such outlying districts as Germantown, Frankford, Manayunk, and Roxborough were thickly settled, but between them and the central city there were only . . . small settlements or villages. . . .²⁹

By 1883, the year Conwell received his Philadelphia pastorate, the area north of the proposed Temple on Broad Street was rapidly being urbanized.

The immediate neighborhood of the church was solidly built up although there were a number of vacant lots on Broad Street north of Diamond. Off to the northwest numerous blocks were yet to be built upon, but such were the prospects for the future growth of "uptown" that an experimental "cable road" was completed. . . . The standing of the community is . . . shown by the fact that most households employed a servant. . . . Many of the houses had small gardens in front with iron railings about them. Monument Cemetery, located directly opposite the present Temple had not been cut up by streets and still had a future. The Philadelphia & Reading Railroad crossed all streets at grade. Said streets with few exceptions were paved with cobblestones. The neighboring churches to the north were in a formative stage, meeting for the most part in chapels, the main buildings were erected at a later date.³⁰

Without exaggerating these portrayals of North Philadelphia it is

²⁹Edward O. Elliott, Tent to Temple, pp. 5-6.

³⁰Ibid., pp. 16-17.

clear that the area contained two contradictory tendencies: the need for neighborliness which occurs during periods of rapid community growth, and the simultaneous fracturing of social cohesiveness which often accompanies urban expansion.³¹ The result of this contradiction was a tension between two consequences of urban growth. Significantly, the urban strain in North Philadelphia was a microcosm of the nation, a situation where the older, face-to-face business transactions of the past co-existed with the growth of the distended impersonal corporations of the present and the future. Needless to say, Russell Conwell's thinking could not escape the tensions which inevitably surfaced in this milieu.

The implications of a growth which is ordering, "overreaching," and impersonal, while concurrently disordering, cooperative, and personal illuminates the meaning of the dichotomy in Conwell's thinking. He could not resolve the tension that the implications of these contradictory tendencies of growth unleashed. That he tried is not nearly as significant as his failure. He was never able to realize how a growing Philadelphia and a growing America drove his frame of mind inward and froze it into categories of opposites. He simply equated personal business and cohesive community relations with goodness, and just as surely equated dis-

³¹How modern urban expansion can destroy as well as promote social cohesion is cogently analyzed in Richard Sennett, Families Against the City: Middle Class Homes of Industrial Chicago, pp. 25-56. Also note the classic description of the community disruptions of urban sprawl in Jane Jacobs, The Death and Life of Great American Cities (New York: Random House, Inc., 1961), 201-221, 241-256, 270-290.

tended business and large impersonal cities with evil. The more he dwelled on the disparities between these inevitable consequences of rapid growth, the more polarized and strained his thinking became. The upshot was that Conwell's mind failed to adjust to the fundamental changes of an emerging modern world. In this sense he was not a modern man, for his mental frame could not be extended beyond putting complete faith in his definition of human community, which amounted to an idealization of home.

This puts the traditional explanation of him as a spokesman for the materialistic doctrines of self-help and individualism in a radically different perspective. Self-help, for example, has an entirely different connotation if it is understood as a personal need which occurs along with the stress of the external stretching of growth. It is no longer simply a characteristically individualistic response to widespread social change. Rather it becomes an integral part of the process of disorganized growth itself. By emphasizing the word "help" the phrase becomes a plea for group cohesiveness in the face of an increasingly dislocated society. To use David Riesman's terminology, self-help no longer expresses an inner-directed condition but rather a need for inner-direction in the confusions of a rapidly developing other-directed world.³² Likewise, the term "self-made" has a different meaning if put into the light of the dynamics of growth. Here the fetish

³²David Riesman, The Lonely Crowd, A Study of the Changing American Character (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), 1-35.

to become a self-made man in the late nineteenth century becomes an understandable if myopic reaction to a society which increasingly denies the self the ability to make the world in which it lives. Put differently, the predicament of a fractured self (alienation) which accompanied the growth of corporate urban capitalism, makes the plea for self-made men an impulse toward the return of organic wholeness. If such an interpretation has validity, the meaning of popular American individualism in this period cannot be dismissed as the antithesis of the search for community.

The significance of the coexistence of cohesiveness and distendedness within the dynamics of growth is lost if introspection is viewed as the individual's attempt to lose his social clothes and "go it alone." Conwell's individualism was always encased in the need for cohesion. Certainly there was no Emersonian aspiration to have the self melt into nature and become the famous "transparent eyeball." But neither was there the lonely vision of the hermetically sealed self-reliant individual roughing it apart from society. The restraint and social awareness Conwell breathed into his conception of individualism is suggested by his rendering of the ideal of liberty. Hence he explains that, "There is no liberty in the home or anywhere unless it be a liberty of willing division where all are working together. And in the true home each one adjusts himself to the character, and life and needs of the other. There every child is arranged for according to his age and needs; where husband and wife overlook each others' faults

and devote themselves to things that each other love--there is liberty; that is the perfect home of liberty."³³ Thus liberty and cooperation cohabitate the home--the perfect conception to soften the selfishness of American individualism without coming to grips with the broader implications of the growth of a corporate America.

IV

That such a rendering of the meaning of individualism was typical for Conwell becomes apparent in his most popular lecture. When Russell Conwell is even dimly remembered by American historians it is as the creator of "Acres of Diamonds." The gist of the lecture is purported to be his insistence that every man in America had a God-given duty to get rich. The fact that Conwell delivered "Acres of Diamonds" thousands of times in over fifty years only confirmed how slavishly Americans of the gilded age clung to the doctrine of individual opportunity.³⁴ Indeed, as some perceptive insight into the late nineteenth century has shown, it was quite typical to cling to the hope of individual opportunity even though corporatism was rapidly undermining its

³³Russell H. Conwell, "The Bonds of Liberty," The Temple Review, XXVI (January 25, 1918), 5. Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University.

³⁴For examples of this consensus on Conwell's contribution to American history see Curti, The Growth of American Thought, pp. 619-620, 630-631; Ralph Henry Gabriel, The Course of American Democratic Thought (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1956), 158, 166; and Phillip Wyllie, The Self-Made Man in America, pp. 59, 62, 65, 174.

reality.³⁵ What is lost by seeing "Acres of Diamonds" as an older ideology resisting momentous social and economic change is the complexity of the older ideology. That the popular mind in the late nineteenth century still guided itself by Jeffersonian-Jacksonian impulses of economic expansion, expectations of social and economic mobility, and a general belief in a material and spiritual progress is not questioned. Indeed, without the image of "the man on the make" the central thrust of the gilded age is incomprehensible. But total reliance upon the desire for economic and social advancement as the only explanation of the popular mind in this period is misleadingly incomplete. A glimpse at a more anxious, if submerged, popular post-bellum ideology is illuminated by a different reading of "Acres of Diamonds."

If Conwell's lecture is read with Mid-Victorian rather than easy "man on the make" assumptions, a new perspective emerges. Many of the Victorian virtues were the very antithesis of the ambitious materialistic Jacksonian ones. It is well-known that the Victorian frame of mind put great stress on such qualities as moral integrity, respect for self-sacrifice, heroism, romantic love and the sanctity of past and, importantly, of place.³⁶ In

³⁵Curti, pp. 626-632; Wiebe, The Search for Order, pp. 1-10; Wyllie, The Self-Made Man in America, pp. 151-174.

³⁶The most complete discussion of the Victorian stance is in Walter E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind. Particularly note his analysis of Victorian moral values, pp. 188-262, 305-393. George M. Frederickson, The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of Union skillfully illustrates the importance of self-sacrifice and heroism in the outlook of educated New Englanders, pp. 79-97. William McLoughlin, The Meaning of Henry Ward

an age which more than any other seemed to be disregarding these virtues and living by their very opposites, acute anxieties arose. During a time when traditional moral anchors were being cut adrift in a sea of philosophic relativism, in an era which romanticized cut-throat business ethics, little wonder that reassurances were sought. When "Acres of Diamonds" is perceived as an anchor to secure a society floating in intellectual, social, and economic drift, the thrust of its message is transformed. Interpreted from the Victorian angle, the word "Acres" in the title suggests a permanency or sanctity of place which would have appealed to those disturbed about the somersaulting world they felt themselves a part of. The Victorian fixation on the ornate and ponderous in architecture reflected the physical attempt to effect permanency. Surely one could shut out the unpleasant confusions of the day if he placed himself in the middle of "Acres of Diamonds." Such a notion in no way detracts from the more obvious translation of the lecture's title as the symbol of great wealth. Rather wealth itself could rescue one from the crass economic and social strivings which saturated American life. Once obtained, great riches

Beecher: An Essay on the Shifting Values of Mid-Victorian America 1840-1870 shows how the symbols of family, home, and love were used by Beecher to reassure a society in which these values appeared to be crumbling, pp. 84-97. And, Richard Sennett, Families Against the Cities: Middle Class Homes of Industrial Chicago 1872-1890 provides empirical evidence that middle class families in Chicago were not necessarily risking a loss of physical and social place to achieve upward mobility. On the contrary, he finds that they were more concerned about social security than social adventure. They seldom moved from either neighborhood or job, and when they did they generally lost rather than gained in socio-economic status. Such families had reason to fear loss of place, pp. 164-217.

obliterated the insecurities of striving in a world possessed by the acquisitive ethic. Wealth gave men identity and place in a society which seemed to have neither.

The meaning of "Acres of Diamonds" can also be read as an American hope for security as well as for the desire for God-approved materialistic opportunity. Conwell began by telling a story supposedly told him by an Arab guide while he was traveling in the Middle East in the 1860's. The essence of the guide's tale is reiterated a dozen times in the lecture: ". . . Had Al Hafed remained at home and dug his own cellar or his own garden, instead of wretchedness, starvation, poverty, and death in a strange land he would have had for every acre, yes for every shovelful of that old farm . . . the gems which have decorated the crowns of monarchs."³⁷ It is clear this passage sanctified the acquisition of material wealth as a desirable human goal. It seems just as evident, however, that one's own home, cellar, garden, or farm were the most appropriate places to seek wealth. Conwell's warning of misery and destruction to those who sought riches beyond their own place revealed the tension between a Mid-Victorian conception of home and a distended society.

A signal characteristic of American society in the late nineteenth century was its extension. Part of such extension was the fear of the loss of place which permeated intellectual, social,

³⁷Russell H. Conwell, Acres of Diamonds (Philadelphia: Reprinted by Temple University, n.d.), 13.

and physical realms.³⁸ If the historian can now separate the desire for opportunity and wealth from the need for stability and place in the shifting sands of a world in flux, it is probable that the popular ideology served to blur the distinction. In a society where the blurring of contradictions and tensions in popular beliefs does not occur, revolutionary politics often does. If, for example, in the 1890's Americans felt clearly that their sanctity of place (in the fullest sense) and their desire for homelike social cohesion were being destroyed by a monstrous and "overreaching" America, the results of the election of 1896 might not have been as peacefully accepted. But except for the bitterly estranged Populists, who interestingly were more fully aware of the contradiction, not even scattered disorganized violence resulted. As a rule, the popular mind simply remained uneasy about a distended corporate America and the accompanying loss of place. A sharp relief between general attitudes (such as those which arose over the meaning of slavery and freedom between the South and the North on the eve of the Civil War) was absent.³⁹ An uneasy, yet non-militant, popular response to a distended society revealed social strains and yet unknowingly relieved them.

It was precisely Russell Conwell's contribution with "Acres

³⁸Wiebe, The Search for Order, pp. 1-43. Wilson, In Quest of Community, pp. 23-31, 171-174.

³⁹David Brion Davis, The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 32-86.

of Diamonds" to articulate the anxiety about a grasping over-extended America without succumbing either to political militancy or the renunciation of modern, materialistic desires. He never allowed his disquietude about the direction of change to drive him into extreme positions. It would be folly to make Conwell appear the Ignatius Donnelly of the Republican Party. His talent was to convince people that their fears would not be realized. He was able to mix anxiety and optimism without suggesting that political action or asceticism would be necessary to remove what was troubling people. For example, in "Acres of Diamonds" Conwell sings the praises of an American pregnant with the older laissez-faire opportunism: ". . . never in the history of our country was there an opportunity so great for the poor man to get rich as there is now. . . . The very fact that they get discouraged is what prevents them from getting rich. That is all there is to it. The road is open, and let us keep it open between the poor and rich."⁴⁰ Yet, the tenor of the passage seems to be urgent as well as optimistic. It was as if some ominous development might be at work undermining faith in individual opportunity. His tone indicated a deep uneasiness over the transitory nature of American opportunity after the Civil War. Instead of ending "Acres of Diamonds" with a completely unambiguous statement of trust in individual opportunity he made a plea for community progress and cohesion: "He who can give to his people better streets, better homes, better schools, better churches,

⁴⁰Conwell, Acres of Diamonds, p. 29.

more religion, more happiness, more of God, he that can be a blessing to the community in which he lives . . . will be great anywhere, but he who cannot be a blessing where he now lives will never be great anywhere on the face of God's earth."⁴¹ The comforting thought that individuals could still find community institutions to fashion the kind of society they desired, was an effective way of muting anxieties about an "overreaching" society. If one understood the message in "Acres of Diamonds" there was no need to think seriously about a politically radical transformation of American individualism. Conwell's lecture exposed popular hopes as well as fears and let the former allay the latter. It was a stabilizing answer for an unstable historical moment.

V

It has been argued that often during periods of unusual social stress a drive for religious activity surfaces.⁴² Certainly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in America there was considerable religious ferment in the social

⁴¹Ibid., p. 47.

⁴²A recent work which admirably shows the close relationship between social stress and religious revival is Robert G. Pope, The Half-Way Covenant: Church Membership in Puritan New England (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969), 261-278. It seems proper to suppose that sensitivity to social change could lead the clerical defenders of capitalism as well as its opponents into religious awakening. Just as Pope shows that church membership and conservative religious fervor increased in late seventeenth century New England due to pronounced social fear, so did the membership and enthusiasm of the Grace Baptist Church increase--particularly in the 1880's and 1890's.

gospel and fundamentalist movements which indicated the presence of the pressures of urban-industrialism and modern science upon religious life. Yet it is common to emphasize the victory of secularism over a religiosity which had been losing ground since the days of the Mathers. There seems little doubt in major American histories that American Protestantism was, in spite of some stirring religious protest, predisposed to assist the development of American corporate capitalism.⁴³ Hence it will surprise many to realize that Russell Conwell, who is portrayed as most representative of the capitalist pastors and a defender of blind materialism, fails under careful observation to make the grade.⁴⁴ That Conwell believed in a conception of capitalism and urged business growth is beyond dispute. What is surprising is that he subjected both to a larger ideal.

A major theme in his sermons was the subordination of "over-reaching" business interests to religious ideals. In fact, Conwell was openly intolerant of businessmen who sought only their own self-interest. In 1893 he warned, "The man who gets above the

⁴³Curti, The Growth of American Thought, pp. 618-620. Gabriel, The Course of American Democratic Thought, pp. 151-169. Stow Persons, American Minds, A History of Ideas (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1958), pp. 331-332. Henry May, Protestant Churches and Industrial America (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1949), pp. 182-203.

