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# **“First Unto God and then to the Queen”: Frederick Ney's Empire/Commonwealth Youth Movement from the Inter-war Period to the 1960s**

**Jialin Christina WU**

## **Abstract**

The 'Empire Youth Movement' (later known as the 'Commonwealth Youth Movement') was the brainchild of Major Frederick James Ney, a “fervent imperialist” and a Canadian military man of English background who sought to solidify Britain's relationship with Canada. This paper delves into the little known history of this Movement from its inception in 1937 to the 1960s. In doing so, it addresses how Canada directly participated, directed and contributed in tangible ways towards the shifting of meanings and ideas of the British Empire and the Commonwealth for impressionable youth of different territories within the British sphere of influence.

## **Résumé**

Le mouvement de jeunesse 'Empire Youth Movement' (rebaptisé 'Commonwealth Youth Movement' par la suite) est une création de Major Frederick James Ney, “un impérialiste fervent” et un Canadien militaire d'origine anglaise qui chercha à renforcer les liens entre le Canada et la Grande-Bretagne. Cet article explore l'histoire peu connue de cette organisation de sa naissance, dans les années trente, jusqu'aux années soixante et analyse comment le Canada a contribué culturellement au concept de Commonwealth. Cette contribution se focalise sur l'impact de ce mouvement sur des jeunes membres influençables venant des quatre coins du monde britannique.

## **Introduction**

As 8000 youths filed into London's Albert Hall for the Empire Youth Rally at the momentous occasion of King George VI's coronation in May 1937, 14-year-old Penelope Chipman, Canada's youngest representative, observed the ceremony with a keen eye. "I could notice the smiles that passed over the faces of the girls as their countries were called," recalled Chipman almost a year after the event. "I realised for the first time, how enormous the Empire really was." ("Montreal Girl's Essay" 1938: 7) By offering a grandiose, visual and tangible meaning of the British Empire to the impressionable youths gathered from the corners of the Empire, the Rally also inspired a sense of belonging and responsibility to the Crown in the minds of the youthful crowd. As Chipman expressed succinctly, "[t]he purpose of having a gathering of the youth of the Empire was to make us understand that the future of the Empire and the world lay in our hands." That sense of duty, according to her, was that which "was impressed upon us most."

Chipman's reactions were the impact that Major Frederick James Ney, a staunch Canadian imperialist and organiser of the Rally, sought to indelibly imprint upon participants and observers alike. Buoyed by the success of this event, in which distinguished dignitaries such as H.R.H. The Duke of Gloucester and Stanley Baldwin, the Prime Minister of Britain, delivered speeches to the gathered youth, Ney promptly inaugurated the Empire Youth Movement (EYM), which was later renamed the Commonwealth Youth Movement (CYM) by the time of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation in 1953. Ney's goals for the Movement were both fantastical and ambitious. From the onset in 1937, the Movement endeavoured to "Organise Youth in Empire Ways [...] with the object of consolidating the Empire youth as a world force for peace, goodwill and co-operation." ("Organise Youth" 1937: 6) These lofty ambitions, however, did not arise in a vacuum. Indeed, Ney's Movement was conceived against the backdrop of the inter-war period in which totalitarian states across Europe were quickly organising youths into national movements. In response to the looming threat of "the domination of the child mind by pernicious political philosophies" ("Empire Youth Movement" 1939: 6.), politicians such as Viscount Bledisloe, the former Governor-General of New Zealand, thus supported Ney's enterprise to "take a leaf of the book of Germany and Italy in a systematic attempt to lead the children of the Empire." (Ibid.) The Movement aimed to serve two purposes: first, as a rallying-point for youth within the British sphere of influence and second, as a bulwark against competing ideological forces such as totalitarianism and Communism. In Ney's words (and imagination), "The World looks to the British peoples today for help and guidance [...] In this great crusade the youth of the Empire is being called upon to take a lead." ("Empire Youth Sunday" 1939: 35)

