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THE REBELLION OF 1837 IN UPPER CANADA

The years 1837-38 in Upper Canada saw rebellions break out at Toronto and near Brantford, saw the borders of the province violated time and again by raids launched from the United States, saw rebel pitted against loyalist, reformer against tory, and neighbour against neighbour. Little wonder, then, that the Rebellion era has long been of interest to historians and general public alike and has formed the stuff of legend in Canadian history. Undeniably, the Rebellion was an important, if uncharacteristic, event in the life of a province (Ontario) whose politics have usually been marked by tranquillity, even somnolence, rather than by violence and strife.

1. The Conservative Design

The political roots of the unrest that beset the province in the 1830s can be traced back to 1791. In the aftermath of the American Revolution, some seven thousand refugees—United Empire Loyalists—poured into the old province of Quebec. Most settled westward from Montreal—the greater part along the St. Lawrence River and on the north shore of Lake Ontario, a few around Niagara and Detroit. These western Loyalists sought a government separate from that of Quebec, one free from francophone influence. Their reward was the Constitutional Act of 1791 and the creation of Upper Canada.

The act gave the new province a framework of government. Upper Canada was to have a lieutenant governor, answerable to the governor general at Quebec and, ultimately, to the British imperial government. In this position, he came to exercise wide powers, among them appointing the executive and legislative councillors. These were important people. The members of the executive council helped frame and implement administrative policies; those of the legislative council initiated legislation and revised or rejected legislation originating from the assembly. The last body, although elected on a broad property franchise, had severely restricted powers. The framers of the Constitutional Act had, like others, searched history for lessons, and one of the things they found, or thought they found, was that the democratic assemblies of the rebelling Thirteen Colonies, by being overly strong, had caused the American Revolution. To prevent a similar occurrence, they limited the powers of the people of Upper Canada. Not only could the legislation of the assembly be rejected by the legislative council, but it could also be turned back by the lieutenant governor or the British government. With its powers so circumscribed, the assembly was in danger of being little more than a debating society. The prospect would not have upset the architects of this governmental system unduly. To them, if the common people, through the assembly, did not have the decisive voice in governmental affairs, that was only just, since they were but one of three
elements of society, and an element whose political rights in England and the colonies were of more recent vintage than those of the Crown or the aristocracy.

The new government, then, was to be a balanced one, blending the elements of King (the lieutenant governor), Lords (the two appointed councils), and Commons (the assembly). No one element would be able to run roughshod over the rights of the others. Instead, the interests of all would be served by a system designed to produce stability, harmony, and orderly growth, rather than the revolution, strife, and chaos which advocates of such a balanced constitution saw in its new republican rival to the south.

Vested interests soon began to accumulate within the governmental structure of Upper Canada, particularly as local government also rested heavily on the appointive rather than elective principle. True, almost from the first, leading Loyalists found themselves sharing power with able, more recently arrived immigrants. Yet there were always those who felt themselves well qualified, but who found the doors of office closed to them. The lucky appointees clung to the offices they had and often acquired more, trying to ensure in the process that relatives and friends inherited or collected their share. The tendency for a few to consolidate power and influence by accumulating offices was exacerbated by the fact that lieutenant governors came and went with some regularity and that the newly-arrived ones turned to those office-holders crowded about them for advice. These, of course, normally took the opportunity to promote their own interests and those of like-minded men and to represent those interests and their views as those of all well-disposed citizens in the province. The extent to which the governors were in the pockets of their advisers should not be overstated, however. The former had their instructions from London and were often far from ready to let local officials pursue courses different from those prescribed at the seat of the Empire. On balance, however, the officials of the colony were extremely influential. Those occupying the central positions of power at the capital, York (renamed Toronto in 1834), are known to history as the “Family Compact.” Perhaps the term is unfortunate, implying as it does a concentration of power at the centre that ignores in some measure the local bases and sources of influence of its members. Perhaps, too, the term is inaccurate in suggesting that all those members were personally interrelated, but that term does convey the essentially closed and oligarchic structure of power in the province.

Within the “compact,” a capable, talented individual like John Beverley Robinson, a son of Loyalist parents who had as his patron John Strachan, from 1812 the rector of York and later archdeacon of the province, could collect a bewildering array of offices. Robinson became first acting attorney general, next, solicitor general, then attorney general, and finally chief
justice, finding time along the way to sit in the assembly, become speaker of
the legislative council, and president of the executive council. As well, in the
Upper Canada of the period, he could see his brother Peter become a
member of the executive and legislative councils, as well as of the assembly,
and Commissioner of Crown Lands, and his brother William become a
member of the assembly and a Commissioner of the Welland Canal
Company.