⁴⁴Curti, The Growth of American Thought, pp. 619-620. "No single preacher of the Gospel did so much to popularize this idea [God sanctioned acquisitiveness] as the Baptist clergyman of Philadelphia, Russell Conwell.", p. 619. See also May, Protestant Churches and Industrial America, pp. 199-200 and Wyllie, The Self-Made Man in America, pp. 62, 65.

business that has made him prosper, and then has made him selfish, stingy and covetous by his position of wealth, has invited a flood that carries him down in a wreck." Woe to the man who "had reached [the] point where his wealth controlled him."⁴⁵ Selfish wealth tended to estrange people from their families, their leisure, and their churches. Predictably he feared the effects of a distended blindly grasping approach to wealth as destructive of the organic Christian world, a world best exemplified by home and church. Two decades later he was still subordinating business to a spiritual concern. He insisted, in 1911, that correctly conceived, business and religion were indistinguishable. Indeed it was essential to understand ". . . that religion is a matter of everyday life and a matter of constant experience." He was sure, "You cannot separate it from actual life and should not. Business and worship are the same thing."⁴⁶ But if religion and business were to be merged, the result was not intended to mute faith while encouraging business. His fears of such an unbalanced synthesis favoring mammon were explicitly revealed in a jeremiad on the American perception of wealth:

We are this day in America looking toward a moneyed aristocracy. It may be a blessing or disgrace, but . . . there are only forty-one families in the United States that hold fifty-five percent of all the wealth. . . . While it is right to get money, if it is obtain-

⁴⁵Conwell, "Religion and Business," p. 124. My italics.

⁴⁶Russell H. Conwell, "Religion in Business," The Temple Review, XIX, No. 22 (February 24, 1911), 3. Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University.

ed honestly, there is such a thing as centering one's mind upon it so as not to protect himself in the enjoyment of it. That is the danger now. We are all the time after the almighty dollar, now as ever before, and after the aristocracy that money brings to America.⁴⁷

A larger faithfulness must be nurtured to insure the lofty progress of Christianity. In fact, "Nothing but the spirit of accommodation and brotherly Christianity . . ." could change an American over-emphasis on money-making.⁴⁸

So intense did Conwell's fixation on the need for a spiritualistic revival become, that it began to constitute a kind of modern jeremiad. His religious anxieties were not vaporous generalities about "hellfire and brimstone." Conwell directed his foreboding at the outstanding social and moral issues of the day, and, like the preachers from a departed age, he exhibited both a sense of the loss of social control and the assurance that the final millennium would come.⁴⁹

It was fitting that Conwell directed his complaints at what he thought was the most religiously destructive trend in American life: the growth of a modern aristocracy. Such an aristocracy

⁴⁷Russell H. Conwell, "Decrease in Church Influence," The Temple Review, IX, No. 28 (September 13, 1901), 406. Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 410.

⁴⁹Peter Gay, A Loss of Mastery: Puritan Historians in Colonial America (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966). Gay's treatment of Cotton Mather is particularly illustrative of the colonial jeremiad (pp. 53-87). Also see Perry Miller, The New England Mind, from Colony to Province (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 27-39.

threatened that openness which was a prerequisite for any general reawakening. Unlike the colonial jeremiads which saw a fluid social order as a materialistic threat to a God-ordained chain of being, and hence destructive of the Christian structure of life, Conwell perceived aristocracy as materialistically undermining existing spiritual openness. In both the colonial and Conwellian laments the religious man was being besieged by a selfish secularism, but here the agreement ceased. The profoundest of social and intellectual revolutions had realized the dire predictions of the Puritan clergy. By the early nineteenth century materialistic democratic openness was in full-bloom. By the end of the century, however, this boundlessness had radically diminished. Corporate closure had replaced a relatively structureless world. And, the intellectual freedoms of a romantic era were giving way to the measured responses of a materialistic scientism.⁵⁰

Russell Conwell's life bridged this transition. For him the sense of an uncontrollable, "overreaching," national and urban development was tantamount to a feeling of the loss of openness. He felt that the world he grew up in was fading and this produced a tendency to idealize it, lashing out at the structures which were disfiguring the old world. The effect was to make Conwell's memory of the older world a changeless portrait. As the laissez-faire society of the late Jacksonian America he had known as a

⁵⁰The best general accounts of these crucial changes in American life are William Appleman Williams, The Contours of American History (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1961), 343-478. Wiebe, The Search for Order, pp. 1-223.

young man was visibly transformed, he relied more and more on a nostalgic photograph of a faded past. That departed world was immune to the restless change he saw in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The past became a measure of a changeless good and evil, a way of explaining the significance of the transformations of the present. Any deviation from the memory, which was eminently romantic, was apt to be viewed as impending social or moral destruction. The idealized past became for Conwell a refuge from which to attack the real world without fear of slipping into relativism--a heresy which many of Conwell's contemporaries were increasingly adopting. Thus the jeremiad became a defense of static idealism, similar in function but different in content from its older cousins. Social and intellectual stress unearthed an older way of responding to the uncertainty and confusion of a time of distressing historical transition.

The connection Conwell made between the pursuit of wealth and aristocracy is revealed in the way his sermons opposed a distended materialism. Pointing out that Christ had always fought an aristocracy of wealth, he warned of Jesus' displeasure, should he suddenly appear in twentieth century America:

Suppose He were to come to the United States today, and look for houses, land, automobiles and all those things we want and which we are endeavoring to get with all the force of our nature. He would say 'you are building a dangerous aristocracy of wealth'. . . . Anything Christ loved you cannot purchase with money. . . . The moment a man is influenced by money to worship, it ceases to be worship. It is worse than dead it has the stench upon it.⁵¹

⁵¹Russell H. Conwell, "American Aristocracy," XVIII, No. 52,

Despair, however, was out of the question, for Conwell believed, "A revolution is near, if I can read the signs. There has been an election . . . [which is] now teaching Christianity to the American people." The spiritual contagion was spreading so that, "the people . . . are awakening to the danger of an aristocracy--one which believes it can buy everything."⁵²

His disgust with the business aristocracy did not have any socially or economically revolutionary message for the laborer, quite the contrary, for labor unrest was just as unsettling as business aggrandizement:

When capital is combined in great corporations, and controls certain trades and conspires to raise the cost of living, the general conscience of humanity says 'that is wrong, that is oppression; that is tyranny'--and it is! On the other hand, when the laboring men get the power, and compel the raising of prices, or the raising of wages by force, it is precisely the same thing. Whether the laboring men do it, or the Capitalists do it, it is the same evil. To get an unjust share of the money of a community is wicked, and should be condemned and prevented by law.⁵³

The Temple Review (September 23, 1910), 2. Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University.

⁵²Ibid. The reference to "an election" concerned the state of Maine. Conwell was vague about what election he was referring to. There were two possibilities, either of which could have been perceived as a warning to an "American aristocracy." In 1908 Maine adopted a constitutional amendment which instituted the initiative and referendum. Secondly, and this was more likely, in 1910 Maine elected its first Democratic Governor, Frederick W. Plaisted, since 1880 when Plaisted's father, Harris M. Plaisted, was the state's Democratic executive. Apparently, in the 1910 campaign Plaisted had attacked the concentration of wealth in the hands of a selfish few thus, even though he was a Democrat, endearing himself to Conwell.

⁵³Russell H. Conwell, "The Last Appeal on the Labor Question," The Temple Review, XXIV (November 5, 1916), 5.

If Conwell is portrayed as a pawn of a ripening American capitalism then his fear of strikes has a ready explanation; it was simply the reaction of a conservative who saw his real interests being jeopardized by labor unrest. But if he is viewed as a man disturbed by social changes which were undermining an idealized older America another explanation emerges. In the second view labor unrest was but the submerged side of the effect of a moneyed aristocracy which transfers its greed to the common man--particularly the poor. The resulting disorder and selfishness, at the bottom as well as at the top, encouraged "overreachingness" in all classes. A breakdown of his older idealized America, and hence of spirituality itself, was inevitable.

Conwell, however, hoped that America would stop short of complete social upheaval. There was one large element of the population who had the common sense to avoid the folly of those who greedily called for political radicalism:

We are not in favor of any revolution, and I do not believe there is going to be any. Because of the good sense of the great middle class of people. Not ten percent of the laboring people belong to the labor union; and not ten percent belong to the rich capitalists of this country. After all, the great government of this country is going to be borne triumphantly through all its difficulties by the even balance of the middle class of people, which is an honor to America and which has maintained so grandly the honor of the American flag.⁵⁴

It was to be the patriotic spiritualism of the American middle class, then, which would bring uplift without greed and disorder.

⁵⁴Conwell, The Angel's Lily, p. 43.

The values of this group needed to be reintroduced to a public which was in danger of forgetting the best of its past and ignoring the best of its people.

But what was the nature of the spiritual measure he used to judge money-making? Was he simply talking like a Baptist or was his religion rooted in a larger intellectual milieu? Certainly the Baptist faith had a particular influence on the quality of his idealism: "I found that the Baptist Church upheld no autocratic power; no dictatorial power over other churches. . . . I found that in every Baptist church one man is no higher than any other, no matter what office he holds . . . many of the other churches are democratic in fact but they are autocratic in organization."⁵⁵ The significance of this explanation is the absence of any adherence to a particular Baptist dogma as the source of his belief. It was the church's open organization which attracted him, its atmosphere of innovative freedom. Hence, Conwell dismissed the practice of Baptist "closed communion" as alien to the free organizational form.⁵⁶ Even more revealingly, he put great emphasis on the form of baptismal ceremony rather than on its theological substance. Paradoxically, as will be seen later, his insistence on free church form translated into a rather excessive organizational arrangement in his own Grace

⁵⁵Russell H. Conwell, "Christian Freedom," The Temple Review, XXVIII, No. 30 (June 6, 1920), 5. Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 7.

Baptist Temple. In any event Conwell found little time for theological hair-splitting in issues which divided one Baptist sect from another. He was more at ease dwelling on what united not only all Baptists, but all religions.⁵⁸ Consequently, only in the sense that the Baptist persuasion was permeated with broader intellectual strands could it be said to contain the source of Conwell's spiritual vision.

Nonetheless, his obsession with free organization gives an important clue to deeper beliefs. Behind his fetish for free form was an amazingly Emersonian penchant for the free play of spirit. Such romanticism collapsed rigid forms and liberated the inner man. This stance allowed him the freedom to rework the mundane within an idealized whole. It freed him from the necessity of adopting an ideology divorced from worldly concerns. It aided his enthusiastic innovational bent toward organizing. It was an intellectual mood which goes a long way toward explaining the fervor with which he created institutions. Only a thoroughgoing romantic could have expressed the following sentiment:

The only way a man can rise above the material things of life, above the pleasure of this world, to a condition where he is not content with [the] mere material; [is to] move into a spiritual world amid 'a cloud of witnesses.' [Then] can he enter that spiritual realm where he will be more than a mere man; an ideal man; a holy man. The carnal mind only thinks of the material; is at enmity with God, while the spiritual mind is ever in communion with Him.⁵⁹

⁵⁸An interesting analysis which links an early twentieth century drive for business efficiency with Conwell's penchant for ecumenical worship is presented by William T. Doherty, "The Impact of Business on Protestantism, 1900-1929," Business History Review, XXVIII (1954), 141-53.

Or, more prosaic but more revealing because of the example he uses, "A home . . . is altogether of the spirit. You cannot make a home by the furnishings, or the pictures, or the carpets, or the decorations. No home can be made by those things that are mundane, that are material. But when into that home goes that spiritual life, it is then, as you step inside the door, [that] immediately the spirit of God is upon you."⁶⁰ Even home, the most perfect earthly social arrangement, was hollow unless permeated with a boundless, spiritual atmosphere.

But the quality of Conwell's spiritualism is captured best in a 1901 sermon aptly titled, "Best Things Out of Sight." Here one senses how thoroughly out of step his intellectual perception was with the thrust of American intellectual development since the Civil War and the coming of Darwinism. As the understanding of the universe became at once more materialistic and relativistic, Conwell held tenaciously to spiritual absolutism, a mind-set which was more comfortable in the antebellum context:

The unseen is the eternal: The unseen the real. . . we are only on the borders of soul investigation but we have reached the clear conviction that the soul is dominant in the human body . . . the soul is the king, and the body is subject to its great will. The immortal part of man is by far the most important.⁶¹

⁵⁹Russell H. Conwell, "The Out-Beaming Spirit," The Temple Review, XXVI, No. 3 (January 18, 1918), 9. Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Russell H. Conwell, "Best Things Out of Sight," The Temple Review, VIII, No. 17 (January 25, 1901), 369. Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University.

It was apparent that Conwell's spiritualism, which translated into middle class idealism, received its nourishment from his perception of a fading Jacksonian America. But to understand this essential quality of his vision, further illumination of the nature of his uneasiness about the present and the immediate future is in order.

VI

In 1898 at age fifty-five Conwell wrote a novel which, fortunately, he never published. It amplified his ideas on the kinds of ideals associated with the immediate American past, the ideals which, he felt, the middle class best exemplified, but were in danger of losing to ominous present developments.⁶² A close look at this novel (most mediocre from any serious literary standpoint) will sharpen the image of an essential Conwell.

The novel is set in the happy time before the Civil War and its plot is utterly romantic. Even the dullest reader would have seen the eternal struggle between good, beauty and truth on the one side and evil, ugliness and error on the other. Caleb Warder, the handsome and heroic but wandering young man, began the action with his arrival in a small town somewhere in western Massachusetts. A stranger to the area, he sought out his only living relative, an old character named Uncle Palm. Shortly

⁶²Russell H. Conwell, "Out of the Floods" (unpublished manuscript, Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University, 1898).

thereafter Caleb was accused of brutally murdering his elderly uncle with an axe. While in prison awaiting trial, he received moral and legal aid from two paragons of feminine virtue, Sarah Maria Smith and Bessie Otis. Though the latter's testimony saved him from hanging, the town's lingering suspicions forced him to flee Massachusetts and begin a new life in Iowa. He changed his name, studied law on his own time, ran for political office on the anti-slavery ticket, and in short became a leading frontier citizen, all in stark contrast to his earlier wandering and idleness. The change in the direction of his life resulted from religious conversion and the salutary influences of Sarah Maria and Bessie who ultimately followed Caleb to Iowa. Sarah Maria, the tragic heroine, and Bessie were captured by Uncle Palm's real murderers who had swindled Sarah's father's property and followed her to Iowa. Sarah died from overwork and abuse from her abductors. Bessie escaped and was eventually united with her soul mate, Caleb. The couple returned to Massachusetts to apprehend the villains who had fled from Iowa, but were too late to apply human justice. God intervened with a flood which not only dispatched Uncle Palm's real murderers but unearthed the old man's hidden treasure that of course now belonged to Caleb and Bessie. All ends satisfactorily for hero and heroine who were now convinced that self-improvement, religious conversion and love can conquer the most dastardly evil. Even Sarah Maria's death was really a victory for Christ because her last earthly moment brought her a vision of ascending to heaven.

We can learn many things about the essential Russell Conwell from the story. First, "Out of the Floods" was a tale of love, violence, despair, conversion, and redemption. It was clearly in the tradition of the Victorian novel rather than the emerging realist school. There were clear-cut characters and categories of good and evil. The novel never hinted at the possibility of relative truth. Absolute values reigned supreme from start to finish. There was never any doubt about who were the good and evil characters in the story, although the good people had weak moments. What emerged was a lesson for life, a story with absolute moral meaning. The didactic elements of the novel established themselves early and were sustained to the end. In fact, most of Conwell's writings--biographies, sermons, and lectures--were meant to be morally instructive.⁶³ Doubt, ambiguity and contradiction which fester in an age of conscious transition are neatly cut away.

Moreover, the setting, a rural or small town locale in the Berkshires of western Massachusetts and on the Iowa frontier, lent itself to simplistic moral polarities. And, indeed, physical setting, history, and social habits melted together to produce the ideal people:

⁶³Of course, the nature of the sermon is didactic. "Acres of Diamonds" was only the most famous of numerous lectures with a "moral" punch. See, Conwell, The Angel's Lily, The Jolly Earthquake or the Power of a Cheerful Spirit (Philadelphia: The Temple Review, 1917), and Six Nights in the Garden of Gethsemane (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1924). Typical of Conwell's biographies which show the morally instructive dimension of an outstanding life is his rendering of the founder of the modern department store, John Wanamaker. See Conwell, The Romantic Rise of a Great American, pp. ix-x, 220-225.