Although the Movement never matched the wild expectations of its Founder, Ney's Movement is interesting to scholars studying the Commonwealth for a variety of reasons. First, Canada – not Great Britain – was chiefly responsible for spearheading, financing and publicising the Movement. As such, an analysis of this organisation could lead to an alternative, non-“Britain-centred” example of how other members or partners of the Commonwealth contributed towards its meaning. Second, since the Movement enlisted – and obtained – the support of other Dominions such as Australia and New Zealand, a study of the Movement's impact and reception in these territories could also shed light on Canada's relationship with other Dominions within the context of Empire and Commonwealth. This would allow researchers the opportunity of exploring this particular aspect of Canadian history, which, as the historian Phillip Buckner reveals, has been “difficult to write given the state of current scholarship.” (Buckner 2008: viii) Third, the Movement's history steers our attention towards the role that youth played in the construction and the meaning of Empire and Commonwealth. Indeed, the Movement accorded youth a participatory role in the making of the Empire and the Commonwealth through facilitating educational travel exchanges for its members which were “to form the nucleus of Empire friendships amongst the younger generation.” (“Junior Delegates” 1937: 8) Just as Chipman's wide-eyed wonder at the grandeur and the expanse of the Empire in the opening anecdote suggests, the Empire and the Commonwealth also had a very real impact upon the lives of some of their youngest members in their most formative years. Examining Ney's Movement would therefore enable scholars to reach a better understanding of both the agency of youth, as well as the cultural and social aspects of the Empire and Commonwealth that youth helped give meaning to.

However, Ney's EYM/CYM and the topic of educational student exchanges as part of cultural imperialism have attracted little attention from scholars thus far. (Harper 2004) To date, apart from several brief mentions of the Movement in the work of historians such as James Mangan (1986), James Sturgis and Margaret Bird's *Canada's Imperial Past: The Life of F.J. Ney, 1884 – 1973* (2000) remains the sole authoritative biographical account of Ney's personality and his life-long endeavours in cementing relations between Canada, Britain and the Commonwealth. While Sturgis and Bird do not focus upon the Movement *per se*, their comprehensive research based upon Ney's personal papers, Canadian sources, as well as their interviews with former members of the Movement are invaluable and fundamental to this paper.

In light of the above, I address current gaps in our knowledge of this chapter of history by concentrating upon two aspects of the EYM/CYM. They are broadly grouped as ideas and actions of the Movement. First, I trace Ney's ideas and British official reactions to the Movement. In connection, I examine the tensions between Ney and officials of the Dominion and Colonial Offices concerning the terms Empire and Commonwealth. For instance, Ney's initial stubbornness in using the inappropriate (or at least uncomfortable) or anachronistic appellation of "Empire" for the EYM after World War II provoked visceral reactions, which in turn reveal opinions of the word Commonwealth in the post-war era. Second, I analyse the extent to which the Movement succeeded in creating a platform for youth to engage in the construction of the meaning of Commonwealth by delving into the young participants' experiences of the Movement's activities – particularly after World War II, as war had interrupted the Movement's momentum after its inauguration in 1937; consequently, the Movement's activities only followed a regular pattern after the war. Some of these activities or "Quests" were filled with religious connotations and organised in places charged with symbolic importance within the annals of British imperial history. They lead us to think about how the Movement negotiated the thin line between promoting an imperial (or propagandistic) and religious/Christian agenda, alongside a more "encompassing", "neutral", or "de-imperialised" idea of the Commonwealth.

In exploring these facets of the Movement, I argue that Ney's organisation contributed towards the on-going and shifting *negotiations* of the meaning of "Commonwealth" in two ways: first, by stimulating discussions of what the Commonwealth was to symbolise and to mean to youth of different ethnicities and religions in the far corners of the British Empire after World War II, and second, by providing opportunities for adolescents within the British sphere of influence to meet under circumstances which encouraged loyalty to the British Crown and a sense of attachment to the Commonwealth. Underlying this main line of argument is the consideration that Ney's Movement was quasi-religious (of the Christian faith), heavily reliant upon (mostly Canadian) public donations and essentially "unofficial" – or, as one British colonial described it, a "one-man show" (FCO 141/15011). As such, while the limitations of the Movement's reach and influence must be acknowledged, this paper also contends that these particularities of the Movement lead us to consider the place of religion and the efforts of private individuals in the negotiation of the concept "Commonwealth". By studying the Movement thus, this article seeks to add towards our understanding of Canadian initiatives in the creation of the social and cultural meanings of the Commonwealth for youth – specifically, in a transitional period of Empire to Commonwealth in the post-World War II era.