Besides power, office brought money and land as payment, but often not
enough of the former to satisfy rising expectations. Many an official
complained of being short of cash. Yet the Robinsons and other like them
did not starve — far from it — and were mindful of the fact that they enjoyed
certain material privileges—fine houses, handsome carriages, or elegant
clothes perhaps. Nevertheless, a John Beverley Robinson believed that his
lot in life was a relatively hard one. He burned candles late into the night
worrying over the affairs of state and the concerns of men—not for him the
easy joys of long evenings of idle talk in the ale house. And what might a
Robinson worry about as the tallow melted?

He might well worry about the security of the colony. Upper Canada had
been founded by men and women who fled the Revolution in the Thirteen
Colonies. After them came immigrants from Britain, but there came, too,
settlers pushing up from the United States, some claiming to be "late
Loyalists." others making no claims except upon the province's good farm
land. These last particularly were people to be watched and watched
carefully in an age of revolution.

When the Americans revolted, had they not been helped in their bloody
cause by the French, who then paid for their sin against God and Britain by
being convulsed with revolution themselves? Indeed, the French had become
so infected with the revolutionary virus that they attempted to spread the
contagion abroad by force of arms. Inevitably, Britain, the one power true to
God's law in the eyes of the Loyalists, stood as the great counter-
revolutionary agent of the age of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic
Wars. Not surprisingly (to a Robinson), Britain and her colonies were
attacked by a perfidious United States bent on helping her old ally, France.

The War of 1812 had, in fact, several causes, not the least of which was a
long standing controversy over maritime rights. Equally, there were
Americans who coveted Upper Canada, and, unfortunately, the events of
the war demonstrated that a significant portion of the province's
approximately one hundred thousand inhabitants were either indifferent or
hostile to the British cause. Had it not been for the British regulars in the
colony and their Indian allies, Upper Canada would surely have fallen to the
Americans. How to purge the province of this lamentable pro-American
element was clearly a major question, then, for Robinson and his circle.
They found the answer, or so they thought, in the decision to exclude incoming American immigrants from the province. A long and bitter controversy, the "Alien Question," ensued in which Robinson played a leading role, a controversy ending only in 1828 with Americans already resident in the province being able, after meeting certain residence requirements, to take the oath of allegiance and secure full civil rights and privileges. But the episode left a bitter legacy, as well as several unanswered questions, behind it. Similarly divisive and inconclusive were the major controversies over the privileges of the Church of England.

Robinson devoutly believed that the fledgling British colony of Upper Canada required an official or established church to provide through sound religion vital social cement to knit the community together in harmony. The Constitutional Act was interpreted as setting aside one-seventh of all the unsurveyed land in the province for the Church of England, the supposed "Protestant" church referred to in the act. These clergy reserves, and the Crown reserves, also one-seventh of the unsurveyed lands, were scattered throughout the townships, angering many residents who perceived them as impediments to economic and social development, since they generally were settled more slowly than surrounding lots. The clergy reserves, of course, angered many in the diverse Upper Canadian religious community who were not members of the Church of England. Various Presbyterians, in particular, clamoured for a share of reserve revenues, but were unsuccessful in their demands in the pre-Rebellion period. Certain voluntaryists, who believed that churches should not be financed by the government but from the purses of their followers, argued that all these revenues should be devoted to secular purposes. The reserves thus became the most obvious symbol of the many privileges of the Church of England in the colony, a symbol John Beverley Robinson was determined to protect.

Robinson had a particular mind-set. He, and others like him, wished to see an organic, hierarchical community created in Upper Canada, one based on a balanced constitution and an established church. They wished also to stress the necessity of loyalty to Great Britain on a continent housing the predatory democracy and the licentious "mobocrats" of the United States. Here, the War of 1812 was a touchstone for them, demonstrating for everyone and for all time the essentially unprincipled and opportunistic policies of the revolutionary republic to the south. In short, tories or office-holders or Loyalists such as Robinson had both a garrison mentality and a conservative vision, seeing Upper Canada as a beleaguered outpost and a beacon of British civilization on a continent which had unleashed the evils of revolution on the world.