Forty years ago the race of hardy mountaineers, which hewed the forests and tilled the terraces and meadows of western Massachusetts, was even more surprisingly a reproduction in feature, stature and mind, of the celebrated Waldenses. The Green Mountain boys of the Revolution had greatly multiplied during the fifty years which followed our national independence, and the neat little homes of freedom-loving and stolidly industrious inhabitants adorned every mountain side. . . . All of them were small, one-story dwellings, each having a little barn with a poultry shed attached. The mountains on each side of the river declined so precipitately that but little use could be made of the rocky declivities for farming. . . . But nature compelled her children to earn everything they received, and hence they were virtuous and happy. Honest, persistent hard work was . . . the only way to success either on the farm or in the mill, as it is everywhere the only way to righteousness or permanent joy.⁶⁴

From such a setting and such a people a tale of profound moral meaning would unfold.

Second, one must note the parallels between Conwell and the novel's hero. Caleb Warder shared many of Russell Conwell's significant experiences. Both were wanderers, each man had flirted with atheism and self-doubt. Both were lawyers and visualized themselves as self-taught, if not self-made. Both were publicly accused of a terrible crime of which (in Conwell's perception) they were innocent, the resulting public suspicion (at least in Warder's case) leading to wandering and restlessness. Each had a decisive religious conversion experience and was profoundly affected by the inspiration of young women. Interestingly, even the names of the influential ladies were not very dissimilar--

⁶⁴Conwell, "Out of the Floods," pp. 2, 7.

Bessie and Sarah for Caleb, Jennie and Sara for Conwell. Most important, in each of their lives a crucial shift of direction occurs after a period of Godlessness and personal suffering. For Conwell the military experience becomes the catalyst of a religious awakening. Conversion transforms Warder after he becomes conscious of his own greed. In each case the sacrifice of another leads to the awakening. The death of Johnny Ring extinguished Conwell's lingering religious doubt. In Caleb's case conversion comes after he recognizes that his best friend in Iowa, Parson Gunnison, has sacrificed his love for Bessie Otis after learning of Caleb's own amorous feeling. First, however, Caleb suffers a sleepless night finally admitting his own damnation:

I'm lost! Lost! Lost! I deserve the hell I am in, and have myself made the perdition I shall be in hereafter. If God and my friend will only forgive me I will give up all. I will never take what my friend offers [Bessie's love]. I ask nothing but forgiveness. A crust of bread and a pure heart is all I ask. I want nothing but to be a better man. But that can never be. Never!

But his despair was to last only several hours:

The great backlog in the fireplace suddenly fell forward into the ashes and the smouldering embers as suddenly flashed up in brilliant sparks and flame. Why that little incident affected him so, he could not explain. But that fresh light and warmth appeared to enter his soul. He in some way felt so different. The great burden that had crushed and ground him seemed lifted. . . . A sense of sweetest peace pervaded his whole being. A fountain of love for all things thrust forth its streams of beauty in his desert heart. Tears, that a few hours before were on his cheeks like hot coals of hellish fires now flowed like the dews of heaven's holy benediction down his beard. He was unnaturally happy. Caleb Warder believed

that God had forgiven him.⁶⁵

The meaning of conversion for the lives of Conwell and the fictional Caleb are roughly parallel. It is after his awakening that Conwell decides to be "active whenever and wherever possible in the cause of Christ." Likewise, Caleb was convinced that "he would devote himself hereafter to the work of making everyone else happy and doing all the good he could crowd into the remainder of his life." In both instances their post-conversion lives were absorbed by crusades. Caleb used the law he learned to enter the political campaign against slavery, just as Conwell used his organizational talents for Christian causes in Minneapolis and Boston before his climactic endeavors for various institutional crusades in Philadelphia. The point is that after conversion both lives were examples of virtuous character. The autobiographical parallels could not help but be apparent to the reader who was familiar with the basic experiences of Conwell's life. Consequently, the morally instructive dimension of the novel would be even stronger. Yet for some reason it was never published. Perhaps the similarities were too revealing of his essential nature. Would a man who made his career by being versatile allow such an exposure?

The vision of the past which "Out of the Floods" propounds is also crucial to an understanding of the mind of Russell Conwell. Significantly, the story is set in the 1850's well before the

⁶⁵Ibid., pp. 194-195.

Darwinist revolution flowered in America. The security of a Newtonian Christian cosmology had yet to be smashed. Furthermore, the 1850's saw the popular trilogy of "free soil, free labor and free men" harden into a northern dogma. Such an ideology manifested a paranoid fear of other systems.⁶⁶ There is an undercurrent of this late ante-bellum ideology which permeates the tone of "Out of the Floods." Never, however, does the worship of these three freedoms become essentially a plea for economic and social mobility. Rather they are principles which lead to the discovery of spiritual truth and personal potential, qualities which led to security rather than the adventure of mobility. Thus, the novel's moral absolutism was set off in even bolder relief by the historical setting: a militant pre-Civil War mentality accentuated the moral message of the story.

In real life it was precisely the erosion of older community values like order, cohesion, and absolutist morality which Conwell wished to arrest. It is no secret that the 1890's were pregnant with indications that these imperatives were being threatened by new forces of change. Yet adjustment to the newer beliefs which these forces brought with them was still far from complete. The strain for people of Conwell's ilk, as old met new, must have been intense, but one way of easing such stress

⁶⁶Eric Foner, Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 11-39, 301-317. Davis, The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style, pp. 62-86.

was to search for a broader social order. American communities were to be connected to developing marketing and communicative systems which would result in new institutional alignments. Increased profits, a professional bureaucracy, broader political control, and a more efficient society were to be the consequences of these developments. The businessman, the administrator, the politician and the social scientist struggled toward this fresh understanding. In the process their values and tactics became more secular, bureaucratic, relativistic and "overreaching" as they worked toward a different set of beliefs. This group initiated and accepted an overwhelming historical transition.⁶⁷

Another reaction to the erosion of older rural-oriented ideology was an emotional and direct attack on the new corporate structuring of society and its beliefs. The essence of the Populist revolt was a strained rhetoric and aggressive (and sometimes misconceived) attempts to politically organize.⁶⁸ A third but neglected way of meeting these changes is revealed, perhaps, in Conwell's rendering of an ideal world of the past. What the American people needed most in a time of shaken belief was a clear example of the right. There was no need to distend society and retreat to a relativist value system. Indeed such behavior only aggravated an eternal problem, the destruction of spirit and the breeding of impersonal greed. On the other hand, the

⁶⁷Wiebe, The Search for Order, pp. 111-223.

⁶⁸Ibid., pp. 44-110.

radical talk concerning agrarian and urban extremism brought further confusion, divisive hatreds and compounded the damage. The way back to moral and social health could be illustrated by sermon, by lecture, by biography and even by fiction. The qualities constituting character needed to be restored. What made "Out of the Floods" significant was the way it buttressed character by unraveling confusions and putting right and wrong in stark relief. It showed graphically the experiences an individual must live through to escape the clutches of greed and the pernicious belief in relative truth. Most important, the fact that the novel was placed in an earlier America, an America which Conwell felt had a clearer understanding about truth and error meant that the historical setting lent itself toward exemplification. Indeed, if the right was ever thought to be "known" in American history it was just prior to the Civil War. To write fiction of that era was not merely fiction at all; it was to create a clear historical lesson which transformed fictional characterization into the moral imperatives of the real world.

We must finally note the reassertion of the values of femininity, social stability and home in Conwell's novel. Interestingly, the struggle between good and evil which pervades the story was symbolized by the clash of two feminine wills. Early in the action Caleb is asked to judge a local debate on the question of women's rights. One side of the question was presented by Sally Ann Thompson who later married the French aristocrat Julian Vernet, the arch-villain and real murderer of Uncle

Palm. Sally's physical appearance gave hints about the quality of her arguments:

. . . The feminine elocutionist was angular, bony, with light blue eyes and a piercingly sharp nose. Her yellow hair was combed straight back from her face, and hung in a bunch of waterfall curls behind, her dress was of silk, with a high neck and long sleeves, but of a most unbecoming color. It was adorned with bunchy ruffles and ribbons in a clumsy fashion. She was about twenty-eight years of age, and so tall that she stooped to clear the door frame as she entered. Her mouth was sunken like her eyes, and one tooth had disappeared from the upper row. Her general appearance was of a manish woman inspired by brazen effrontery, and filled with chronic indignation that she was not born a boy. She strode to the fireplace with a stamp of defiance, dropped her lean hands to her sides, threw back her thin shoulders, and gazed proudly about the room. . . . Caleb was startled by her ostrich-like appearance. . . .⁶⁹

The incongruity of a "manish woman" forewarns of her demand for more male-like political and economic power for women. She began her argument by attacking the conventional vision of womanhood: "Woman! What is a woman but the slave of man? Woman! Noble woman! What hast thou had for all ages but toil and pain? What bread hast thou eaten, save such as stingy man has doled out to you in dribblets?" Male character, according to Miss Sally Ann Thompson, left much to be desired: "Man, hard-hearted man, has spread his broad palm over the hills, and said 'these are mine!' He has spread his nets over the seas, and said 'all are mine!'" Acquisitive man "piles his wealth in banks, and enriches himself in speculative stocks . . . but woman, where is she? Only the

⁶⁹Conwell, "Out of the Floods," p. 27.

tail of his kite." Then in a chilling finale Sally Ann Thompson, unable to accept the self-effacement of a Joan of Arc pledges herself to the tactics of a Charlotte Corday: "If false and cowardly man dare refuse your petition hurl him to his doom! Let the woods be peopled with seekers after vengeance; let the highways become dangerous, and the fields but places of execution! Let horrid murder haunt him by night and fearful assassination startle him at noonday, until woman shall be wholly free. . . ."70

What Sally loathed was man's freedom to conquer his environment and to grasp in the process both wealth and power. Ironically, those were also the very things she would kill to get. She emulated what Conwell thought was worst in man. Indeed, there is little doubt that he invented Sally to portray his conception of what was evil in man. She personified what he was anxious about in the America of the 1890's: a society which pursued wealth and power to excess and opened the door to violent social revolution. Once womanhood itself was infected with the desire to grasp power and "overreach" people, one of the last sources of social stability and individual morality would have disintegrated. The home with all its metaphoric meaning was under attack. Such an insidious character required opposition by a vision of ultimate good. Fortunately, at this point Sarah Maria Smith rose to enter the debate. Her inner beauty gave every confidence of her being the antidote to the poisonous Sally:

⁷⁰Ibid., pp. 28, 30.

What a sublime thing is a pure loving woman! Nothing else in art or nature approaches the majesty and delicious sweetness of a cultivated stainless woman! Such a woman was Maria Smith. She was not externally beautiful as Bessie, but Maria has a stronger will, a deeper heart, and a more brilliant intellect . . . it would have required the form of Juno to have matched the mind and soul of that country maiden, Maria Smith.⁷¹

There was nothing in Sarah Maria's argument to disturb the vision. She understood true femininity: "It is delicious and grand to be a woman . . . we cannot question that He who made us women, intended that we should have the right to be women. We were not intended for camps and sieges, battles and marches: And ought to have the right to stay at home." In fact, "home" and real femininity were inexorably intertwined: "Think of the millions of happy homes, of which the papers make no mention simply because they are happy: And imagine how many wives and daughters there are in those homes, as happy and as free from care as is consistent with permanent joy."⁷² The spiritual superiority of a home guided by true femininity was Sarah Maria's final argument:

. . . The holiest nook in all God's universe, and the most blessed situation is the quiet retirement of a cultivated home. That is a woman's birthright and no man or woman has a right to drive her forth to uncongenial, unwomanly work and publicity. Let the men be men. . . . Woman--true, pure and holy. Woman--sweet, white and beautiful. Woman--honest, earnest and faithful. Woman--loving, tender and patient. Woman--modest, retiring and Christian. . . . I claim the right to be a woman!⁷³

⁷¹Ibid., p. 268.

⁷²Ibid., pp. 32-33.

⁷³Ibid., pp. 34-35.

What more could she have said to blunt the force of Sally Ann Thompson's argument? Here was a Conwellian ideal of goodness, an ideal which seemed threatened by uncontrollable evil forces.

The debate between Sally Ann Thompson and Sarah Maria Smith symbolized the tension in Conwell's thinking between the material and the spiritual--between the transient and the eternal. It also unveiled the depth of his fear in the corrupting power of a nation intent upon large-scale grasping. Without the spiritual model personified by Sarah Maria to counter crass selfishness, the whole society would surely succumb to the seductive power of Sally Ann Thompson's message. The anxiety is made more explicit by showing how easily Sally submits to the villain, Julian Vernet. It is unmistakable that Vernet's physical appearance appealed to fears of urban and racial corruption:

He was dressed in the style of city fashion, wore dark gloves and a silk hat. His face was thick with freckles, and his red moustache and short curly red whiskers, together with his cropped hair and Jewish nose, gave him a comical appearance. But for the sunken, pale blue eyes, which somehow suggested a serpent's eyes, the first glance at his face would suggest a laugh. But no one laughed who looked straight into the evil depths of bead-like pupils. His shoulders were unnaturally broad, his head set low between them, and his forehead re-treated like the skull of a monkey.⁷⁴

Vernet was a subhuman product which resulted from a life and ancestry of greed. He told Sally Ann Thompson that he was related to French nobility and intimated that he would both marry her and see Caleb Warder punished for Uncle Palm's murder. Miss

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 79.

Thompson was putty in his hands and she gladly agreed to testify against Caleb. By testifying against him she could indirectly seek revenge against Sarah Maria Smith who had humiliated her in debate. At this juncture Conwell exposed the social dimension of his fears about a grasping personality. He explained that Sally really did believe that Caleb was a murderer, "But her love of notoriety and her insane hatred of Sarah Maria Smith were more powerful motives in her attempts to have him convicted than any love of justice or any regard for the welfare of the community."⁷⁵ Eternal truth and social health were threatened by Sally's selfishness and Vernet's scheming ambition. Sally was an image of those very forces which were undermining Conwell's ideal world of community order and individual justice. Vernet served to focus that menace into the prospect of widespread social and moral decay.

It was obvious that Caleb's conversion was an important reason for the final victory of good over evil. The religious awakening, however, did not fully insure the outcome. The importance of the feminine ideal in Conwell's mentality was also being illuminated. The parallels between Caleb and Conwell are again impressive. Caleb, now a new bachelor servant for Christ, needed to bind his newly found dedication to a woman's love. Such a union was necessary if the full momentum of his conversion was to be maintained. Indeed, the moment of love's spiritual consu-

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 88.

mation seemed similar to religious awakening. The union of Caleb and Bessie Otis reinforced his earlier conversion:

They tried to speak, they could not. They stood under the terrible strain of such emotions as have often burst asunder the human heart. Until Maria by a quick intuition, impulsively took the hand of each and forcibly drew them together. It was the lightning's stroke that opened the windows of heaven. He clasped her to him with compulsive embrace and kissed her cheek and forehead again and again. For an instant she seemed to recoil, and then surrendering wholly to her emotions . . . she drew him closer to her and cried aloud. Such moments of concentrated bliss men and women see but once in a lifetime. It is a foretaste of heavenly joy which the heart cannot bear should [it] be too often repeated.⁷⁶

If there was any doubt of the eminently spiritual complexion of such a union, Conwell answered it by explaining, "A man is never wholly the noble thing God intended him to be until he loves truly and purely some guileless woman."⁷⁷

It is conjecture whether Conwell's description of the love between Caleb and Bessie was an attempt to revive his own feelings toward either his first or second wife. There is, however, a good indication of his need to attach himself to an idealistic young woman later in his life. From at least 1894 to 1919, or from his fifty-first to his seventy-sixth year he corresponded intermittently with Baptist Temple member, Miss Sara Langstroth. Conwell gave her a scholarship to attend Temple College which he periodically renewed. For her part Miss Langstroth compiled a superior academic record, almost worshiped her benefactor, and developed an

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 215.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 220.

interest in professional writing. Conwell's letters to her give insight into his fixation on the meaning of womanhood. They point to the piritual--almost transcendental--meaning he found in femininity. In Sara Langstroth he found a living counterpart of the fictional Sarah Maria Smith. They both had great inner beauty. And, each acted as models to sustain his Victorian sense of innocence, greatness, struggle, loneliness and optimism. Through his letters to Sara he could continue to renew his conversion commitment to Christ when old age and social change were working to undermine the memory of his religious awakening during the Civil War.