### **“Strange on Modern Ears”: Ideas of the EYM/CYM and Official Reactions**

Although youth movements were hardly novel at the time of the EYM's inauguration in 1937,<sup>1</sup> Ney's Movement differed in its promotion of *educational travel* as the main method of moulding and solidifying the relationship between metropolitan Britain and the Empire. In hindsight, this is unsurprising considering Ney's responsibilities in the Overseas Education League (OEL, or “Hands Across the Seas”) and the National Council of Education (NCE, of which Ney was Secretary). Both these Canadian organisations encouraged educational travel for teachers, youths and schoolchildren. The NCE, particularly, was subsequently used as a “valuable” ‘front’ organisation for the EYM/CYM. (Sturgis and Bird 2001: 141) Ney's conviction of the need to bridge the vast geographical distance separating Canada and Britain was thus nurtured very early on. In *Britishers in Britain* (1911), an OEL publication commemorating a teachers' visit from Manitoba to the “Old Country” [Britain], Ney questioned: “How shall the daughter, separated by thousands of miles of sea, have that love of the Motherland if she know not the mother, or how shall the mother regard the daughter she has not seen?” (Ney 1911: 4) To Ney, travel was necessary to fill that gap; *seeing* and physically *experiencing* the Motherland would “strengthen the Bonds of Empire and Imperial Fraternity”. Similarly, in planning the 1937 Rally (and the EYM), Ney affirmed the importance of travel by stressing that the 1937 trip would enable Empire youth to feel “at home” through “let[ting] them see something of the charm of its country life in the beauty of an English Spring, as well as of the greatness of our cities and of the splendour of our solemn national celebrations.” (DO 35/537/2) Throughout the lifetime of the Movement, Ney regarded travel as crucial for “saturation in English culture, history, literature, and traditions.” (“Youth Centre Proposed” 1947: 13)

In the framework of the EYM, this emphasis on travel was manifested in several ways. First, Ney identified travel costs as “one of the greatest obstacles to Empire intercourse”. Hence, in a 1938 EYM pamphlet, Ney pushed for concessions such as a “flat rate of £10 between any two Empire ports”, or “a flat Steamship rate for Students [...] between all parts of the Empire.” (ED 136/685) Railways (more accurately, rail concessions) also figured within Ney's scheme, but above all, seemingly in the line of the sensibilities of the time concerning Britain as a maritime power, sea travel was stressed. Thus urged Ney for a ship – the “S.S. Spirit of Youth”:

The Movement should possess its own Steamship – a floating school or college – which could exist largely for the purpose of enabling the greatest number of students to see the Empire [...] An Empire which can spend well over £2,000,000,000 upon armaments to defend itself should not find it difficult to provide the relatively small sum needed for a ship by means of which that Empire may be made known to its younger citizens, who will be [...] quite conceivably be called upon to fight for its safety. (Ibid.)

Second, to allay the cost of travel accommodations, Ney proposed the construction of a “City of

<sup>1</sup> The Boys' Brigade, Boy Scouts and Girl Guides had already been founded in 1883, 1907 and 1910 respectively.

Youth” (“Youth City”) in London. Guided by his belief that “Situation and Surroundings are of the greatest importance if the desired impression of London is to be obtained by the young visitor” (Ibid.), Ney advocated symbolic and prime areas such as the site of the Crystal Palace, Regent's Park, or a corner in South Kensington as possible locations for Youth City. In Ney's words, the building was to be “analogous to the Cité de l'Université in Paris [Cité internationale universitaire de Paris], [...] each Dominion and the Colonies would be invited to contribute its own building.” (DO 35/537/2) By facilitating educational travel amongst Empire youth and “Youth of other lands”, Ney hoped to encourage international cooperation under the aegis of British leadership and influence by “let[ting] them [Youth] breathe its [England's] air of freedom and help them to understand its essential friendliness.” (ED 136/685)