Some have suggested that Robinson and those like him in Upper Canada sought to create a gentility of themselves, to become the holders of great
landed estates which they could pass on intact to their heirs and hence establish, like the British aristocracy, families which would give tone and direction to society. The application of this term should not be taken to indicate that the views of a Robinson were exclusively agrarian. They were not. Certainly he, and others like him, would not have welcomed the smokestacks of industry in the young province, but they were willing to acknowledge that a healthy commercial sector was vital to both the economy and society of the colony. Hence they put their weight behind such enterprises as the Bank of Upper Canada, established 1819, and the Welland Canal Company, created 1824. In sum, the Robinsons of the province were in favour of economic development that was supportive of an essentially agrarian society. This is one factor helping explain why the leaders of the tories, or conservatives as they liked to style themselves, attracted widespread support in the province, particularly in the towns and in the old Loyalist settlements in the eastern parts of the colony. The influx of Britons after the end of the Napoleonic Wars, especially the half-pay officers pensioned from the British army and navy, added significantly to that support.

2. The Growth of Opposition

The conservative vision was not shared by everyone, however. The structure and operation of government, the privileges of the Church of England, the Crown and clergy reserves, the attempted exclusion of American settlers, the favouring of certain business enterprises—all these had their critics. So, too, did the rampant land speculation made possible by the province’s lax policies, the inadequate sums devoted to primary education, and so on. In fact, a full catalogue of the accumulated grievances of all the inhabitants would have been an enormously long one. Inevitably, opposition voices began to vocalize their objections to these perceived grievances. A small grouping of such individuals appeared before the War of 1812. Then in 1817 Robert Gourlay, a Scot and a would-be colonizer, arrived in the province. He canvassed the settlers’ discontents and became convinced that the provincial government was monumentally derelict in its duty to the ordinary folk. He launched an extra-parliamentary protest movement, but was expelled from Upper Canada by officials appalled at both his methods and his message.

In the 1820s the conservative government’s critics in the assembly began to coalesce as an identifiable group, but their organization was rather loose and their electoral success by no means assured. The conservatives carried the elections of 1820 and 1824, but lost to the reformers in 1828. These, in turn, lost to their opponents in 1830, but then won the election of 1834. One of the few constants in this changing scene was that the urban ridings of the province—Cornwall, Brockville, Kingston, York (Toronto), Hamilton,
Niagara, (London became a separate riding only in 1836)—had an almost unblemished tory record. For their part, the reformers proved to be particularly strong north of Toronto and in the peninsula west of Lake Ontario and north of Lake Erie.

Despite their internal disagreements, most reformers could agree that the present governmental regime was too oligarchic and that the Robinsons of the world had too much power and privilege. The reformers' general desire to diffuse power and diminish privilege was made more intense by developments elsewhere. The year 1830 saw a series of revolts, albeit unsuccessful ones, against the established order in continental Europe. The movement for change was such that not even counter-revolutionary Britain was unaffected. There the Reform Bill of 1832 saw a significant widening of the parliamentary franchise. And 1832 also saw in the United States the re-election of President "Andy" Jackson, who had made a name for himself as the defender of the common man against those entrenched interests which would threaten the continuing vitality of the American experiment in democracy. To the Upper Canadian reformers, then, internal and external considerations suggested the necessity, and the expediency, of protesting things as they were, of opposing the tories.

A simple tory-reform dichotomy, however, obscures the fact that neither the tories nor the reformers were monolithic. The tories could agree on certain essentials, but could wage fierce internal fights. The reformers could agree that things needed changing, but could not always agree on the nature or degree of those changes. For instance, in the late 1820s and on into the 1830s, some talked at length about the need for responsible government. What exactly did they mean? To a W.W. or a Robert Baldwin, this concept required the executive councillors to have the confidence of the assembly. If they lost that confidence (or voting majority), they should resign. Beneath this apparently simple premise lay another: that relatively closely-knit political parties with reasonably coherent programmes were emerging, since party structure was necessary to gather and maintain voting majorities. Responsible government would be party government. In any case, the Baldwinite version of reform would clearly give the assembly far more control over the executive than it had had before. The Baldwins, father William Warren and son Robert, were eminently respectable Anglo-Irish immigrants, urban professionals who could, and who did, argue that their proposal was perfectly consistent with recent British practice. They came to be regarded as the leaders of the moderate reformers.