In 1898, perhaps not coincidently the same year he wrote "Out of the Floods," he showed how intimately connected were his feelings about nature, God and femininity:

Up here at the eagle's nest there is a cleft in a huge ledge of rocks to which I go alone to think and pray when any great trial disturbs me. . . . I went there today for my heart, too, has been sorely tried. While there I took out your letter and read it aloud. All was so still, so solemn: All about so fresh and natural, so near to God's own heart, and my emotions so deep, so throbbing, that I could not describe the experience. . . .⁷⁸

There was something in Sara's nature which eased Conwell's alienation, perhaps something strikingly feminine:

I often feel that there is no one so alone, so destitute of friendly sympathy, so abandoned by man as I am, no one thinking that I can possibly need sympathy

⁷⁸Russell H. Conwell to Sara H. Langstroth, September 7, 1898 (Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University).

or aid. Then when I think of your young sensitive nature so tested by the severest trial a woman's nature can know, I think what a sinner I am to complain. So then I forget my own trials in thinking of yours.⁷⁹

By 1904 Conwell had moved his relationship with Sara into the spirit world. Femininity seemed positively defied when he exclaimed, "I have a strange interest in you which is like wireless telegraph and I can hear you fluttering across all space. What a strange world this is!"⁸⁰ In 1915 he asked her to write his biography. She refused but recommended another young woman church member, Miss Agnes Burr, who eventually wrote it. Four years later as a measure of his feeling for the now married Sara, Conwell in his last surviving letter to her, merged the couple into his own home: "It is strange how like my own children you both seem to me. I suppose I am foolish as there is no fool like an old fool. But the mysteries of soul life are more and more difficult to understand as life increases in days." Quite properly, considering his feelings for Sara, he signed it, "As ever, Grandpop Conwell."⁸¹

It is clear then that the concept of ideal femininity held an important place in Russell Conwell's thinking. It is also apparent that the meanings of home and femininity were interrelated. Each seemed to strengthen the other. Moreover, both were

⁷⁹Ibid., January 10, 1899. What the severe "trial" Miss Langstroth had endured is now unknown.

⁸⁰Ibid., March 10, 1904.

⁸¹Ibid., January 12, 1919.

a part of the composite of attitudes which comprised a romantic picture of the way he thought life should be lived. Such a vision clashed with his perception of the way America appeared to be moving in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The softness of a remembered small town, the social peace of an essentially rural nation filled with cohesive homes, hard working fathers and idealistic mothers, was being challenged by hard, impersonal, distended selfishness.

Conwell's fear paralleled the doubts which Jacksonians who remembered the heritage of disinterested republican virtue had about the emergence of "the man on the make."⁸² The difference was that Conwell centered his need to restore social virtue in the home rather than in the large society. It was not that he avoided the question of a restoration of public altruism and responsibility. He spoke out on these matters frequently. The difference was about where to begin. For Jacksonians the natural place to control greed was in politics, even though it was also the natural place to further economic and social advantages. Conwell started his search for social goodness in the home. Here was the place where the individual heart retained its innocence. Here was one social institution which had not yet been completely undermined by a distended and grasping economic development. Moreover, home was the one social community which seemed entirely divorced from politics. No one would accuse a pastor of political

⁸²Meyers, The Jacksonian Persuasion, pp. 1-32.

design because he was trying to preserve the virtues of the American home.

But there was something else in Conwell's emphasis besides the need to develop a Christian home and spread its essential goodness to other institutions. If the middle class was the one group which could achieve social uplift and avoid revolutionary chaos it must be appealed to in terms which would strengthen its function of stabilizing American society. As the milieu which the middle class found itself in became increasingly "overreaching" they found themselves ever more a part of the attending anomie or social confusion which accompanied distendedness. The one refuge from involvement in the disorder and impersonalization inherent in the struggle to modernize an agrarian society was the American home and the values it symbolized. If those values were romanticized and kept sacrosanct they would help ease the psychological strains and social tensions which accompanied an impersonalization of large portions of human life. A reduction of these anxieties might head off the prospect of disordered rebellion, organized revolution, or both. It is here that the rationale for Russell Conwell's essential frame of mind becomes clearer. The one way open to still the disquietude of large numbers of Americans who found themselves involved in a profound historical transition, but yet not completely convinced these changes were for the best, was to emphasize existing security. By stressing home, femininity, and a moral past filled with good character, Conwell could sharpen those enduring verities which

were losing ground to distendedness, grasping and immorality. He could articulate and pronounce a simplistic ideology to counter the relativistic thinking which was accompanying the material change to a corporate America. In Conwell's mind these new world views needed to be arrested because they were a part of and added to the disorders and selfishness of his time. Insofar as he was representative of an older ideology, and insofar as he used it to prevent the American middle class from completely adjusting to the emerging modern America, he helped define the crisis of American individualism. In this case to define meant to ease the strain of historical transition by justifying ideological inertia.

But to say that the essential Russell Conwell functioned as a figure who helped prevent the adjustment of middle class American individualism to the needs of corporate capitalism is to tell only one half the story. It is only after it is shown that Conwell did indeed further this adjustment that his essential contribution becomes apparent. Only then does the nature of his predicament and perhaps that of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American individualism begin to emerge.

CHAPTER III

In 1917 some Philadelphians were expressing their concern over the effect of movies on the public morality. Russell Conwell was one who presented the problem:

When one goes to the moving pictures--and I think we must confess that we have all been there--we have seen a great many pictures which have taught good; we have seen them exhibit the wonders of science and beauties of nature, and we have made up our minds that somehow the profession ought to be cleansed--something ought to be done, and it is strange that we who have been preaching for fifty years have not hit upon the remedy for the evil. But we have been extremists; we have said, "Keep away altogether from the theater; there may be some good in it, but there is so much bad in it, the safest thing is to leave it alone altogether . . . that has been the weak attitude of the church . . . yet our common sense has taught us plainly that there are theatrical exhibitions which elevate and teach great truths."¹

Cleverly, Conwell tried to dispel his congregation's ambivalence over the value of movies and theater by unearthing a historical church which sanctioned the use of the theater. He eased their anxieties by reminding his parishioners, that "originally the theater itself was the product of the church, and used for the purpose of teaching Christians doctrines in the church long be-

¹Russell H. Conwell, "Reasonable Christianity," The Temple Review, XXVI (January 25, 1918), 5. Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University.

fore it was ever taken over by the world."² But most importantly, while quieting their apprehension, Conwell had justified an institutional solution to the problem of movies versus morals. That is, he linked a discussion of the theater to the province of the church. In effect he had switched the burden of determining the morality of the theater from the individual to the institution. By showing that the historical church approved of the theater he indicated that institutions could make decisions about morality. The problem, however, was a contemporary one because the media itself had changed. Movies did not exist when, "the theater itself was a product of the church." It still needed to be shown that the church could solve the dilemma of the day.

Conwell used the Catholic church as an example of a contemporary institution which had solved the problem of individual moral confusion over the movies. That he could use the Catholic church reveals the depth of Conwell's congregation's concern. After all, the Catholic church was perceived as one of the greatest enemies of individual freedom. Indeed, it ranked with slavery as the primary symbol of immorality, a veritable anti-Christ.³ By the late nineteenth century, however, democracy needed consensus, unity, and a sense of community.⁴ And where

²Ibid.

³David B. Davis, "Some Theme of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XLVII (September, 1960), 205-224. Davis, The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style, pp. 62-86.

⁴Wiebe, The Search for Order, pp. 44-75. Wilson, In Quest of Community, pp. 26-31, 171-174.

was one to find a better example of the operation of consensus than in the policies of the Catholic church? Their "white list" of movies and plays suitable for viewing was suddenly worth considering. A new threat to values which held family and home together called for extraordinary measures: "I appeal to you Christian people of the Protestant denomination here tonight that you join with the Catholic church in the purifying of the theater until it is safe for your children or mine, or your friends and mine to attend."⁵ Nevertheless, in no way was the committee (a group of priests and Catholic laymen) which chose the Catholic "white list" abridging individual choice. The censorship committee was not substituting the law for a free moral decision. To the contrary, there was "no law involved in it, . . . it is simply a reasonable plan to get the opinion of Christian people as to whether that play is fit to be seen."⁶ Nevertheless, it was clear that Conwell was urging his listeners to allow an agency of the churches to make moral decisions for them; to substitute institutional for individual judgment.

II

Thus far this study has presented a view of Russell Conwell's mind which places it at odds with the prevailing interpretation of the thrust of popular ideology during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It has been shown that his beliefs

⁵Conwell, "Reasonable Christianity," p. 5. My italics.

⁶Ibid., p. 6.

were preeminently nostalgic. That is, they were in many respects strangley similar to an earlier American outlook which might be described as an amalgam of backward-looking Jacksonian and mid-Victorian values. Yet Conwell lived in a later era; one which by the very magnitude of its urban-industrial growth was more involved in material progress and institutionalization. This meant that the techniques of modernization such as planning, organization and regularization were more fundamentally centered on the institutionalization of economic expansion. Of course, economic expansion had always, in some degree, been the case in America. The difference was one of degree and result. After the Civil War there was more open emphasis on the need for mammoth corporate development, on the desire for governmental controls, on the effect of the environment on human affairs. The result was the erection of a huge corporate overlay which was accompanied by a slow but steady growth of governmental functions, and an increasing tendency for thinkers to start their inquiries with questions about the social or physical environment. Although each of these trends was countered by a surprisingly viable individualism, the latter's cultural strength was clearly diminishing in the face of these powerful challenges.⁷

⁷The best amplification of corporate growth is Williams, The Contours of American History, pp. 345-412. For an explanation of the expansion of governmental functions see Fine, Laissez-faire and the General Welfare State, A Study of Conflict in American Thought, 1865-1912. A good analysis of the growing environmental bent of American thinkers in this period is Persons, American Minds, A History of Ideas, pp. 217-330.

It has been shown that Conwell's rhetoric partially reflected the strain of a collapsing Jacksonian and mid-Victorian world. Hence, it is tempting to explain him wholly as an anxious man of the past, an anomaly. To characterize Conwell as essentially backward-looking, moreover, would be to suggest that the popular ideology of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was primarily nostalgic. Such an interpretation is misleading. It was with fervor that Americans partook of their age. They, by and large, accepted industrialism. They left their farms by the hundreds-of-thousands for the city. And they clamored for unparalleled educational opportunities so they could continue their unending quest for social and economic mobility. If they had fears, they normally did not talk about them, much less vent them in revolutionary violence, or in socially disintegrating ventures. In short, they welcomed industrial and urban growth which they unfailingly identified with modernization.

Consequently, if Conwell is representative of popular attitudes one would expect him to applaud urban-industrial development. He does not disappoint this expectation. An ebullient, optimistic, and even futuristic side of his thinking is as evident as his uneasy nostalgia. Russell Conwell is able to set fears and expectations in equilibrium with one another without sacrificing his notion of progress. It is here that his functional capacity begins to emerge: Conwell was a balancer of opposing social strains and social hopes. He allowed neither tendency to upset a belief in a general social progress which

was increasingly being identified with a material development effected by institutionalization. Thus, despite his orientation toward the world of Jacksonian and mid-Victorian values and his belief in urban-industrial progress, he would not let any over-view jeopardize social equilibrium, for only with stability and harmony could he realize both the past and the future. In this context the rationale behind his support of Catholic censorship of the movies and theater is illuminated. Only by relaxing social tensions--tensions which upset harmony--could Conwell preserve his vision of the past and yet also have his dream of the future.⁸

III

There were at least three Conwellian ways of relaxing social tensions. One way was to preserve social balance. It is possible to see what he meant by balance or equilibrium by examining his perception of extremism. In 1917, he gave a sermon suggestively entitled, "Reasonable Christianity" which begins to unravel the drift of his argument for balance. He explained that, "Moving down through the ages the Gospel teaching has been ever vacillating between extremes. Extremists have been the curse of the

⁸For an older but convincing explanation of popular fascination for the city see Arthur M. Schlesinger, The Rise of the City, 1878-1898 (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1933), pp. 53-77. A good short analysis of the popular writers who catered to the demand for social and economic mobility is in Curti, The Growth of American Thought, pp. 626-636. Also see Wyllie, The Self-Made Man in America, pp. 94-115. The most profound interpretation of popular support for industrial growth in American history is Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America (London: Oxford University Press, 1964).

church and the greatest hindrance to the proclamation of Christ's universal kingdom." Their tactics were insidious: "Extremists are those who following truth follow it so far that it becomes a lie; they who are so enthusiastic over some good cause that they adopt unjust and unfair means to carry it on; men who think that the end justified the means, and . . . are against the common conscience and against the commandments of God. . . ." ⁹ Such a way of operating was an assault on the Christian message: the hope for peace. Conwell did not simply mean peace as opposed to war. He meant evenness as opposed to chaos, or faith as opposed to doubt. Therefore, it was not surprising that his argument for peace extended into economic concerns: "It is the extremists in the labor movement that are continually antagonizing the forces of labor and capital; it is the extremists who are always worrying, and yet we are taught in God's word that worry is unwise and unchristian." ¹⁰ Imbedded in his plea for equilibrium was the fear of the centrifugal force of extremism which might produce the tension and uneasiness that would pull apart stable social relationships and erode absolute values. A fanatical and blind idealism for certain causes was the real enemy of social peace.

In the same sermon he showed how his own idealism could be modified. Conwell had consistently spoken out in favor of the temperance movement. He evidenced an acute sensitivity to the

⁹Conwell, "Reasonable Christianity," p. 3.

¹⁰Ibid.

evils of alcohol. There was, however, a limit beyond which his sympathy for abstinence would not go. The boundary of his tolerance for liquor reform was reached when the rhetoric of reform ceased to be reasonable. Hence, "The Temperance Movement," which was sweeping the country, "has been hindered, and hindered and hindered, in my lifetime by extremists--by those who had said intemperate things, made intemperate speeches, and these intemperate things have caused a continual reaction, and the saloon will exist . . . for fifty years longer than it would have existed had it not been for the many intemperate people who have advocated its abolition."¹¹ An unbalanced rhetoric encouraged the very evil Conwell sought to remove. This became the justification for abandoning a radical approach to an essentially moralistic reform. The result was to put Conwell's thinking more squarely in the camp of those favoring the continuance of the social status quo. A desire for balance tended to strengthen his conservatism.

His concern became clearer when he substituted covetousness for temperance:

We have often been taught that we should not earn money for money's sake, that we should not be covetous; that it is a very wicked thing to be ever seeking after money for greed's sake. But we have so preached against covetousness until people have thought they ought not try to earn any money or save any money at all, and the commandment of God is made of no effect.¹²

Again a radical position led Conwell to search for equilibrium.