While Ney's S.S. Spirit of Youth inspired little enthusiasm, Youth City succeeded in attracting the support of politicians and the attention of the international press. As case in point, a Tasmanian daily, *The Mercury*, informed its readers in January 1939 that “former Governor Generals, including Lord Stonehaven for Australia, Lord Bledisloe for New Zealand, Lord Bessborough for Canada and Lord Lloyd, representing Britain” had formed an executive committee to plan Youth City. (“Youth City” 1939: 2) Other newspapers within the Empire, such as *Cairns Post* (Australia), *The Winnipeg Tribune* (Canada), *The Straits Times* (Singapore) and *The Glasgow Herald* (Scotland), also devoted editorial space to Youth City, adding to the list of illustrious supporters of the project “Lord Willingdon for India, the Earl of Clarendon for South Africa, Leopold Amery [Colonial Secretary under Stanley Baldwin] for the colonies and dependencies [and] Sir Charles Innes for Burma”. (“Youth City Planned” 1939: 7) Some of these individuals, such as former Canadian Governor-General Lord Bessborough, contributed more than a name by giving an address in Guildhall in January 1939 to generate interest in Youth City. Apart from underlining the “Canadian-ness” of Ney's ideas in enunciating that the EYM and the 1937 Rally were “due to Canadian initiative”, Lord Bessborough stressed the affordability of the building project by estimating that it would amount to “[a]t most, the cost of a destroyer. The destroyer is built for defence. So will Youth City be.” (“Bessborough Advocates Youth City” 1939: 6) Interestingly, both Ney and Lord Bessborough thus made allusions to the military and Britain's defence budget in their statements on the financial viability of the S.S. Spirit of Youth and Youth City respectively. On the one hand, the political climate on the eve of war in Europe inspired both men to connect these EYM projects with the defence of the Empire. On the other, this “defence metaphor” was also motivated by another perceived threat to the unity of Empire – the influx of emigration (of “the non-British stock”) in the Dominions.

This potential “threat” of emigration in the Dominions was not new in 1937. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the “flood of humanity” in Canada had already alarmed certain members of the public of the “implications for an eventual multicultural Canada [...] and this possible deviation from Anglo Saxonism”. (Sturgis and Bird 2001: 17) Ney himself had stressed the need to *acculturate* new emigrants to Canadian ways and imperial culture through education in *Britishers in Britain* in his homage to Canadian teachers. To him, these teachers were “holding in their hands the destiny of the Mighty Dominion”, for:

Theirs is to make British the thousands of children of foreign birth (with their almost traditional dislike and jealousy of our race) who are peopling the Western prairies [...] [On Americans, Dukhuboors, Galicians, Germans, French, Italians, Greeks, Russians and Poles in Canada] – all have to be welded into one race (a British race), and made law-abiding citizens of the vast Dominion, and faithful subjects of our Sovereign Lord, the King. What a mission and what a responsibility! (Ney 1911: 5)

Along similar lines, the EYM was conceived to address “the important problem of emigration” through educational travel, which would forge imperial identity and cultural attachment to Britain. Concurrently, the EYM was also created to encourage British immigration to Canada. This facet of the EYM appears to have been a priority for Ney for, as he implored in a 1937 Memorandum on the EYM to Colonial Secretary Malcolm MacDonald:

The need for peopling the Dominions with British stock and filling our great vacant lands becomes all the more imperative in the face of Germany’s demands for Colonies [...] (IT IS WELL TO BEAR IN MIND THAT IN CANADA – THE KEYSTONE OF THE EMPIRE OVERSEAS, THE POPULATION OF BRITISH STOCK IS NOW LESS THAN 50% OF THE WHOLE.) (DO 35/537/2)

In light of these “Dominion-based” perspectives on Empire youth, what were British opinions on Ney's EYM? Letters between officials of the Dominion and Colonial Offices over the span of the Movement's lifetime (1930s – 1960s) suggest that British attitudes ranged widely from enthusiasm to outright rejection of the EYM. While some officials at the Dominion Office optimistically noted in the 1950s that “there can be no doubt that the Movement achieves its purpose in stimulating and fostering sentiments of Commonwealth unity”, (DO 35/8197) others were convinced at the same time that Ney's “ideas for the artificial regimentation of 'Youth' are fundamentally unsound and modelled on Nazidom.” (DO 35/4217) Some detractors were very vocal about their reservations of the EYM. For instance, in a series of correspondences between Percivale Liesching and Sir Alan Lascelles on Ney's scheme to “repeat the success of the last Coronation” by organising a similar Rally on the occasion of Queen Elizabeth's coronation in 1953, the former starkly described Ney as “the plague of my life” and the Movement's Rally as “profoundly alien to the tradition and natural genius of this country”, whereas his correspondent complained, “Why can't they let these wretched boys and girls alone, and leave them to enjoy the Coronation in their own way?”