One reformer who was not moderate was William Lyon Mackenzie. A Lowland Scot, he had come to Upper Canada in 1820, working for three years as a merchant, then founding a newspaper (the Colonial Advocate) in 1824. First elected to the assembly in 1828, he was repeatedly expelled from it
in the early 1830s for allegedly libelling its conservative members, but he eventually emerged from the ordeal as a martyr. He advocated a variety of solutions for the province’s ills, including responsible government, but “Little Mac,” as he was fondly called by admirers, was increasingly inclined towards more radical American electoral and democratic models. In the assembly elected in 1834 he chaired a grievance committee. Its report, issued the succeeding year, was largely his. Its sweeping indictment of the provincial government led the Colonial Office in London to remove Lieutenant-Governor Colborne who, whatever his deficiencies, had been following instructions to calm political passions by conferring more appointments on reformers around the province.

The man the Colonial Office chose to pour oil on troubled waters was Francis Bond Head, a sometime adventurer and author, and Senior Assistant Poor Law Commissioner of Kent County, England. His appointment has puzzled many historians, but it may be that the British thought his appointment justified by his reputation as a tried-and-true reformer and by his administrative experience in Kent. The former might appease the irate reformers of the province; the latter might prove valuable as increasing numbers of poor British immigrants came to the colony.

After arriving in Upper Canada in January of 1836, the new governor attempted to win over the reformers by admitting two of them, Robert Baldwin and Dr. John Rolph of Norfolk, into his executive council. Baldwin was able to persuade all the councillors to sign a memorandum insisting that Head confer with them on all items of executive business and declaring that he must accept their advice on certain vital issues. Head refused to agree and, when the councillors in turn refused to withdraw their document as he insisted they should, he appointed a new council, composed entirely of tories.

The assembly tried to bring Head to his knees by paralysing the government. It stopped passing grants of money. The governor retaliated by withholding assent from money bills already passed and by dissolving the assembly and calling a new election. Governors had been partisan in election campaigns before, but never as much as Head in 1836. He branded his opponents disloyal, suggesting they were conniving with dangerous external enemies. No one need have asked who. Government bureaucrats took their lead from him, contriving to hurry land patents conferring the right to vote to known tories. In the election itself, returning officers sometimes refused to let reformers vote. Just how widespread such incidents were cannot be known, but they did occur and likely affected some results. They are scarcely enough in themselves, however, to explain the tory avalanche that buried the reformers. The tories took over twice as many seats as their opponents.
The electoral pendulum, long in motion, had swung back once again to the tories.

The reformers did not see it quite this way. Many were convinced that electoral fraud had cheated them of victory. Charles Duncombe, a reformer from Oxford County, took a petition alleging as much to the British government. The petition was referred back to the new assembly, where it received short shrift from a committee appointed to investigate its charges.

In these circumstances some defeated reformers, such as moderates Robert Baldwin and Marshall Spring Bidwell, lapsed into silence. But Mackenzie, his fiery temper suggested by the red wig he wore, refused to take defeat, his own or that of his comrades, quietly. Having established a new paper, *The Constitution*, on a significant date, the fourth of July 1836, he used it to ring out new complaints and to toll the long list of old ones. He noted particularly the many troubles besetting what he regarded as his constituency, the farmers of the province.

3. Economic Discontents

The farmers, the backbone of the economy, were beginning to suffer hard times. In 1836 crop harvests about the province, particularly potatoes and wheat, were unusually small. This was reflected in prices. In 1835 wheat had generally sold in Upper Canada for its customary four shillings per bushel, but in 1836 the substandard harvest drove the price upward. By October a bushel sold for over six shillings. And prices continued to climb on into 1837 before dipping in the second half of that year.

The precipitous rise in wheat prices hurt many. Townsfolk and farmers who did not grow enough wheat to meet their own needs had to pay higher prices. Those farmers whose crops failed, or failed to meet expectations, found the situation difficult, even ruinous, particularly those who were newly established and who had gone into debt to buy land. Those, though, whose crops did not fail, benefitted from higher prices.