¹¹Ibid. My italics.

¹²Ibid., p. 4.

Ironically, he seemed to realize that his own admonitions against acquisition could be falsely interpreted by "extremists." Their mistake was an erroneous understanding of natural laws, which if comprehended correctly meant just plain common sense. He observed that "if we were to pray that those mountains be literally moved into the sea, or if we were to pray that the sun may come down to us, or . . . that the laws of nature should be reversed, we would be praying for things that are unreasonable to expect and not in accordance with the plain teachings of Scripture." Then in a phrase which exposes the well-defined limits of his spiritual expectations he explained, "Faith is the substance of things REASONABLY hoped for."¹³

Here, Conwell parts company with the radical perfectionism and come-outerism of the antebellum period. He would not allow his spiritual frame of mind to upset his desire for balance. It was not that he perceived himself moving in a more conservative and institutional direction. On the contrary, only by recognizing the built-in equilibrium of God's natural laws could a safe spiritual climate be realized. The effect of his penchant for reasonableness, however, was to sterilize or at least immobilize any anti-institutional tendency in his Christianity. His sense of equilibrium pulled his religious endeavors toward rather than away from an institutionalized church. Individual conversion was fine, indeed indispensable to a Baptist, but you could not

¹³Ibid.

"advance the best interests of your own denomination by continually assailing other denominations."¹⁴ His desire for social peace and religious unity outweighed his zeal to see Christianity realized by any doctrinaire, evangelical ferment. In this case, fear of disorder generated religious conservatism.

Conwell's fear of social chaos was acute. Often he functioned as a soother, the man whom churchgoers could rely on to reasonably mediate between two opposing social factions. A case in point was his analysis of the classic case of urban-industrial disorder: the strike. His first response was not to deny the existence of labor unrest, but to exaggerate its calamity. Thus, he began by warning of the strike's impending violence: "We have come to the eve of great strikes. We are seemingly approaching now the volcanoes that must soon open their mouths." Next he honestly acknowledged the existence of an almost Marxian class-struggle: "Men are not going to be long content with the wages that they are now receiving, under the high cost of living, and allow the capitalists to make their uncounted millions." In fact, "men are not going to be content, either, with their share; but are going to ask for an unfair share of what they should have. It comes as a kind of reprisal. It is human experience over and over again between those who have and those who have not." What was really behind the class struggle was human greed. Men were naturally going to seek money to pay for the necessities of life

¹⁴Ibid.

because there was, "nothing in the world or in the Scripture" to condemn it. Nevertheless, Conwell was insistent, "everything depends upon the method."¹⁵ It was the way a person sought wealth which determined its legitimacy.

Because there was an ideal way of living with money it was important, if there was to be social equilibrium, to construct a model situation:

Two brothers in this city went into business together. They lived together; they kept their families near together. They had different numbers in each family, and they lived in different houses; one in a quiet place, in an old Quaker neighborhood; the other went out to build a beautiful mansion in the suburbs. These two brothers lived in partnership for 42 [sic] years, and they never had any division of profits or property until after the death of one of those brothers. Very frequently one would need a thousand dollars and the other would need only five hundred, and yet there was no account kept between them, except their business partnership account, giving the account of the whole concern. They were looked upon as representative Christian men; they lived with no division among them, and with no quarrel in any way or shape. Oh! The blessed brotherhood of two men living together like that!¹⁶

This example of Christian sharing was significantly set in the family rather than in the factory. The assumption was that if a balance of want and wealth could be established in the home, then such an equilibrium was possible for society at large. He concluded that "if these brothers and their friends could dwell for so many years together in Christian peace, it shows that it can

¹⁵Russell H. Conwell, "The Last Appeal on the Labor Question," The Temple Review, XXIV (November 17, 1916), 3. Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University.

¹⁶Ibid.

be done. . . ." It followed, "that when Christ sets up his ideal, he does not set up the impossible." Even so the road to social harmony was not without its difficulties: "So many causes are brought to bear upon this contest between labor and capital that the number is millions." The only sensible way of dealing with this multitude of men and corporations was to allow "adjustment by the human conscience to the local circumstances."¹⁷ But what specifically did Conwell mean by this vague kind of adjustment? He did not leave his congregation wondering.

He explained that American workers did not understand their true interests. It was an interpretation of false-consciousness which would have made a Marxist livid. It seemed obvious to Conwell that "the distinction between profit sharing and paying wages is a mere matter of words," which had "fooled the laboring people beyond measure." The trouble with the laborer's outlook was that he failed to see that the capitalist was already sharing his profits with his employee: "If I agree to pay a man \$10 a week, that's a division with him. If I am in business it is a profit sharing if I tell him that I will give him \$10 a week of my profits. If I want him to have a larger division I will raise his wages, and if I want him to have a smaller division I reduce them." There was no doubt that adjustment to individual situations would eliminate labor strife if only both the capitalist and the worker would live up to "a fair interpretation of his

¹⁷Ibid.

contracts," contracts which he implicitly recognized would be controlled by the capitalist.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Conwell believed that the key to the mediation of this unrest was each man's conscience honestly telling him what was fair. It could not be done by legislation for, "it is one of those instinctive things which a pure heart regulates." Russell Conwell was sure that "You cannot change the soul by law."¹⁹

Once having convinced his audience that current social tensions could be removed by fair and balanced consciences, he relaxed their fears of social disorder by predicting the coming of a standardized morality:

Very soon we are to have great uprising, great changes, and the cry will go up from every shop, and every mill and every street, from the afflicted people of the country. One thing we need, and that is a common standard of justice; a common standard of morality, or righteousness--one final standard by which we can all be judged, and consequently all work together in harmony. But there is no other possible standard in the world except that of the Lord Jesus Christ.²⁰

In fact, an amazing convolution had occurred to his insistence that individual consciousness be the arbiter in questions of fairness. Instead of ending his sermon by stoutly maintaining each individual's duty to determine for himself the justice of the wage-profit system, he urged conformity to "one final standard by which we all can be judged." Such a conclusion was not only com-

¹⁸Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 7.

²⁰Ibid., p. 10.

fortably ordering in a period of confusion, but hinted at the institutionalization of morality as a remedy for social unrest.

Another method Conwell used to relax social tensions was captured in his rendering of the future. The way an old conception moved toward an idealization of the future showed he was not trapped wholly in the nostalgia of the past. In 1909 he saw the ancient notion of sin as the cause of social strain, strain which was inhibiting future social progress. His point was clear: Eliminate sin and the disorientations of the present would melt into a harmonious future:

Sin disintegrates, divides, distributes, sets apart. Evil has for its chief work in this world the setting of hearts at variance with each other, the disturbance of pure harmony, and sending far away the grace and goodness and kindness and love of God. Sin divides men from each other in all the varied avenues of life. Sin prevents one nation from holding commercial relations with another. Sin awakens race pride . . . sin establishes grades in society. Sin makes cliques in the church, little divisions in which a few people get together and think themselves better than others.²¹

If the present was fractured by sin, the future needed to end these disjunctions. Thus, Conwell told his congregation, "You need to be a person who mends these broken links; who brings together these divided sections of the earth and these divided hearts."²² He wanted to balance a remembered organic past in which good and evil were easily discernible, with an envisioned organic future.

²¹Russell H. Conwell, "Blessed Lawmakers," The Temple Pulpit (February 5, 1909), p. 3. Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University.

²²Ibid.

It was earlier suggested that his conception of the ideal past was organic. The home typified his ideal of social wholeness. A nostalgia for the self-sufficient farm illustrated this same tendency: "I saw a man with a load of seed driving up the valley. But I knew he was a man who had no farm and owned no real estate. I wondered then, and I have wondered since, what he was going to do with all that seed corn and seed wheat." Then his reverence for an older organic rural America became apparent: "What is the use of seed wheat to a man who has no farm? And what is the use of a farm to a man who has no seed? There must be some union between supply and the demand."²³ The point was to link people together again in the future as they had been linked in the past. Conwell made the problem as explicit as possible:

Blessed are the linkmakers. Is there a family divided? Are there hearts which ought to love each other, now indulging in bitter difference, and is that home, instead of being heaven, really a hell upon earth? Does it need a linkmaker, someone to bring these hearts and these lives together? Are you not the one? Is there a city broken so that the people are unemployed and unhappy? Is there a town where one part of the city hates the other part? Is there a village in which the people are bitterly contending with each other over some local division? Do they not need a linkmaker somewhere who can tie them together?²⁴

But how could these links be made? What kind of future was Conwell aiming for? Close to the end of his life he hinted how being a "linkmaker" really meant building institutions:

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid., p. 4.

I have said that we should associate together for the purpose of getting strength. The association of many small things containing power is necessary to the advancement of civilization. We may find fault with Henry Ford for possessing so many hundreds of millions of dollars. But if he administer that collection of dollars so that it will be a greater power than could possibly otherwise be attained for the advancement of the community, it is a great achievement for the advancement of civilization.²⁵

Incorporation made a truly progressive future. The corporation, if properly conceived, lifted the organic qualities of the past into a broader social utility:

When Watt invented the steam engine he linked people together. When Vanderbilt built the New York Central Railroad, and when that great combination built the Union Pacific Railroad, and brought the people so near together as one nation, they were representatives of . . . great principles of peacemaking.²⁶

Significantly he added, "And if they had done it for the service of God, rather than for the service of their own pockets, they could have been the highest example of peacemakers." Conwell's meaning in the perspective of this study seems clear: Incorporation for essentially spiritual purposes united a disjointed society. He remained, however, uneasy about those who incorporated "for the service of their own pockets." He seemed to roughly realize that large-scale economic growth both caused and allayed social tensions. Yet when incorporation was projected into the future, public peace rather than disharmony was the outcome.

²⁵Russell H. Conwell, "Radio or the Church?," The Temple Review, XXXI, No. 31 (September 28, 1923), p. 2. Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University.

²⁶Conwell, "Blessed Lawmakers," p. 3.

The climactic vision of the future is, for Conwell, strangely similar to his perception of home as a social heaven on earth. In both images there was a harmonious unity which resulted in social fluidity and a lack of tension. In addition, Christian love was the essential ingredient in both conceptions. Without Christianity's cohesive power both hopeful visions found themselves back in a disordered present which churned with divisiveness. Russell Conwell seemed sure of the final outcome:

God's kingdom is coming; it is coming. Nations are drawing nearer every day. It takes less and less time to go over the ocean . . . and the telegraph more and more closely connects every corner and the telephone . . . every home. Merchandise of every clime is exchanged with each other, and books of every language are being read in every land; money is becoming more international, and the world is getting speedily nearer and nearer together. The nearer people get together the more necessary are Christian principles for their lives . . . the closer God brings the people of the earth into compact . . . the more necessary . . . [it is] to live according to the precepts of Christ's kingdom. Christ's kingdom is coming; I see it . . . the links are being repaired. The links . . . that bind heart to heart, and life to life, people to people and nation to nation are multiplying a thousand fold with every passing year. The world is getting nearer to God. Rejoice! Rejoice! And again I say rejoice!²⁷

Yet, the similarities notwithstanding, there was an important difference of direction between Conwell's conception of home and his perception of future one-worldness. While his idea of home seemed directed by a nostalgia which was non-economic and anti-institutional in its tenor, his conception of the future leaned toward intense economic and institutional activities. Awareness

²⁷Ibid., p. 15.

of these differences is crucial to an understanding of his attitudes about America's stupendous corporate development.

By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, when Conwell spoke out about the world's future, the American progressive movement was at high tide. What seemed to make it a movement was its search for institutional answers to problems of order and its expectations of human oneness.²⁸ Conwell roughly grasped this. When he voiced a vision of some future institutionalization, which in spite of its economic orientation, would be dominated by the heart, he eased the feeling of disjuncture of man from man. Such a feeling of fragmentation seemed unavoidable in an expanding capitalistic corporatism. An innovative institutionalization with romantic overtones was an important memory of antebellum America, an America which Conwell and many in his audience held dear. It was because this kind of institutionalism had strengthened the tendency toward individualism in the past, that it was so naturally adopted as an antidote to a future which was becoming less and less romantic.²⁹ Conwell, by concen-

²⁸A fine analysis of Progressivism's dual penchant for organization and ideals is Clyde Griffen, "The Progressive Ethos" in Stanley Coben and Lorman Ratner, eds., The Development of an American Culture (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 120-149.

²⁹Ibid., pp. 126-133, 149. Griffen after noting the connection between the ideals of Jacksonian reform with those of Progressivism perceptively comments: "Almost without exception the progressive reformers took ideal qualities associated with the home, in fact or in evangelical precept, and held them up as a standard for the wider world," p. 132. For the best review of Jacksonian reform see John L. Thomas, "Romantic Reform in America," American Quarterly, XVII, No. 4 (Winter, 1965), 656-681.

trating on the nostalgia for a fading past while simultaneously emphasizing the expected brightness of the future, was able to sooth the anxieties of the present. The insecurities of the present were only an unpleasant and temporary interim between the remembrance of a romantic individualistic past and the coming of a corporate millennium--one which kept the individual in the center of its experiences.

A third way of relaxing social distress is found in Conwell's perception of the present. He never interpreted the present as wholly or even primarily displeasing. If the past and the future were better it was only because the present had not succeeded, yet, in identifying and eliminating evil. Even though evil corrupted and set man apart from his brothers, Conwell felt there was massive evidence that America was verging on Utopia. During the late 1880's Conwell co-authored with John S. C. Abbott a work which showed, quite specifically, that the present could be lived with confidence.³⁰ Nearly seven hundred pages long, Lives of the Presidents of the United States of America almost bestowed sainthood upon every American president from Washington through Benjamin Harrison. Although this catalog of executive

³⁰John S. C. Abbott and Russell H. Conwell, Lives of the Presidents of the United States from Washington to the Present Time (Portland, Maine: H. Hallett and Company, c. 1889). Abbott was born in 1805 and died in 1877 a good ten years before the above work was published. He was a congregational minister and historian. Like Conwell, he had written of home, Christianity, and great men. There is no reason for thinking the general outlines of his thinking diverged significantly from Conwell's. See the sketch by Stanley P. Chase and Robert Edmond Ham in Allen Johnson, ed., Dictionary of American Biography, 20 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), I, 22-23.

excellence is a revealing glimpse into Conwell's perception of presidential character, its major significance lies in its faith in American progress. A last chapter entitled "One Hundred Years' Progress," which is subtitled "A Chapter Showing the Progress of the Republic from the Revolutionary War to the Present Time," gives a vision of his understanding of the present.

America's past, Abbott and Conwell concluded, enjoyed the best of character but lacked the advantages of modern civilization. The American government had "passed through as severe an ordeal as it is possible for any nation to be subjected to" and had emerged triumphant.³¹ In spite of this magnificent beginning the United States by the end of its revolution was devoid of the blessings of civilization:

A century ago there were but few insignificant towns scattered along the coast from Maine to Georgia. Maine was almost an unbroken solitude, with but here and there a hamlet upon her rugged shores. Savages roamed through all the interior of New York. Pittsburgh was but a military post. The largest part of Virginia was an unexplored wilderness, mostly covered with a dense gloomy forest. It required the laborious journey of twelve days to pass from Baltimore to Pittsburgh . . . as to the regions beyond the Mississippi, even the imaginations of men had hardly traveled so far.³²

Moreover, the civilizing effect of American democracy had not yet permeated the nation; "The planters of Virginia were feudal lords, trampling upon the rights of the industrial classes, who

³¹Abbott and Conwell, Lives of the Presidents, p. 665.