Generally, British opinions concerning Ney and the Movement were cautious, but “friendly” and “fairly favourable”. Revealingly, no financial backing on the part of the British Government was supplied to the Movement throughout its lifetime. (DO 35/8198) To a certain extent, financial support was not forthcoming as officials opined that, given its “Dominion-centred” background, “initiative should come from the Dominions themselves.” (DO 35/537/2) Furthermore, some feared that the Movement was “by no means representative of the whole Commonwealth” because of its Christian agenda and emphasis on loyalty to King and Empire. In the post-World War II context, which demanded sensitivity and political finesse in dealing with indigenous aspirations of independence and decolonisation across the Empire, Ney's EYM was unsurprisingly deemed “out of date” and “not conducive to attracting support from the newer Commonwealth countries.” (DO 35/8198) As case in point, Ney's insistence on the term “Empire”, as opposed to “Commonwealth” in the naming of the Movement (up till 1953) was a clear signal to British officials of the anachronistic nature of the EYM/CYM. As early as March 1937, Colonial Secretary MacDonald had aired his doubts over Movement's name, but while Ney “agreed it is not ideal”, he insisted that “no formula [suitable alternative] has yet been found” and thus, that it was “better to be courageous and frank” about the Movement's Empire-minded agenda. (DO 35/537/2) We obtain a more vivid illustration of Ney's zeal in his fiery address to the Empire Club of Toronto in December 1948, entitled “The Commonwealth on Trial, or What's in a Name?” At this occasion, Ney accused some of being “ashamed of the very word Empire”, and that the word “Commonwealth would obscure a past which is the greatest envy of our enemies.” (DO 35/4217) Instead, challenged Ney, “if we must change our name, then why not merely 'The Empire' or 'The Britannic League?’”<sup>2</sup>

Importantly, Ney's adamant preference for EYM over CYM, as well as related discussions on the aptness of Empire/Commonwealth for events such as Empire Youth Sunday, propelled British officials to confront the issue of terminology and the meaning of Commonwealth. More precisely, as there was no sharp disjuncture between the two terms (“Commonwealth” had been formulated by Lord Rosebery in 1884) and as the shift from Empire to Commonwealth in common parlance was ongoing, the obstinate adherence to one term over the other (as in Ney's case) triggered discussions in the Dominion and Colonial Offices. An example of the coexistence (or even equal “appropriateness”) of the two terms is found in the following: in the debate of whether the term Commonwealth ought to replace Empire in Empire Youth Sunday in the 1950s, some officials felt strongly that “the word Empire stirs up so many noxious feelings” in the colonies. Yet they also admitted that in some cases (notably in the Dominions) such as Australia, “the word Empire is more

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<sup>2</sup> Sturgis and Bird assert that Ney finally adopted “Commonwealth” after 1953 because the word “received the sanction of the Queen and was unquestionably in common use.” (p. 167) However, Ney “retained a lingering hope that a suitable circumlocution could be found to avoid the necessity of the word 'Commonwealth'.” (p. 250)

sensible than Commonwealth because the latter, in Australia, has two meanings.” (CO 859/673) Another instance of how the EYM/CYM stimulated debates on “Commonwealth” is the Singapore Government's reaction to Ney's request for help in encouraging Singapore youths to attend the 1957 CYM “Quest”. To begin with, one colonial asserted positively that Ney's Movement “have been very successful indeed” in inspiring “the ideals of Commonwealth patriotism and loyalty to the Crown”. The same official noted further that Ney had also made significant changes to the Movement to “avoid upsetting people who are not of the Christian faith” and to attract Asian youths to participate in the EYM's 'Quest'. However, his correspondent argued that “the average Asian youth would consider that there is too much emphasis on cathedrals and castles in these quests” and that Singapore youths were “only too ready to think of England as an old country living on her past” because of the Movement's selective educational tours of historical sites in Britain. (FCO 141/15011) From this, we observe that some colonials imagined that the Commonwealth was to be more culturally inclusive, forward-looking – or even economically-minded, for, as the second British official in this example added, “visits to aeroplane factories, oil refineries and atomic power stations would impress and interest them [Singaporeans] far more.” (Ibid.) In these ways, Ney's Movement thus contributed towards the negotiation of the meaning of Commonwealth by creating a basis for dialogue and articulation of thoughts amongst British officials – even if his ideas, as Ney conceded, “may sound strange on modern ears”. (Ibid.)

