

Unsung teacher changed the history of Alberta

Charles Scarborough sold Social Credit to William Aberhart during hard-scrabble Depression years

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Tribute

Editor's note:

Newspapers don't usually print obituaries about ordinary people — those who have gone through life without getting their names into the paper. And that means most of us. But often the aspirations and achievements of regular folk are as interesting and inspiring as those of the media stars.

In a series titled Tribute, The Journal recognizes some of the Edmontonians who live, love, work, play and die in our community.

He's virtually a forgotten footnote in history.

But if it weren't for Edmonton high school teacher Charles Morton Scarborough, the history of Alberta might have been much different.

Without him, the Social Credit movement might not have swept Alberta, won nine successive elections, ruled the province for 36 years and won world attention.

And while a Calgarian, "Bible" Bill Aberhart is remembered as the founder of Social Credit, one can argue it was really sparked by Scarborough, an Edmontonian.

Scarborough, a chemistry and lab teacher at Victoria High School, had been converted in 1925 to the Social Credit theories of Major C. H. Douglas, an Anglo-Scottish engineer.

Every July, he met Aberhart in Edmonton as Alberta teachers converged to mark students' final examination papers.

"He talked Social Credit but nobody listened. Year after year, Scarborough talked Social Credit to a stone-deaf Aberhart," says James Gray in *The Winter Years*.

Aberhart was the inventor of radio evangelism and Canada's most famous lay preacher.

"You are the man," he told Aberhart, "who could launch a really effective educational program on monetary reform. You already have the audience, your radio listeners, and you have the powers of persuasion," say L. P. Johnson and Ola MacNutt in *Aberhart of Alberta*.

But Aberhart wasn't interested in politics and had little interest in Scarborough's favorite subject.

"He was the principal of Calgary's newest and largest high school, taught mathematics with Prussian discipline, and ran the Prophetic Bible College the same way," says Gray.

But all that changed in July 1932. Aberhart was gloomy when he arrived in Edmonton again to mark final exams. The Depression had shattered Calgary. Even his best high school graduates couldn't find jobs. A few weeks before,

one of his senior students, a nice youth, had committed suicide in despair.

Aberhart's salary had been slashed like those of other teachers, religious collections had dropped sharply and economic woes were distracting his radio followers.

Canada's jobless rate had nearly peaked at 32 per cent. And Albertans' per capita income had plunged 61 per cent in the five years since 1928.

This time, as he stayed at St. Stephen's College at the University of Alberta, he listened to Scarborough. And the great evangelist who converted so many was converted himself. Back in Calgary the next month, he prepared to launch Social Credit.

"Scarborough gave Aberhart precisely what he needed — a simple, easy-to-understand, do-it-yourself solution to all the economic problems of mankind," says Gray.

Within weeks, Aberhart was altering his vast store of biblical allegories to make them attributable to Social Credit. He shifted the emphasis of his missionary activities from Ecclesiastes to blasting the economic system and the scarcity of money.

Aberhart's biggest supporters became Scarborough and other teachers who could see the Depression's toll on students and their families. He found a big fol-



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Edmonton high school teacher Charles Scarborough promoted the ideas of Social Credit and converted former Alberta premier William Aberhart (right) to the philosophy in 1932

lowing among poorer farmers, almost-bankrupt small businessmen and the working class.

"Albertans were seized by a mass hysteria which has rarely come to surface of this continent," said J. G. MacGregor in *Edmonton, A History*.

Aberhart went on to fame with the Social Credit movement. He became premier when the popular new political party wiped out the United Farmers of Alberta in the 1935 provincial election.

Scarborough, who was born in Ontario in 1890 and moved with his

parents to Edmonton when he was eight, was one of the first graduates from Strathcona High School in 1908.

After teacher's training at Camrose Normal School, he taught in Alberta rural and village schools before and after serving overseas with the Canadian Expeditionary Force from 1916-18 in the First World War.

He finished his arts degree at the University of Alberta in 1927, and the next year began a 23-year teaching career with the Edmonton Public School system.



For 15 years, he taught chemistry at Victoria High and coached and managed sports teams, especially senior boys' rugby. In 1942, he moved to Strathcona High where he taught algebra and was honorary head of the students' rifle club.

Scarborough, who was five-foot-11 and 190 pounds, had a commanding classroom presence which cowed the more timid students. He shared Aberhart's use of Prussian discipline.

"You could hear him through

the walls," remembers former teacher Orville Stratte, who started at Strathcona High in Scarborough's last couple of years.