³²Ibid.

were kept in stolid ignorance."³³ The inference of these shortcomings, however, was clear: The America of the revolutionary period but awaited the twin geniuses of American life--technological innovation and democratic uplift.

The development of the United States from 1776 to the Philadelphia International Exhibition one hundred years later, was largely a story of technical progress: "In 1776 there was no mode of signaling news, but by beacon fires, or by arms of wood, swinging from elevated buildings." But by 1832 Morse with his telegraph had mechanized communications. Or, in an example which indicated that no technological innovation was insignificant, if it could be dispensed with democratic commonness, there was the story of the "metallic pen." Many could recall the first of these pens: "Scarcely a third of a century ago they were regarded as a great novelty . . . the metallic pen has now become one of the necessary appliances of civilization; and those of the most perfect manufacture can be purchased at less than a dollar a gross."³⁴ It did not matter which year in the nineteenth century one chose; they all were replete with examples of technical progress--a progress which was civilizing the nation:

In 1820 there were no canals, now there are over 4,000 miles. In 1825 there were no railroads, now there are in use 86,497 miles, of which 4,721 miles were built in 1879. In 1843 there were no telegraphs; in 1880 there were 200,000 miles in operation. In 1875 there were no telephone lines; in

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid., pp. 673-75.

1881 there are nearly 80,000 miles of wire in use for that purpose. In 1850 there were 2,526 newspapers and periodicals published in the United States. In 1881, 10,500 were published. In 1831 only fifteen per cent of the population . . . attended school; now the average attendance is . . . over ninety-five per cent of the school children.³⁵

Bringing together into one spot physical examples of these changes, the International Exhibition at Philadelphia in 1876 was an American testimonial which, "exhibited, on a scale of unprecedented magnitude, the resources of our own country, and its progress in those arts which elevate and ennoble humanity."³⁶

What was the meaning of all this change to the nineteenth-century reader of "One Hundred Years' Progress?" It was probably much the same as its authors' conceptions of progress in American history: The democratization of technical advancement. What the present held over the past was the spread of material creations. An optimistic prognosis for the American future rested squarely on the continuing dispersion of material advantages. The fact that Conwell and Abbott had gone to great trouble to measure technology's conquest over America during the previous century was meant to assure that things were better now than in the past. They seemed to be saying that although in the past American success was measured by character, now it was dependent on the spread of technology. Character was the enduring quality of all the presidents, but of particularly Lincoln and the founding

³⁵Ibid., p. 686.

³⁶Ibid., p. 677.

fathers. The virtues of the presidents after the Civil War were increasingly attached to their ability to facilitate material progress.³⁷ Security in the future, as we have noted, was in Conwell's vision the creation of the spiritual unity of all men. Indeed, America's role in the world's future was no less than being a guide to universal excellence. This expectation coupled with confidence in the continuing spread of technological improvements, gave reason for the authors and their audience to be self-satisfied about the present.

Obviously, Conwell believed that America was morally superior to other countries. Whatever her shortcomings, her ideals were unequalled. These were even more outstanding when they were contrasted with the fiber of non-Caucasian underdeveloped countries:

No country in the world, unless it be Africa presented a less favorable field for a republic than did Mexico when it declared its independence of Spain in 1821. Ignorant, hasty and quarrelsome, the Mexican populace had but little fitness for self-government . . . but yet with the moral influence of the American republic constantly exerted to encourage, enlighten and caution the Mexican people, they have slowly ascended the scale of self-discipline until the introduction of railroads and telegraphs by the capitalists of the United States appears to be the crowning feature of republican success.³⁸

This view of the relationship of American capitalism to her republican heritage showed that the modern strength of the example

³⁷Ibid., pp. 514-515, 541, 657-663.

³⁸Ibid., p. 695.

of American moral superiority rested not on past ideals nor on future expectations, but on the spread of technological progress-- a progress which seemed most recognizable in the present. The present both at home and abroad could be seen from an angle which relaxed social tensions.

There was then a continuity of optimism running through his interpretation of America's importance as a moral model. It ran from a noble past to a materially creative present into a spiritually unified future. It was only the present which made Conwell nervous. The importance of this past-present-future eschatology lies in his recognition of the present in history as transition. Once he had conceived of the present as flux he opened the door to pragmatic behavior. Since the past was gone and the future was yet to come, the present needed to be adjusted so as to bring in the bright tomorrow as quickly and as painlessly as possible. Because moral imperatives were clearly revealed by God, the Bible and the examples of history, they were hardly open to adjudication. The only area of possible adjustment was the material world. Happily, the present abounded in mundane matters which could be made ready for the ideal future. The upshot of this was that Conwell felt free to manipulate men and institutions as a part of his understanding of the creative present. His expansion of the Baptist Temple's worldly functions as well as the creation of Temple College, indeed his entire role as innovator, assumes an added rationale if he conceived of his contemporary world as preeminently the world of material flux. In this perspective,

Russell Conwell as preacher-innovator was merely acting out a particular understanding of American history. The preacher earnestly explained the moralistic absolutes of the past and future while concomitantly warning against moral backsliding in the present. The innovator busily manipulated worldliness to insure a hopeful future, a future with an absolute standard of morality which would make all men as one. An argument for and an example of intense activity in the present worked to assuage anxieties about the contemporary world.

IV

Conwell's institutional life in Philadelphia gives insight into the quality of his innovative pragmatism. The forty years he administered the Temple institutions were filled with decisions, problems, and interactions which would entail a separate history. The objective in this study will be only to learn something of Conwell's administrative style. While examining this will not explain the development of the Temple complex, it is not unrelated to the central concern of this study: The crisis in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American individualism.

Undeniably one of the precipitants of individualistic crisis in this era was the problem of people adjusting their lives to new institutional environments.³⁹ Their lives were increasingly touched by ponderous structures which directed human effort toward

³⁹Wiebe, The Search for Order, pp. 11-43. Wilson, In Quest of Community, pp. 26-31.

the production of something. Whether it was a factory, a church, or a school, the sheer size of these institutions coupled with the introduction of efficiency techniques usually meant a change of roles for the individuals involved in them. This change of roles was an important dimension of the crisis of individualism. In many ways an antebellum man, Conwell found himself directing the largest Protestant church in America. His style of administration would reflect a tension between his pre-war ideology and his new institutional milieu. Hence, his role in the Temple institutions partially reflected the larger individualistic crisis. It is entirely possible that his institutional style was a replica of the way people felt the transition to institutional life should be made if it should be made at all.

There was a distinct operational dimension to Conwell's administrative style, a work-a-day world image which made his institutional experiences unique. He combined a curious blend of personal flamboyance and impersonal efficiency. The contrast between an open exaggerated individualism and a closed faceless organizationalism was apparent in his modus operandi. Put differently, he displayed two levels of operational behavior. One is captured in his public image, which exuded warmth and intimacy. The dispensing of such an atmosphere of homeness became the trademark of his ministerial style. On another level, however, his working methodology was bureaucratic. Considerations of speed and system directed his responses to all the functional aspects of Temple institutions. This did not mean that efficiency

became the dominant criterion only in areas of finance. Organizational technique was crucial to the rationalization of his entire institutional style. For instance, the spontaneity and warmth of the weekly Baptist Temple Sunday services was calculated not accidental.

In the 1880's a visiting Methodist minister described the Sunday services in the First Grace Baptist Church. His comments which were partially quoted in the previous chapter are worth a fuller hearing here; they provide a glimpse of the planned intimacy which was illustrative of Conwell's ministerial approach:

There was an unusual spirit of homeness about the place, such as I never felt in a church before-- I was not alone in feeling it. The moment I stood in the audience room, an agreeable sense of rest and pleasure came over me . . . there was none of the stiff restraint most churches have. Everybody moved about and greeted each other with an ease that was very pleasant, indeed. I saw some people abusing the liberty of the place by whispering, even during the sermon.

He noticed specific examples of the Conwellian style:

All the people sang. I think Doctor Conwell has a strong liking for the old hymns . . . it was difficult to tell whether the strong voice of the preacher, or the chorus choir, led most in the singing. A well-dressed lady near me said 'good evening' most cheerfully, as a polite usher showed me into a pew. They said that all the members do that. It made me feel welcome. She also gave me a hymn book . . . how it did help me to praise the Lord! At home with the people of God! That is just how I felt.

When it came time for the collection,

It was not an asking for money at all. The preacher put his notice of it the other way about. He said, 'The people who wish to worship God by giving their offering into the trust of the church could place it in the baskets which would be passed to anyone who

wanted to give' . . . it was all voluntary, and really an offering to the Lord. I had never seen such a way of doing things in a church collection. I do not know if the minister or the church re-
quire it so.

The observer concluded his remarks by noting that, "The whole service was as simple as simple can be--and it was surely as sincere as simple."⁴⁰ And yet, he seemed implicitly aware of the necessity for some system of simplicity ("I do not know if the minister or the church require it so.")

Any question of whether there was method behind Conwell's unique institutional style is removed by the contents of an unpublished survey of the Baptist Temple's operational policies. In 1916 his church secretary, May Field McKean, wrote about Conwellian procedures in two tracts entitled, "Organization and Activities of the Baptist Temple," and "The Book of Methods for the Baptist Temple."⁴¹ McKean immediately indicated that the model for the church's institutional procedures was taken directly from the business community: "Mr. Conwell believes that the business principles which apply to a banking house, should apply also to a church. Therefore when the Temple was built a full set of offices was provided, with every convenience and appliance that would be found in the most modern business house." There was to

⁴⁰Quoted in Burr, pp. 188-190. My italics.

⁴¹May Field McKean, "Organization and Activities of the Baptist Temple" (unpublished manuscript, Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University, 1916). May Field McKean, "The Book of Methods for the Baptist Temple" (unpublished manuscript, Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University, 1916).

be an automatic transfer of the name of each new church member to an efficient accounting system: "When a name is entered on the church roll of which the deacons have the spiritual oversight, it is also entered on the business records, and it is understood that he or she will assume a future share, according to ability, of the support of the church." The accounting system was directly related to the intimacy one felt when the congregation gathered each Sunday morning. Thus, "Sittings in the Temple are assigned to all 'regular givers,' whether members of the church or not, that they may be made to feel as much 'at home' in the church service as they would at their own table where each member of the family has his own particular place."⁴² The systemization of the Temple's financial apparatus dictated the pattern of organization in seemingly unrelated church concerns.

It is hard to determine how much Conwell influenced the regularization of church finances. Once the deacons by 1895, had curtailed his ability to create new institutions by obtaining money from "fairs, concerts, lecture courses, dinners and various other forms of entertainments" it is logical to suppose he saw the need for a safer kind of financing. The practice of "systematic giving" through "duplex envelopes" which the deacons adopted

⁴²McKean, "The Book of Methods for the Baptist Temple," pp. 33-35. McKean makes it crystal clear that regularization and not spontaneity was now the desired result of the church's financial activities: "While it is true that considerable sums of money initially came through fairs, concerts, lecture courses, dinners and various other forms of entertainments, it is the aim of the trustees not to depend upon these, but to make up their budget upon the basis of pledges received and reasonable expenditures of gifts from regular sources.," pp. 38-39. My italics in text and footnote.

could hardly have seemed out of place to a pastor who equipped the Baptist Temple like a modern office:⁴³

In the rear of the auditorium on the street floor are the business offices of the church, Doctor Conwell's study and the offices of his secretary and associate pastor. The offices are equipped with desks, filing cabinets, telephones, speaking tubes and everything necessary to conduct the business of the church in a businesslike way.⁴⁴

Indeed, would a man who systematized prayer reject the facelessness of "systematic giving?" By 1916, cards displaying the following message were handed by ushers to every person at the Sunday service:

Dear Friend:

I wish that you would take this card home and write to me why you wish us to pray for you. It gives me an added interest and directness, and it will avoid the danger of forgetting. When your prayer is answered I would like to hear about it.

But all communication will be kept to myself.

Your brother,

Russell H. Conwell⁴⁵

The magnitude of his organizational capacity shows up in a multitude of other church activities. For instance there were established procedures for greeting guests. A committee would,

. . . voluntarily undertake to greet strangers; introduce them to the pastors and other officers and to each other; show them in companies the

⁴⁴Burr, p. 205.

⁴⁵McKean, "The Book of Methods for the Baptist Temple," p. 89.

whole building explaining every part and the work done in it; giving information upon all sorts of topics connected with the building and its organizations, and otherwise acting as a general 'information bureau.'⁴⁶

A unique system of providing for regular choir attendance while simultaneously collecting a regular small revenue was established. Any person absent from the practice session was required to pay twenty-five cents for each absence.⁴⁷ There were a wide variety of working organizations which Conwell either started or endorsed. Among them was the Bible School which aimed "to be the department of the 'church at study'." The Christian Endeavor Society was "divided into 'sections' representing affiliated ages and interests." The children's church was a kind of religious kindergarten which encouraged children to be "led to Christ." A number of charity service clubs such as the Brotherhood Mission, the Ladies Missionary Circle, the Ladies Aid Society, the Samaritan Aid, and the Garretson Aid dispensed mostly sympathy, but also some service to the sick and poor of North Philadelphia. The Beneficial Association for men and for women was a church insurance company which operated "upon a wholly Christian business basis," and provided cash benefits for infirmity or death. Persons of "good moral character" could join, and any surplus cash was "divided each year among members, counting upon the next years dues." The Baptist Temple Men's Class grew out of the Conwell Men's Class.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 33.

⁴⁷Ibid.

It functioned as a forum to discuss current problems from "a Bible standpoint." Conwell organized the Temple Guard which was a para-military organization for adolescent boys. The Guard disciplined "boys and young men at an age when it is sometimes difficult to hold them in the church." Completing the principle church organizations were two choirs, the chorus and the Temple Glee Club for men. This abundance of organizations was responsible to the regular church hierarchy led by Conwell and the deacons. Nevertheless, there were an incredible number of church officers involved in the various organizations. For example, the officers of the Temple Sunday School included: General Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Superintendent Primary Department, General Secretary, Secretary Senior Department, Assistant Secretary Junior Department, Secretary Primary Department, Treasurer, Financial Secretary, Registrar, Secretary of Supplies, Secretary of Teachers, Librarian, Statistician and Chorister. By the second decade of the twentieth century the administrative structure of the Grace Baptist Church resembled that of a large corporation.⁴⁸

If Conwell had any hesitation about the wisdom of a bureaucratically organized church, and none can be found, he certainly encouraged the development of modern business procedures in Temple College. In the early 1890's he wrote to the secretary of the trustees, Charles Stone, about the necessity of establishing an

⁴⁸McKean, "Organization and Activities of the Baptist Church" (no page numbering).

administrative bureaucracy: "The school has lacked decision in its administration heretofore and now the scholars must learn that it is a school not a mob."⁴⁹ There is no doubt that he equated the modernization of the school's administration with the newer business techniques. He wrote Stone in 1893 about a Miss Dellow who was then auditing the college accounts. Conwell was uneasy:

I wish to say that I am sure she is most scrupulously honest but does not know anything of systematic bookkeeping. It will be of little use to try to compare vouchers or study out the intricacies of a system only she would have adopted . . . henceforth the accounts must be kept in a systematic thorough manner. . . .⁵⁰

Much of his desire for a modernization of the college's business procedures can be explained by his concern for the survival of the school. In the early nineties he was most anxious about how the college would pay back the church after buying part of its property. The transaction involved some complicated financial juggling:

The interest paid on the mortgage on the church building (old) should be used toward paying the interest on the college lot. If the church takes the college money it will be fatal to the college. It would be a terrible shame for the church to destroy the college. . . . I cannot believe the trustees of the church would think of such a thing and the suggestion troubles me much.⁵¹

Without systematic bookkeeping and a college finance manager who

⁴⁹Russell H. Conwell to Charles F. Stone, April 19, 1893, Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University.