At the same time that the province was wracked by agricultural distress, it suffered from an international tightening of credit which followed a long period of economic expansion in the United States and Great Britain. The commercial economy of the province was based on a great chain of credit which stretched from British wholesaler to Upper Canadian retailer to local farmer, and back again. All were locked in an interdependent relationship in this credit system, and when one member was squeezed the others felt the pinch. British wholesalers, themselves pushed, demanded payment of their accounts from the colonial merchants who, in turn, sought their money from farmer creditors. Little wonder that by 1837 cash was in short supply and that interest rates on the money available were climbing.
The Upper Canadian banks, affected by the currency shortage, particularly of "hard money" or coins which had, or so it seemed, a more secure value than paper money, pressed the government for relief in the form of permission to suspend withdrawals of hard currency by depositors. The legislature met in June and July of 1837 to consider the request, deciding that the three chartered banks in the colony would have to apply individually for such permission. In the event, the Commercial Bank asked for and was granted the right to suspend specie (or hard money) in September 1837, permission that was extended to the other two—the Gore Bank and the Bank of Upper Canada—the following March.

4. The Movement to Rebellion

This general economic downturn added fuel to existing political discontent. Mackenzie, for one, was prepared to heap blame on Sir Francis Bond Head and his circle; increasingly, he made the British government a target too. It had faced great difficulties from much more determined reformers in Lower Canada and had seen fit in March 1837 to establish government by decree there. On July 19 an exasperated Mackenzie, pointing out in The Constitution the similarity between the grievances of the province's reformers and those of the American revolutionaries, suggested that the reformers organize political unions, which might, coincidentally, "be easily transferred ... to military purposes." Political unions had been known before in the province, having been created in emulation of those in Britain that helped produce the great Reform Bill of 1832. In fact, there was in 1837 one in existence in Toronto, formed in October 1836. At the end of July 1837 it, too, called for more unions, as well as the establishment of a close working relationship with reformers in the two Canadas, cemented by a common convention. Reformers about the province heeded the cries from Toronto, though less so than is usually thought. They created two hundred unions, Mackenzie was to claim, and this has generally been believed. The real figure was but a fraction of that, perhaps one-tenth, certainly no more than one-eighth.

The union movement was strongest in the Home District, about Toronto, and in the London District to the west (see map). Occasionally, the movement brought on brawls between rival gangs of tories and reformers, as at Vaughan and Bayham. Nonetheless, the general run of meetings was reasonably peaceful. Seldom did they involve military training. Despite Mackenzie's dark hints, their primary purpose was, as Mackenzie himself put it in The Constitution of 13 September, "Agitation! agitation! agitation!" —all this to culminate in a great reform convention. So certain was Governor Head that nothing serious was afoot that he acceded to the request of Sir John Colborne, now the commander of the British forces in the Canadas, to send as many men as he could spare from the one British
regiment in the province to Lower Canada, to aid the authorities as the situation there worsened. In a show of bravado, he sent them all.

Mackenzie decided some time that autumn to escalate agitation into rebellion, first speaking with some ten other reformers in late October, telling them that, now that the soldiers had been withdrawn, it was time to strike. A quick blow would rally thousands. The meeting broke up when one reformer, Dr. T.D. Morrison, denounced the whole thing as treason, but Mackenzie continued plotting, eventually bringing John Rolph and Morrison himself into the fold. The conspirators agreed to send Jesse Lloyd, founder of Lloydtown, to Lower Canada to seek information about the intentions of the radical reformers there. Though the radicals of the two Canadas were to achieve very little in the way of coordination and cooperation, this did not stop Mackenzie from claiming in the following weeks that the two were acting in close concert. Eventually he agreed with a small coterie of radicals north of Toronto to raise the standard of revolt at the capital on 7 December. Toronto taken, Rolph would be proclaimed head of a provisional government.

5. Rebellion

Though he published a proposed constitution for an independent Upper Canada based on American models on 15 November, "Mac" did precious little the rest of that month to organize a large scale revolt. Not till December did he really bestir himself. He dashed off a circular on the first, calling on the people to rise in arms, and at Stoverville (Stouffville) on the second he informed a gathering that Lower Canada had fallen to rebels there. In fact, rebellion had broken out there and the patriotes had won the initial battle at St. Denis on 23 November. Thereafter, however, their fortunes declined—something Mackenzie did not yet know. He may have believed, as he told the Stoverville audience, that victory was simply a matter of marching.