### **Crusaders and “Quests”: Youth at Play in the Movement**

Apart from stimulating dialogue between colonials about the idea of Commonwealth, Ney's Movement also contributed actively towards the meaning of this term through its activities for youth. The sources available on the participants' experiences of the Movement indicate that many were grateful for the eye-opening opportunity to travel and meet youths of other countries. For instance, Iain Ewing of Ashbury College, Ottawa, considered himself “fortunate enough to be selected” for the CYM's Quest in 1961. (Ewing 1962: 25) In his 1962 essay on the 1961 Quest, Ewing stressed that he “was not sailing for a standard guide book tour of Europe” as:

The CYM is dedicated to the ideals of peace, brotherhood, and understanding. Through its annual Quest, students from the far-flung lands of the Commonwealth are brought together [...] by sharing the common experience of seeing Europe together, they forge a bond of brotherhood [...] I lived with boys and girls whose skin was not the same colour as mine, whose religions were unknown to me, whose homes were foreign to me [...] many of my preconceived ideas and prejudices [were] washed from my mind. (Ibid.)

Ewing's sense of duty (“I was not sailing for a standard guide book tour”) and his emphasis on the multicultural composition of the Quest suggest that some youths did feel they were playing a part in the Commonwealth by “forg[ing] a bond of brotherhood” with youth of other religions and ethnicities within the Commonwealth. Certainly, not every participant eagerly endorsed or imbibed

the Movement's message of youth's duty to Crown and God. Other Questors (participants) such as Modris Eksteins, who also attended the 1961 Quest, described his experiences in adulthood:

The climax of every Quest was an overnight vigil in a historic church. In 1961 the venue was St. George's Memorial Church in Ypres [site of the Battle of Passchendaele] [...] in half hour intervals throughout the night, Questors knelt in small groups before the altar and confronted their own souls in the context of British imperial history and the crisis of the twentieth century. Ney's aim was to have each youth come face to face with the ideals of commitment and service as the ghosts of the great conflict that was the First World War dance about in the clammy night air. 'You will, I hope, sense something of a fellowship with them,' he said of the dead, 'for they were Questors too, and youthful.' Some of my fellows came away from this night of communion proclaiming that it was the most meaningful experience of their young lives. I approached my 'watch' open to impression but also confused by the intricate weave of culture and slaughter. (Eksteins 2000: 57-58)

In analysing Eksteins' recollections of his experience as a Questor (written four decades after the event), it is useful to bear in mind that he had immigrated to Canada as a child from Latvia. Subsequently, he became a historian of European history and the relationship between war and culture. It is perhaps for this reason that Eksteins devoted greater attention in describing the Vigil at Ypres (a site fused with deep historical significance in British imperial history) as compared to Ewing, who focused mostly on the act (and excitement) of travelling in Europe. Nevertheless, we find several common points between the two narratives. Both underlined the CYM's stress on the importance and role of youth within the Commonwealth. Both revealed that some Questors connected with Ney's vision of the Commonwealth/Empire through the CYM's activities – Eksteins, for instance, added that some “proclaim[ed] that it [the Vigil] was the most meaningful experience of their young lives.” From other accounts, we also note that the CYM's activities nurtured a sense of pride or responsibility in the Commonwealth in the minds of the Questors. For instance, during the Quests, each wore a “specially dyed crimson blazer with the Crown and 'Canada' in gold on the pocket” and had to swear a “Promise” – a prerequisite for being considered as a Questor – to “unhesitatingly subscribe to its motto: FIRST UNTO GOD AND THEN TO THE QUEEN“. (DO 35/8197) Additionally, in assessing the impact of Ney's educational tours upon youths, Sturgis and Bird assert that one participant from Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, spoke to “250 high school students [and] 1,300 junior school pupils”, on top of publishing papers in his school paper and giving talks to the IODE (Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire). Another youth, Nora Gladstone, “was such an effective speaker that she brought tears to the eyes of the many adult audiences which she addressed.” (Sturgis and Bird 2000: 167 – 168) Seen in this light, the CYM thus did succeed to a certain extent in inspiring a sense of responsibility and identity towards the Commonwealth amongst youths.

Sturgis and Bird's analysis of these two youths, who were inspired to travel and give talks about their experiences in the CYM, drive us to question how youths also served as effective propagandists in the construction of the meaning of Commonwealth. As early as 1929, Ney's educational travels had focused the spotlight on youths as adolescent "ambassadors" who would (and could) establish close relationships between different territories of the Commonwealth. Indeed, in 1929, *The Calgary Herald* was convinced that "the sending of young ambassadors [Canadian youths] to Australia, New Zealand and other parts of the Empire should become a definite feature in Canada's educative plan". ("Empire Tours" 1929: 4) According to this newspaper, this was because "the impressions gained [...] will remain with them all their lives and be transmitted throughout the circles with which they come in contact." Underlying this opinion is the assumption that youths were ideal "ambassadors" because they were malleable and impressionable.