⁵⁰Conwell to Stone, June 29, 1893.

⁵¹Ibid., January 30, 1892.

was "a thorough going businessman" the financial status of the college could not be stabilized.⁵² Consequently, the college might be lost and Conwell's credibility would be shattered. An internal ordering of the college finances would not only solidify institutional walls but fortify the pastor's reputation as a successful innovator. The college could no longer afford to nurse financially from the church: It needed to adopt the corporate techniques of a modern business--something the Grace Baptist Temple had done from the beginning.

In an America which was becoming increasingly corporate, an organization had to incorporate in order to survive. Being corporate in the 1890's meant more than systematizing bookkeeping; it meant the creation of full-scale bureaucratic procedures. Max Weber has noted that bureaucratic procedures meant that within institutions, offices deal with offices. That is, individuals insofar as they confront institutional policy cease to communicate with each other.⁵³ The administrative system which Russell Conwell urged as a way to foster individuality and community worked ultimately to undermine both.

V

Sigmund Diamond in his book The Reputation of the American Businessman has maintained that the historian can learn much about

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Max Weber, Economy and Society, An Outline of Interpretive Sociology, 3 vols., trans. by Ephraim Fischhoff, et al. (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968), III, 959.

popular attitudes toward the business ethic by examining the testimonials to businessmen at their deaths.⁵⁴ If this is so then a look at memorabilia on Conwell might tell us what it was about his style which engaged the popular imagination. Of course, his fame was linked to his reputation as a lecturer, and it would be an error to deny that testimonials merely reflected his Philadelphian accomplishments. Nonetheless, the tributes are overwhelmingly local which leads to a suspicion that his institutional endeavors formed an essential part of his fascination.

One of the first things which strikes the reader, besides the expected deference to him as a most inspirational man, are numerous references to his fatherly power. At his funeral one speaker, after alluding to the paternal contributions to "Christianity and civilization" by David Livingstone and Abraham Lincoln, put Conwell in their company:

Back of this Temple, back of yonder university building, back of the hospitals, is that loving, big brotherly heart of Russell Conwell, and it seems as I stand here, if the mists could be dispelled between this and the world beyond, that we might see these three linking hands on that victory shore--Livingstone, Lincoln, Conwell! Their services for humanity have no superior in the annals of modern history.⁵⁵

⁵⁴Sigmund Diamond, The Reputation of the American Businessman (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1955), 1-4.

⁵⁵Grace Baptist Church, "Memorial Services in Honor of Russell H. Conwell founder and President of Temple University" (unpublished manuscript, Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University, 1925), p. 13. The major address at the memorial was given by U. S. Senator George Wharton Pepper. The quoted passage was delivered by a certain Dr. Dager who was probably a prominent Baptist Temple member. My italics.

He spoke of the creative side of his fatherly image in an almost biological and vividly masculine sense. He assured his audience that although, "Christianity has been charged with being anemic; that is, lacking in physical and mental manhood," there was no doubt that they were looking at "the silent body-the earthly toolhouse-of the most virile and aggressive and manly personality that ever used his talents and his hands for the uplift of Philadelphia."⁵⁶

But there was much more to his fatherly image than Conwell as creator, as the man "back of" the Temple institutional development. In 1893, as a tribute to his fiftieth birthday, the Baptist Temple's secretary, May Field McKean, composed a poem which paid homage to his paternal qualities.⁵⁷ It was, however, a strange kind of father which "The Flight of the Eagle" described. Instead of a man rooted in institutional life who regularly cares for his community, McKean described a free cruising spirit. The imagery of the poem's title suggests what the text amplifies; Conwell was loved for his romantic individualism, not for his communitarian endeavors. His life style was boundless:

And next we ask: "How does the eagle fly?"
 Upon a tireless wing he seeks the sky,
 With an undaunted courage he forsakes
 The shadows of the earth, and, pauseless, takes
 His persevering, unassisted way,
 To dizzy heights, whose summits would dismay
 A heart less brave, a wing less trained to dare
 The difficulties of the upper air.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 14.

⁵⁷May Field McKean, "The Flight of the Eagle" (Philadelphia: by the author, 1893).

The source for such a soaring individualism was God Himself:

"Why does the eagle soar?" 'Tis to fulfill
The praise of Him who by his Holy will
Gave it wings and power and strength to fly
Above the earth up to the vaulted sky.

And then in the imagery of a long-gone laissez-faire world, a full-blown impression of one man's heroic anti-institutionalism emerges:

He mounts and sinks, and mounts, and mounts again,
Glad in his freedom, till the haunts of men
Far, far below seem like a prison cell
To wings ordained above the earth to dwell.⁵⁸

If "the haunts of men" in the 1890's were likened to "a prison cell," and Conwell's power to escape them represented a lingering anti-institutionalism there could be little doubt of McKean's meaning: Temple's pastor was envied for his ability to live a fading Jacksonian past.

Yet, McKean was as immersed in the institutional life of the Temple complex as Conwell. Moreover, her Conwell was never called "The Eagle" but always "Our Eagle." The paternal overtones in that phrase were illustrated on the last page of the poem which was simply a picture of an eagle feeding its young in the nest. There was an obvious contradiction of this image with the one of Conwell as a free individual seeking escape from "the haunts of men." He attracted with both centripetal as well as centrifugal force:

But now we hail thee, pastor, shepherding
Thy flock with tenderest care. Seeking to bring

⁵⁸Ibid., pp. 4-6.

The wayward, wandering ones from mountains cold,
 Or deserts waste and bare, back to the fold
 Of God's forgiving love and fostering care,
 Whence He will lead to pastures green and fair.⁵⁹

There is no question, however, that the dominant symbolism of "The Flight of the Eagle" is that of a God-like, free-wheeling individual with powers (ironically in our contest) to bypass the abilities and be indifferent to the cares of ordinary people.

What did the poem suggest then about the question of Conwell's institutional style? It implied a paradox: an anti-institutional man controlling an institutional setting. Or, it presents the image of a free father, a parent who wanders like a bachelor but never really leaves home. The eagle-nest imagery would suggest a similar kind of activity. Such a paradox was more than poetic description because it mirrored a similar condition in his life.

We have seen that approximately the first half of Conwell's life was lived in relative drift. It was not until he was past forty that he settled into his final occupation. But settling down in the city of brotherly love was partially illusionary. The lecture circuit and the countless trips he made to his retreat, the Eagle's Nest in South Worthington, Massachusetts, kept him away for substantial periods. Yet, there is no mistaking his need for an institutional life. The picture of Conwell at the apex of an extended church community is interwoven with his roaming proclivity.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 10. McKean's italics.

There is still another dimension of Conwell as a father figure which testimonials can expose. He was characterized as a salutary combination of love and authority; a kind of benevolent dictator who gave security and direction simultaneously. The best indication of this side of his paternal image comes in a group of letters and poems to Conwell from a female acquaintance. Although evidence of his relationship between Ellen (Nellie) Frances Mills is meager, it apparently sprang from an infatuation she formed when he was lecturing as a young man in Massachusetts. Nellie's initial impression of Conwell had been formed thirty-five to forty years before her tributes to him were written. How old she was when she first saw him is conjecture but reference to "a stick of candy" which he gave her at their first meeting indicates she was hardly more than a child.⁶⁰ There is only one surviving note to Nellie from Conwell, a short rejection of her request that he lecture near her home in Pepperell, Massachusetts.⁶¹

Nellie's letters, nearly all of which contain gushy sentimental poems commemorating his birthdays, are explicit statements of his image as a strong but loving father. There is no mistaking her insistence that he is a pillar of moral strength in a troubled world:

. . . You've bravely lived your life
In a world of sin and strife.

⁶⁰Ellen Frances Mills to Russell H. Conwell, September 15, 1920 (Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University).

⁶¹Russell H. Conwell to Ellen Frances Mills, May 23, 1917 (Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University).

Oh the good that you have done
 Every day from sun to sun!
 Countless millions bless your name;
 Spread abroad your lasting fame;
 Wondrous love you've gained on earth
 Who can estimate its worth?
 "Seventy Seven" means more than this-
 Means promise of eternal bliss-
 Oh! We need you more and more!
Need your counsel o'er and o'er!
 Let's forget the passing years
 And the anxious brooding fears
 Let the joy that you are here
 Banish every lurking fear.⁶²

Here was a picture of a man who gave comfort to the troubled.
 Here also was a man whose values had not eroded in a world which
 was becoming ever more relativistic and selfish. Nellie Mills
 saw Conwell as a beacon of surety in a universe which seemed less
 and less coherent. It was her hope that the "countless millions"
 could find and save the receding image of American Christian in-
 dividualism in the example of his life.

Those who praised Conwell in life and death, then, saw him
 as several kinds of fathers. To a few acquaintances at his death
 he was a builder--a creator of uplifting institutions. His
 church secretary described him as essentially a limitless free
 spirit who yet remained attached to his community. And, to a
 female admirer he was the rock of strength in the quicksand of
 uncertainty and sin. Although each of these visions is special
 they all converge on one common particular: they each defer to
 Conwell's authority. It is not, however, an acquiescence to his
 power which characterizes their homage. In fact quite the re-

⁶²Mills to Conwell, September 15, 1920. Mills' italics.

verse is the case. What they revered was his unauthoritarian use of authority. He deserved their reverence because he typified the ambivalence of American power wrapped in idealism. In an era when many people and organizations were being revealed as selfish manipulators, the symbol of a fatherly Russell Conwell reassured that one could have substantial institutional power and yet be good.

VI

What then can be said of his institutional style? It is clear that from the days of his efforts at army recruiting his organizational talent lay in building from the ground up. During the 1870's when he agreed to reorganize the finances of the Lexington Baptist Church he began operating as a preacher-innovator. When it appeared that Philadelphia offered him greater opportunity to apply his technique he did not hesitate to move there. By 1900, Conwell had become more and more the preacher-administrator. This metamorphosis from one role to another mirrors the larger changes from one American era to another; from a period of developmental institutionalism to a time of consolidational institutionalism. In this sense Conwell's style merely reflected a profound transformation of America.

Yet there was a subtlety in the way Conwell duplicated this larger process. It is revealed in the functional nature of the Conwellian style. He was able to convince his middle class audience that there was nothing undemocratic or anti-indi-

vidualistic about participation in institutions which tended toward bureaucracy. Alexis de Tocqueville, Robert Wiebe, and Max Weber are helpful from a theoretical point of view in explaining Conwell's success in easing this transition. If in any democracy there are always tensions between individualism and conformity, as Tocqueville assumed, it is logical that some historical eras would tend more toward one than the other. Or, any era would hold extremes of one or both tendencies.⁶³ Wiebe has shown that there was indeed an extreme form of individualism which surfaced in America during the late nineteenth century. In many ways the populist uprisings of the 1890's were extensions of the dominant individualistic anti-corporation campaigns of the Jacksonians. They were reactions to an increasingly corporate and therefore institutional America, an America whose work-a-day world functions demanded increasing conformity and standardization. The strikes and other popular disorders of this period as well as those of the first quarter of the twentieth century, were, from this perspective, evidence of both the magnitude of the change and the internal strain which followed the swing of the democratic pendulum from individual to institutional dominance.⁶⁴ But why did the new organizations become bureaucratic?

⁶³Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, trans. by George Lawrence (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1966), 227-254, 477-484. A superior analysis of Tocqueville's social theory is Raymond Aron, Main Currents in Sociological Thought, 2 vols., trans. by Richard Howard and Helen Weaver (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1965), I, 219-231.

⁶⁴Wiebe, The Search for Order, pp. 76-110, 286-302.

Here Weber is the most helpful. In Economy and Society he extends Tocqueville's idea about the necessity for conformity in a democracy. He maintains that "bureaucratic organization inevitably accompanies modern mass democracy, in contrast to the democratic self-government of small homogeneous units."⁶⁵ If Weber is correct, it is futile to look for the origins of American institutional bureaucracy in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. One would do better to examine the first half of the nineteenth century for the beginnings of this development. Indeed, in Weber's context the whole of America's democratic experience might be interpreted as a germination and growth of the bureaucratic process. In this case any discussion of a crisis in American individualism would involve not only its relationship with conformity and institutions, but with a particular stage of bureaucratic development.

Conwell's contribution, in this regard, was to create the illusion of a balance between individualism, innovative institutionalism and a particular stage of bureaucratic growth. He was able to reduce his own anxieties and those of his parishioners by presenting a style of institutionalization which he pretended was not institutional at all, if by institutional one meant the abridgement of democratic individual voice. A recent perceptive article by Peter J. Larmour suggests that modern leadership must personalize itself if it is "to counter the modern tendency for responsibility to dissipate." In this view "lead-

⁶⁵Weber, Economy and Society, III, 983.

ership" becomes "the antidote for the evils of organization."⁶⁶ As Conwell's organizational creations grew they increasingly acquired the characteristics of fully-developed modern bureaucracies. The increasing complexity of their authority structures indicated that personal responsibility was indeed being dissipated. Moreover, the fast growing urban environment of North Philadelphia, by its very nature, exhibited a volatile mass democracy. The social needs of this area were massive, and the institutional responses had to be proportionately gigantic. Conwell not only bent with this tide but helped to make it. His image as a charismatic paternal figure who was free of and yet responsible for his community, not only was natural in an increasingly bureaucratic complex, but gave him the authority to reduce the strains and confusions of Philadelphia's urban life. To be a part of the Baptist Temple, to be a member of one of its related organizations was to have a place in an urban situation which lacked surety. Likewise, to enroll in Temple College was not necessarily motivated by the desire for social mobility--which in a city was often hard to distinguish from social confusion--but to insure one's status in a society permeated with perplexing role changes. In other words Conwell's innovations gave people identity and security in a city which must have seemed to many hopelessly anonymous and insecure.

Hence, Conwell's institutional style eased the transition from an individualistic to an institutional democracy. In this

⁶⁶Peter J. Larmour, "DeGaulle and the New France," The Yale Review (Summer, 1966), 507.

sense his life in Philadelphia showed how the crisis of American individualism could be solved. When he had the effrontery in 1917 to tell his congregation that the Catholic Church had found a suitable institutional solution to the touchy individualistic issue of movies versus morals, he revealed the strength of his style. After all, had not Conwell created the largest Protestant church in America and yet preserved a homelike atmosphere within its walls? Did not his life testify to the outstanding success of an individual could have in an institutional setting? If he had correctly interpreted the relationship between the individual and the church since the 1880's, why doubt him now? There was, then, an essential Russell Conwell who moved with, and even moved, his age, despite his longing for the past. By the end of his life, however, it was plain that his ability to relax middle class social tensions was at best temporary: the ferment of an onrushing urban-industrial age produced anxieties which Conwellian techniques proved unable to soothe.

CONCLUSION

Recently, on a dreary January Sunday morning, this writer attended the worship service at the Grace Baptist Church. The bleak weather seemed to fit the neighborhood surrounding both the church and Temple University. Blocks upon blocks of row tenements, many of which are in bad repair or empty, are occasionally peppered with the "modern" high-rise developments of Temple University. The old and the new are combined (at least to this visitor's eye) in an architecturally grotesque composite. The area is currently one of America's worst black slums with all the tensions and sufferings these areas commonly possess.¹ Anyone still living who was familiar with this section of Philadelphia at the time of Russell Conwell's death in 1925 could not but be aware of the radical change from a white and blue-collar middle class neighborhood to a Negro lower class ghetto--pervaded by unemployment and crime.