"He was a good disciplinarian at a time they needed it. He wouldn't stand for any nonsense at all."

Scarborough died on July 9, 1951.

Today, the man who converted Aberhart to Social Credit and got just a passing mention in a few history books is almost unknown, except for a student trophy in his name at Strathcona High.

Bill accepted a book from Charlie. And the rest is history

WILF BENNETT

... retired Vancouver Province reporter, who was a reporter for the Calgary Albertan from 1932 to 1939 and covered the Aberhart Social Credit legislature in Edmonton.

OFTEN WONDER what would have happened to the political parties and personalities of the past half century in B.C. and Alberta if Charlie hadn't given Bill that book in 1932.



William (Bible Bill) Aberhart

The book was Unemployment and War by Maurice Colbourne, a rather simplified treatise on Major C.H. Douglas's intricate theories of Social Credit. It was given to William Aberhart, Calgary high school principal and popular evangelist, by Charles M. Scarborough, an Edmonton high school chemistry teacher, when both were marking high school graduation papers and Aberhart was living in St. Stephen's College, Edmonton, in July 1932.

To put it simply, "Bible Bill" Aberhart might never have been "sold" on the Douglas theories if Scarborough hadn't persuaded him to read that book. And it is generally agreed that Social Credit would never have become a new political party and a major force in Alberta without the dynamic leadership and organizing ability of Aberhart, with his large and faithful Calgary Prophetic Bible Institute and evangelical radio audiences and worshippers.

The timing was perfect. It was the beginning of the Great Depression and individual suffering and poverty were widespread. One of Aberhart's top students at Crescent Heights High School in Calgary had just been driven by family poverty to suicide.

Many teachers were becoming concerned with economic problems. Scarborough, a university graduate in engineering, had first come in contact with Douglas's Social Credit theories on a trip to England.

While crossing the Atlantic he met a British engineer who had known Douglas in India, and

who enthusiastically embraced the Douglas theories for monetary and social reform. He made so total a convert of Scarborough that the Edmonton teacher bought copies of all Douglas's books and studied them while in England.

Scarborough saw the Douglas monetary plans as a possible solution to Alberta's economic problems. He had no leadership ambitions himself. Knowing Aberhart and his remarkable organizing and leadership abilities, and his large and loyal radio constituency, he was convinced the Calgary teacher-preacher could be the ideal mouthpiece and messiah for the wonderful new movement and its solutions to the Depression's problems.

On his return he made several approaches to Aberhart, but couldn't get him sufficiently interested, partly because of the complexity and indefiniteness of the theories.

Maurice Colbourne, an English actor and writer, was another enthusiastic Douglas convert. His Unemployment and War was a comparatively straightforward, simple explanation of Social Credit. So this was Scarborough's most hopeful weapon to convince and capture Aberhart as a convert and potential leader.

It worked. After Scarborough took the Colbourne book to Aberhart in St. Stephen's College one evening, talked about it, and left the book with him, Aberhart sat up most of that night reading it. By morning he decided he had found a way to cure Alberta's distressing problems and free the province from domination by bankers and financiers.

The rest is history. Soon he was using his Calgary Prophetic Bible Institute as a forum for the organization of province-wide Social Credit "study groups." The combination of religion and economic reform — with its O God Our Help in Ages Past theme song and its promise of a \$25 monthly dividend — was unbeatable. It quickly became a crusade that swept the province.

In the provincial election of 1935 the new Social Credit party captured 56 seats, the Liberals five, and the Conservatives two. The incumbent United Farmers of Alberta party was completely wiped out.

Social Crediters ruled Alberta for the next 36 years. They also moved into B.C. in 1952, sent a phalanx of MPs to Ottawa, and still rule B.C. today.

But what if "Bible Bill" hadn't caught the original spark that night in Edmonton? What political parties and what leaders would have ruled Alberta and B.C. throughout the next 45 years?

What would have been the careers of such people as Ernest Manning, Robert Thompson, Solon Low, Nathan Tanner, W.A.C. Bennett, Bill Bennett, Einar Gunderson, Phil Gaglardi, Robert Bonner, Robert Sommers, Ray Williston, Grace McCarthy, Dan Campbell, Rafe Mair, and hundreds of others whose fate and fame have been largely tied to the Social Credit phenomenon?

A good case could be made for the proposition that when Bill accepted that book from Charlie in 1932 he touched and affected, in some way, the future life of every citizen of Canada's two westernmost provinces. □