On Sunday, 3 December, Mackenzie received a message from Rolph in Toronto to the effect that the government had learned what was afoot and was about to arrest the ringleaders of the plot. He urged a rising on the fourth before the authorities could act. The doctor was skittish. Mackenzie decided. Unfortunately, Rolph's message circulated to others and men did begin to muster on the Monday. "Little Mac," though he wanted to, could not stop the premature movement.

Monday saw men gathering at Montgomery's Tavern, just north of Toronto. Their mustering did not pass unnoticed. Seven alarmed men, loyal to the government, tried to breach their lines to warn the capital. One, Colonel Moodie, was shot from his horse, later dying in agony. Three of his comrades were taken but the remaining three did break through. Mackenzie, who had arrived on the scene, and two companions captured two
Torontoians, alderman John Powell and wharf owner Archibald MacDonell, who had ridden out to see if the rumours circulating of revolt were true. After this capture, one of Moodie's escaped comrades rode past, shouting that Moodie had been shot. Powell drew a concealed pistol and killed Anthony Anderson, one of the few rebels with any military expertise. Powell then spurred his way south, bringing news of the rising to a sleeping lieutenant governor, who had been warned several times in the recent past about the dangerous drift of events by Colonel James FitzGibbon, Clerk of the Assembly, but who had foolishly ignored the warnings.

Now a chastened Head had to organize things quickly. Since the regulars were out of the province, he knew that the militia would have to be the main line of defence. On paper it consisted of all male citizens aged sixteen to sixty, but in reality it was badly organized and trained. Hence in Toronto, rather than relying solely on the militia, Head and the authorities issued a general call for volunteers, a procedure they were to follow at other times in the months to come. And rather than relying on just the citizens of Toronto, they appealed to those to both the east and west for aid.

"Little Mac" and the five hundred or so rebels who had gathered by Tuesday morning wasted the precious advantage they had. The government was off-guard, unprepared, but still they dithered. When Mackenzie finally did lead his men south, the marching rebels met a party carrying a flag of truce headed by none other than Dr. John Rolph, who had been asked to deal with the insurrectionists by a lieutenant governor unaware of his involvement in the rising. Rolph's two companions were Robert Baldwin and Hugh Carmichael, reformers both. The flag brought the rebels an offer of amnesty if they dispersed. Mackenzie wanted it in writing. When Head was asked for this, better apprized of the strength of the enemy, which was much less than originally thought, he refused. At some point in these proceedings, Rolph advised Mackenzie to ignore Head's offer and to take the city, but again the rebel chieftain delayed.

That evening Mackenzie bestirred himself, but could persuade only part of his men to follow him into Toronto. Their advance was stalled, however, by a small loyal outpost which opened fire and then fled. That night the capital was reinforced by sixty or seventy men led by Allan MacNab, Speaker of the Assembly, an influential Tory who championed his own, and the town of Hamilton's, interests in the assembly. A few others came in from Scarborough Township. This helped prompt the ever-cautious Rolph to yet another change of direction. He sent a message to Mackenzie advising him to disband his force. He slipped away after learning that "Mac" and his lieutenants had declined his advice, deciding instead to launch their attack on Thursday, 7 December, the day originally planned.
Wednesday passed in rather desultory fashion, with both rebels and loyalists receiving reinforcements. The former, however, suffered some desertions; so their number, some four hundred by Thursday, compared very poorly with the loyalists' fifteen hundred. The man who was to command the rebel forces, Anthony Van Egmond, at last arrived from the far-off Huron Tract, sensibly advising the insurgents to withdraw, but Mackenzie would have none of it. His followers, most so poorly armed that only about two hundred could actually fight, waited as the government forces, led by Colonel FitzGibbon, marched upon them. The battle was a rout. A triumphant Head ordered the burning of Montgomery's Tavern, the rebels' headquarters. The home of prominent radical David Gibson was also torched. Fleeing rebels were hunted down and brought before Head, who freed them. He offered rewards, however, for the leaders, most of whom escaped, "Little Mac" included. A few, Van Egmond among them, were not so lucky, with Van Egmond, in his mid-sixties, soon dying from the cold and damp of his jail cell.

