The Most Reverend Robert John Renison (1875-1957)

The Most Reverend Robert John Renison is an important figure in the history of the Anglican Communion in Canada due to his role as Metropolitan of the Ecclesiastical Province of Ontario. He also was known as a gifted writer of books and articles and was a popular religion columnist for the Globe and Mail for over 20 years. He was born in Ireland in the little village of Clonoulty near Cashel in the County Tipperary in 1875. His father was the Rev. Canon Robert Renison and his mother was the former Mary Elizabeth Kennedy, an American citizen that the Rev. Canon Renison met while on a trip to the United States. The Rev. Robert John Renison was the oldest of three boys, all of whom became Anglican (or Episcopalian) priests. In addition, he had three sisters. In 1914 he married Elizabeth Bristol of Hamilton, Ontario. They had two sons, Robert John Bristol Renison born in 1916, and George Everett Bristol Renison born in 1918. George Renison (d.1998) was married to Nancy Stirett and had three children; Katherine, Carol and Michael. Robert John was married to Shirley Somerville (d 1957) and had one son, Robert.

Bishop Renison immigrated to Canada in 1880 when his father answered a call to serve as a missionary to the Ojibway on the shores of Lake Nipigon. He was educated at Trinity College School in Port Hope Ontario from 1886-1892 on a scholarship for children of Anglican Priests, at the University of Toronto where he received a B.A. in English in 1895 and at Wycliffe College at the University of Toronto where he received a Degree in Divinity in 1896. He received a D.D. degree from St. Johns College in Winnipeg in acknowledgement of his missionary work. He was ordained as a deacon in 1898 and as a full priest in 1899. After graduating from Wycliffe College he enlisted in the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers under the pseudonym “Sergeant Patrick O’Reilly.” His first parish position was as a missionary priest near James Bay, Ontario, where he served until
From 1912-1927 he was Rector of the Church of the Ascension in Hamilton, Ontario, except for a leave from 1918-1919 when he served as Anglican Chaplain for the 21st Battalion Expeditionary Forces in World War I in France.

He was Rector of Christ Church in Vancouver from 1927-1931 and Dean of New Westminster from 1929-1932. In 1932 he was Bishop of Athabasca. From 1932-1943 he was Rector of St. Paul’s Church on Bloor Street in Toronto. In 1944 he became Bishop of Moosonee. In 1952, he became the 9th Metropolitan (Head Bishop) of the Ecclesiastical Province of Ontario, a position he held until his retirement in 1954. He died in 1957. His funeral at St. Paul’s Anglican Church on Bloor Street, where he served as rector for many years, was packed with over 2000 mourners.

A dedicated missionary, he spent much of his career as a missionary with the first nation people in northern Ontario. He spent the first 14 years of his career as a missionary in the James Bay region. He was fluent in Cree and in writing the Cree syllabary language, eventually writing a hymnal in Cree. He was considered an advocate for members of the first nation tribes in northern Ontario for his time and was given the name “Sheegoos” or “the good medicine which comes once a year” in Cree. Upon his appointment to Metropolitan, he declined the opportunity to serve in Southern Ontario, preferring to stay in the Diocese of Moosonee. He was considered to be a gifted orator with a strong intellect and a rich sense of humour. He was a much loved rector during his time in Hamilton, Vancouver and Toronto as well.

He was a talented writer publishing a number of books besides his Cree Hymnal including the Life of Bishop Sullivan, Canada at War, Wednesday Morning, (which was a selection of his editorials for the Globe and Mail), For such a Time as This, (which was a collection of his sermons), and One Day at a Time, (his autobiography). Starting in 1937, he wrote a popular newspaper column in the Globe and Mail which he
continued until his death in 1957. As a result of his weekly column and his work as a rector and Archbishop, he was held in high regard by Anglicans in Ontario for his spiritual leadership. In September of 1941 he travelled to London, England as one of a number of Canadian journalists and writers, in his case representing the Globe and Mail, as a guest of the British Council.

He left a legacy with his writings and books and also in the honours which were bestowed on him as a result of his life’s work. In 1959, the newly formed Anglican College in Waterloo, Ontario, which would become later become affiliated with the University of Waterloo, was named in his honour. The Renison family remained in close contact with the college, with Bishop Renison’s widow Elizabeth often being present for College events in early years. His son, George Everett Bristol Renison, a World War II hero and the founder and chairman of W.H. Smith Canada, served as Chancellor of Renison University College from 1986-1992.

The Most Reverend Robert John Renison (1875-1957) fonds contains newspaper clippings collected by Bishop Renison (and later by his wife) about him or written by either himself or his wife, Elizabeth Bristol Renison. It also contains drafts of his writings, diaries, letters from him and to him and his wife, drafts and notes from his sermons, speeches by him or his wife, photographs and negatives including many from newspapers, his books with his notes (many in Cree), official documents and certificates and objects including his academic robes and war medals.