¹For an example of the kinds of strains and hatreds in the Temple University area today see the Community Press Release, December 18, 1969, in the Community file of the Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University. "From the beginning of Charette [a current neighborhood plan for community renewal] Temple made no effort to recognize and accept its responsibility for human tragedy resulting from its previous history of expansion--expansion that has driven 7,000 families from this community within the last 10 years. Temple was only willing to deal with Temple's needs as defined by their 1975 expansion plans." P. 2.

The church service did nothing to modify the impression that the area in which Conwell had built his institutions had changed beyond recognition. Instead of a congregation numbering in the thousands, who needed tickets to be admitted, less than one hundred were in attendance. With few exceptions, they appeared to be white, middle class, and of retirement vintage. Moreover, the minister announced that a final decision had been reached to search for a new church home. It was no longer feasible to continue services in the Broad Street location. Besides the obvious reason of a dwindled membership in the culturally hostile neighborhood, there was another rationale for moving. The Grace Baptist Church was about to celebrate its centennial anniversary--from 1872 to 1972 in essentially the same location. If there was to be a bicentennial anniversary, it clearly would be in another section of Philadelphia. The membership no longer lived near their church. Was it not proper to move their church to them? Would not Russell Conwell have agreed?

Indeed, it would be hard to imagine Conwell opposing the removal of his congregation from such an alien area. It was a living reminder that his middle class idealism had failed to preserve its promise of a better life. Only Temple University partially served the needs of the neighborhood, but even it seemed in some degree architecturally and functionally to "over-reach" its constituency.

Toward the end of his life Conwell became increasingly sensitive to the beginnings of radical transformations in North

Philadelphia. Already by 1922, there were members of the Grace Temple congregation who wished to move to more compatible surroundings. Conwell forthrightly presented the issue:

We in this locality are in a "downtown Church." The greater portion of our audience come from great distances. Since we built the Temple, this neighborhood has filled up with other races of people,--with the Jews, the Russians, and the negroes,--until we are almost an island in this great company of people who do not worship with us. The question might arise whether we should not do as other churches have done and move farther out to reach our own people,--go out into the suburbs--or whether we should stay here and strive to work with the other races in the community, and try to put into the more ignorant ones the Bible, the Sunday School, and the truths that are there set forth . . . to save the City and the State, and the Nation, from the great army of criminals which are now being raised up in our city?²

Although Conwell felt the Grace Baptist Church should remain on Broad Street, he was obviously troubled by ethnic changes in North Philadelphia. The Church must go to these immigrant peoples and teach them Christian middle class values if a criminal culture was not to swallow up the Temple's "island" community.

The only place to secure peace and prosperity, the only place, as I have said it before and emphasize it again now is to go down into the slums of the city, within almost a stone's throw of this Church, and set up missions, and go into the homes and see that they have the Bible . . . until all communities will recognize the Ten Commandments, and then, with one common law, we shall live at peace and prosperity, and the civilization of the land will reach down to the humblest home.³

²Russell H. Conwell, "Educated Criminals," The Temple Review, XXXI, No. 15 (February 23, 1923), 139. Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University.

³Ibid., p. 141. My italics.

The ethnic change which made the Temple congregation the most nervous was the beginnings of black migration into North Philadelphia. Conwell could not have been more explicit about it:

What shall be done with this great army of negro population that are flocking to use from the South at the rate of 10,000 every year. They have become now so large a membership of our community that they are a menace to themselves; a menace to the health of white people, and a menace in their competition with the labor of the white people. They lack education, and they lack the opportunity to get it and consequently they lack in health, and they breed many diseases, which in their poverty stricken condition, they cannot avoid.⁴

Here Conwell was forced to explain why blacks had not properly Americanized themselves into community life:

We fought for the freedom of the slaves and we thought they could be the equal of the whites. We thought if they only had their liberty they would go to school and have a standing as high in intelligence as the white children. We thought if given his liberty, he would earn money and would do his duty--put up buildings, and houses and enter into civilized life. We were misled by extremists who taught us that such would be the case.⁵

The blacks had proved they could not perform equally with the whites in white institutions. Indeed, Conwell noted that ". . . I have been for 40 years in your city, and for most of those years I have been connected with the Temple University, and I have seen . . . how few colored men and women there are who can

⁴Conwell, "Colored Migration," p. 2.

⁵Ibid., p. 3.

measure up to our highest grades in that University."⁶ Low Negro achievement, however, was not Conwell's major criticism of integrated education. He was really more concerned with what integration would mean to white achievement:

If you take a number of these colored children who have just recently come to this city who are neither able to read nor write and put them into your schools, and your child goes to the same school, and to the same grade, and the colored child sits across the aisle from your child, your child will be held back in his or her studies in order that all the class may all recite at the same time, in the same class with the colored people. Thus your child is kept back. That is so generally the case now that it is a great calamity to our educational institutions that our children are held back by the more ignorant classes of colored children sitting alongside of the white child.⁷

Conwell made it quite clear that the missionary technique he advised to meet the urban ethnic crisis was not to be a cultural exchange program. Blacks were only welcome in Philadelphia when local institutions could "digest them." In the meantime, the Southern solution, "separate but equal" was Philadelphia's only way of preserving "the highest order of morality."⁸

Conwell's response to the threat of an overwhelming black migration in the Temple's neighborhood suggests the social limits of his kind of institutionalism. That is, the Temple complex was to cater to the needs of only a specific kind of poor. As early as 1885, he differentiated between two types of poor people. The acceptable people (those who would be accepted in

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

the Grace Baptist Church) were represented by the Biblical Lazarus:

You know he lay out in the street. He was poor and weak and full of sores, and neglected. He had no friends, and only fed himself from the crumbs they accidentally threw out of the window; and yet the poor, neglected wretch of this life is in glory to-day, and he stands with the highest potentate that ever walked the earth . . . I am glad that those who live in these slums, and in these garrets, and in these low and dirty, and wretched spots are not forgotten of God, and I am glad that there is some way by which He is to change their hearts, and by which He is to gather such into His Kingdom.⁹

There were those, however, who were excluded from "God's poor."

The dispossessed elect or those poor with Christian morals did,

. . . not include all those who are in the dirty slums, and live in the wretched quarters, and circulate around those bawdy-houses and gambling dens and saloons to-night. It does not include all the thousands that make life dangerous around our homes to-night. There are thousands on thousands who are not included . . . but who are all those thousands who are not invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb, who are not to sit down with Christ in His Kingdom? It is those who have made themselves what they are, and have chosen to go down rather than upward in the great journey of life. They are the thousands that might have been happy and pure if they had chosen to be such themselves.¹⁰

The distinguishing mark of the excluded poor was a combination of idleness and immorality. "Oh! the street corners of a great city at night, when the young men stand and smoke and talk and gossip and insult ladies who pass: where the young women can be found talking with the young men late at night! It has been the

⁹Russell H. Conwell, "All the Poor are not God's Poor," The Temple Review, II, No. 42 (July 17, 1903), 4. Templana Collection, Samuel Paley Library, Temple University.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 4-5. My italics.

ruin of . . . thousands of souls. . . ." Next to using alcohol, nothing broke down reputation and character more effectively "than the silly loitering, lazy, foolish habit of standing around public streets . . . "11

It makes sense to surmise that Conwell's fears of black migration into the Temple neighborhood were more than just blind racism. Unemployment, dilapidated housing, and unstable family life made the street the natural place for human communication. Again as in earlier American history black culture provided white middle class Americans with a way to sharpen their own values in a period of ideological and social uncertainty.¹² In the context of this study one would expect Conwell to use blackness to clarify the values of American individualism. He did just that.

In a sermon lauding the accomplishments of Booker T. Washington, Conwell showed that the Negroes' presence necessitated no changes in his thinking on the proper roles of institutions and individuals in American society. The qualities he admired in Washington were the ones he liked about himself. "He was a builder of homes; he was a builder of churches; he was a builder of schools; he was a builder of Christian life and character." Hence he too saw the need for institutional growth after the Civil War. Yet they both also knew that, "each must recognize his own responsibility and do the best he can . . . "13 The effect of this

¹¹Ibid., p. 5.

¹²Winthrop Jordan, White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 269-311, 542-569.

agreement on the necessity of both institutional development and individualistic duty and effort was to make the emulation of white middle-class values the only road to black equality. Tuskegee Institute was an excellent institution because it inculcated Negro uplift without disturbing white middle-class moral verities.

He [Washington] insisted that the Colored man respect himself if he expected others to respect him; he taught the colored woman that she must respect herself if she wanted to be respected and recognized by the white people so that his Christian teaching has gone out among the colored people, until he built those great institutions for colored women of the South, at one of which it was my good fortune to be present at the founding . . . now the colored women of the South, like the colored women of the North, are becoming women of moral principle and moral life that characterized the white women of the South.¹⁴

As it became increasingly clear to Conwell that black migration into Philadelphia was a threat to his kind of institutionalism, he predictably clung to individualism more tightly. His Jacksonian leanings--a plea for romantic reform--became urgent:

We must save society by saving the individual, and to establish missions and churches we must pray with and work with the individual. We must get back to the good old established principle founded by Jesus Christ, that every single individual has the same right, so far as his circumstances are concerned, as any other individual in America, be he Jew, or Gentile, negro or white. It is the individual man, and the individual woman and for the salvation of those individual men and those individual women we shall reach out until we can save the communities.¹⁵

¹⁴Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁵Conwell, "Colored Migration," p. 7.

But here was the revealing admission: Russell Conwell's institutions, even though they participated in community life, could not deal directly with acute social problems. The old Jacksonian assumption that once you reformed the individual, society would be uplifted was still operative. Indeed, the assumption was that black migration was not a social problem at all, but a collection of individual deficiencies.

Even so it has been shown that Conwell believed in institutional development. He did not normally separate the individual from society. On the contrary, his institutional style showed how individualism could be subordinated to social endeavors. In practice Conwell led his congregation toward, rather than away from an institutional milieu. His charismatic personal leadership only testified to the predominance of social purposes in the Temple complex. Moreover, Conwell tried to reduce urban tensions by substituting institutional for personal decision-making as his stand on movies versus morals showed. Why then did he not suggest an institutional or social solution to black migration?

If Conwell's functional dimension was to relieve social strains in his community, his response to black migration exposed the limits of his faith in institutions to reduce anxieties. The specter of large numbers of Negroes moving into North Philadelphia set the ethnic limits of his institutional stance. Although he did not deny the usefulness of his created organizations, Conwell responded to racial uneasiness with a surprisingly naked individualism. Suddenly the community interaction, cooperation,

and cohesion which he had fostered in the Temple complex seemed threatened by a race with values so alien they could not be successfully dealt with as a group. Conwell undoubtedly would have agreed with W. E. B. DuBois' opinion that the lack of stable home life was a problem for Philadelphia Negroes. It was only too apparent that many blacks in the city of brotherly love had ". . . little home life, but rather a sort of neighborhood life centering in the alleys and on the sidewalks, where the children are educated."¹⁶ Yet Conwell would not have agreed with DuBois that any intelligent approach to Negro problems must begin with a sensitive awareness of ". . . the physical environment of city, sections and houses, the far mightier social environment--the surrounding world of custom, wish, whim, and thought which envelops this groups and powerfully influences its social development."¹⁷ In Conwell's mind there was a more fundamental way of coping with Philadelphia's exploding Negro population:

The tendency among great writers and influential Christian men and women is that we must save the community and if we give less attention to the individual, that we must institute great reforms and great welfare associations and organization for the whole community which of course we ought to do, but it should never take the place of true religion.¹⁸

¹⁶W. E. Burghardt DuBois, The Philadelphia Negro, A Social Study (Philadelphia: Ginn and Company, 1899), 193.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁸Conwell, "Colored Migration," p. 4. My italics.

Despite Conwell's desire to "save the community" by "great reforms and great welfare" his racial disquietude drove his social impulse inward. There was but one genuine way of relieving racial tension and preserving neighborhood order:

God distinguishes every individual on Earth. He has numbered every sparrow, and especially is this true of mankind. He looks upon everyone as though he was the only person on Earth. . . . And that is the Gospel message--that we are to treat men and women as individuals; and that we see that their souls are saved individually; and that their characters are reformed individually; and that they serve God individually. And the insistence of the people upon that at any election is the only safe ground. . . .¹⁹

In effect when social changes seemed too ominous to be controlled by institutionalism, Conwell reverted to the personal come-outerism of ante-bellum reform. The difference was that now when fears about society arose individualism could be safely espoused behind the walls of bureaucratic organizations which catered to a white middle class ideology. Conwell and his congregation by the 1920's were in the comfortable position of being able to advocate personal reform for others while their own exposure to urban disorientation was blunted by the Temple institutions. When it was apparent to Conwell that major value adjustments would be needed if pluralistic social institutions were to be extended to blacks he opted for "separate but equal" facilities. This was not only a way of saying that Negroes needed to build their own institutions, but more significantly it pointed

¹⁹Ibid.

to his inability to attempt ethnically innovative institutionalism. This inadequacy showed the bureaucratic failure in Conwell's organizations: they could adjust their procedures to gain in efficiency, but were too inflexible to initiate changes in values which would enable them to grapple with acute social problems. Indeed, to have urged adjustment to black urban values would have presented an open-ended institutionalism as a social approach to city problems. Needless to say, Conwell's ideology and the functional priorities of the Temple complex worked together to make such flexibility impossible.

The crisis in American middle class individualism, if Conwell's experience is roughly representative, was muted from the 1880's to the 1920's by institutional growth. Ironically it was this very organizational development which generated the crisis. What can be lost sight of is that Conwell's failure to modify his individualism in the face of racial strain does not mean that he failed to soothe anxieties. The reverse is the case. The aggravation which black migration brought to an already troubled middle class individualism could only be assuaged by re-emphasizing personal freedom. But now the stress on go-it-alone individualism at Grace Temple did not mean the possibility of institutional breakdown as it did in early nineteenth-century America. It merely meant that entrenched bureaucratic institutions would not be threatened with social experimentalism. The American paradox of the cry for individual freedom working to insure its antithesis--the preservation of bureaucracy--was neatly illustrated. Because

the institutional context of American society was radically transformed between the Civil and World War I, the effect of a plea for individualism could never be the same as it was in the Jacksonian era. The defeat of cultural pluralism in the Grace Baptist Church neighborhood was due to many factors, but the insistence on individualistic reform by Russell Conwell at the first sign of cultural intermingling helped insure the tragic result. As a charismatic figure near the end of a highly successful career in Philadelphia his attitude must have counted with his constituency. No doubt he helped temporarily to relieve their apprehensions. But in the end his congregation moved to the suburbs and the crime, unemployment, and the human suffering he wished to eradicate overwhelmed his neighborhood.

In no lasting sense, then, did Russell Conwell solve in microcosm the crisis of American individualism. Middle class Americans still sanctify the home as their society becomes incredibly "overreaching." They still idealize the past and visualize the future in utopian perspective attempting to soften unpleasant social realities. And, they increasingly turn to the fetish of individual freedom as the antidote to confronting the frightening proportions of modern bureaucracy. Yet both social tensions and problems increase in magnitude. As an old man while vacationing at his Eagle's Nest retreat, Conwell composed a sad poem which captured more than the loneliness of advanced age:

No one here to
run typewriter
to trim trees

to drive to North Hampton
to sit up late
to play piano
to help cut hay
to go to the store
no one to do nothing.²⁰

There was something in it which symbolized both the deepened crisis of American individualism and its emptiness as a fully satisfying ideology during Conwell's life of transition.

²⁰Russell H. Conwell, An untitled poem, n.d. The obvious concern of this verse is loneliness. His second wife, Sara, died in 1910 and it is probable he composed it after her death. My italics.

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