The following illustrations provide us with a visual idea of how youth could indeed play an active role in propagating certain ideas of the Commonwealth. Consider illustration 1, a picture of a choir at Ney's 1938 Empire Youth Rally in Vancouver. This image of youths singing while dressed in white robes emblazoned with a cross on their lapels – reminiscent of Crusaders – accompanied an article delineating Ney's goals for the EYM, where the Founder declared: "[i]n this great crusade the youth of the Empire is being called upon to take a lead." In the same article, nine supportive "messages from the Empire's leaders" were published; for instance, Michael Savage, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, stressed in his letter that "Youth today is rendering service, splendid service" while Joseph Lyons, the Prime Minister of Australia, affirmed: "our British Youth are preparing for the leadership they must give tomorrow to the British Commonwealth of Nations." The impression created upon the reader is thus that of youths actually playing a role (singing in an official capacity celebrating Empire and Commonwealth), as well as the importance of youths in the construction of Commonwealth (as exemplified by the declarations of the two Prime Ministers). Although we do not know to what extent the youths in the choir were consenting (did they choose their uniforms?) or aware of the ideas they were propagating, illustration 2, a poster design by a 17-year-old for Empire Youth Sunday, provides us with a basis for comparison. Here, the Crusader-Knight is stoic and armed (ready for action). The motto next to him, "The Great Crusade of Youth", associates the idea of youth, ready for service, in the character of the Crusader, ready for action. Tellingly, the array of flags representing various territories within the Commonwealth is arranged domino-like – suggesting that each depended upon the other. This example of a piece of propaganda produced by a youth also illustrates that some did invest themselves in the production of meaning of the Commonwealth – effectively, they could be adult-led (as in the case of the choir), but they could also be independent producers of meanings of the Commonwealth in their own right.



Illustration 1: “Youth Sunday – ‘O Give Us Brother Love for Better Seeing’”, in *The Vancouver Sun*, 20 May 1939, 36.



Illustration 3: A design by W.T. Berryman (Aged 17), for Empire Youth Sunday, May 21<sup>st</sup> 1944. This design was used as the front cover of a publication of the Commonwealth Youth Movement in 1958 to mark the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the Movement. *DO 35-8198*, National Archives, UK. Note as well the similarity between the Crusader/Knight's uniform and that of the choir in Illustration 1.

## **Conclusion**

Ney's EYM/CYM contributed towards constructions of the meaning of the Commonwealth by emphasising youth's importance and potential in serving the political, social or cultural purposes of the Commonwealth. However, its impact and reach was limited. First, Ney had concentrated his efforts mostly on Canadian and British youths – who also tended to be “elite” and privileged. (Sturgis and Bird 2000: 310) Furthermore, the Movement was quasi-religious and its reach was largely restricted to Britain, Canada and some of the other Dominions, such as Australia. According to Sturgis and Bird, only about 900 – 1000 youths had participated in the Quests from 1953 to 1969. Indeed, as one British official had pointed out, Ney was “not a BP [Baden-Powell] or William Smith [founders of the Boy Scouts and the Boys' Brigade respectively]” (DO 35/4217); in other words, Ney's Movement never achieved wide appeal.

On the other hand, the Movement enabled members of the public to view youth as important youthful “ambassadors” for the promotion of close relationships between Canada, Britain, and the Commonwealth at large. Thus convinced, members of the public (mostly Canadians and British) donated to the Movement and even opened their homes to accommodate youths of different religions and ethnicities from various corners of the Commonwealth on Quests. Apart from raising greater awareness amongst the general public of the idea of the Commonwealth, the Movement also certainly had an impact upon youths. Some Questors felt a sense of importance and duty as they were received and entertained by important personalities such as High Commissioners and Ministers during their Quests. While not every Questor felt strongly about the message of loyalty “unto God and then to the King/Queen”, most were thankful for the opportunity to travel and experience more of the Commonwealth that they were part of. Ironically, just as British officials were more positively-disposed towards the Movement as youth had become “more Commonwealth-minded” and “more aware of the existence of other Commonwealth countries” through the Movement's activities, (DO 35/8197) the EYM/CYM lost its momentum and ceased its activities as Ney became older, frailer, and increasingly fatigued by the demands of organising his “one-man show.”

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