Beyond Toronto, the first news of the Rebellion was generally that the rebels had been successful. This was the report that reached the Brantford area on the sixth or seventh of December. It was accompanied by the "news" that the authorities, to forestall further revolt, were about to arrest various locally prominent radicals, Charles Duncombe and Eliakim Malcolm among them. There two, aided by others, immediately set about organizing resistance, telling their followers that now was the time to take advantage of the "fall" of Toronto to end oppression. With considerable success, they spread their efforts westward to the St. Thomas area and beyond. In the township of Norwich, for example, Duncombe mobilized some two hundred men, Malcolm secured about one hundred south of Brantford in Oakland and vicinity, while others elsewhere rallied another two hundred. By 13 December Duncombe thus had some five hundred rebels gathered at Oakland. They were to march to join Mackenzie's "victorious" forces in Toronto. Unfortunately for them, they were about to be surrounded by irate loyalists.

Officials at Toronto, once revolt had broken out there, expected trouble in the west which had a reputation for radicalism. Allan MacNab, having helped disperse Mackenzie's men, was ordered westward with five hundred volunteers. The western loyalists mustered too. Consequently, on the thirteenth, government supporters, including one hundred warriors from the Six Nations' Reserve near Brantford, were about to fall upon Duncombe's force from all points of the compass. Learning this, Duncombe, on the evening of the thirteenth, had his men retreat from Oakland to Norwich, then disperse. MacNab's force swept into the rebel encampment at Oakland early on the fourteenth to find it deserted. In the days that followed.
MacNab’s men rounded up the rebels, capturing several hundred, but none of the ringleaders.

6. Causes of the Rebellion

The twin revolts in Upper Canada over, many wondered why the rebels had taken up arms. Of course, as has been seen, the accumulated political grievances of the reformers had played a major part, as had short-term economic distress. So too had the factor of personality. Clearly Mackenzie had persuaded, or duped, men into rebelling. And circumstance had played its part. Had the rumours of rebel success not been so rife and communications so bad, Duncombe and his band would never have shouldered weapons. But had there been something else, some deeper structural economic or social problem little acknowledged by contemporaries but whose influence, insidious and pervasive, was at work nonetheless? Several historians have speculated that such was indeed the case.

About Toronto and in the west, rebels had rallied from forty-one townships. These were primarily agricultural in character and were relatively long settled, just the sort, it has been suggested, where farmers had contracted debts to merchants and bankers in purchasing farms, stock, and machinery. Doubtless, such debts had been contracted and doubtless many incurring them had been caught in the credit squeeze of 1837 described earlier. But was farm debt a real long-term problem, or more importantly considered a long-term problem? This was not likely the case, particularly since many farmers must have looked kindly upon the credit system, in normal times at least, knowing that without it they could not have farmed. Usually, credit was beneficent, not malevolent. The evidence suggests rather that those locales which produced rebels, far from being economically depressed, were prosperous and, hence, that the notion that deep-rooted economic distress was at the root of rebellion must be discarded. For one thing, contemporaries noted the relative prosperity of the insurgent areas. For another, one hard indicator of prosperity, population growth, bears out their comments. That indicator, though, warrants some discussion.

The rebel areas of the province grew in the thirties at a faster rate than did the non-rebel areas. Some will ask: had the former grown too quickly, had the flood of British immigrants coming into Upper Canada created intense social pressures which spread discontent, then disaffection? This question has two dimensions; the first relates to Toronto, the second to the rural rebel areas.

As indicated, large numbers of immigrants crossed the Atlantic to the Canadas in the 1830s. Over 50,000 arrived at Quebec in each of the two peak years of the decade, 1831 and 1832, most passing on to Upper Canada. Some were paupers, a greater number temporarily poor because of the expenses of
the voyage, and these together posed a serious financial threat to the limited resources of public charity and private philanthropy. A portion too, especially in the cholera year of 1832, carried contagious diseases and threatened the health of all. The various threats posed by the immigrants were perceived most readily at Toronto, the great jumping off point to the interior. The kinds of tensions created in Toronto by the arrival of so many so quickly were severe, it has been suggested, and form an essential backdrop for a sophisticated understanding of the real causes of the Rebellion, not just in Toronto but around the province. This general line of argument obscures two salient points. The first is that Toronto's growth lagged somewhat behind that of the province as a whole. The capital's population was 9,252 in 1834, the year of its incorporation, 9,765 in 1835, 9,654 in 1836, and 10,871 in 1837, a growth rate over the period of 17.5 per cent, compared to the provincial average of 23.6 per cent. To repeat a point made earlier: Toronto was a jumping off point for the interior. Most of the thousands arriving in the city moved on, and did not remain to cause untold problems. The second point is an equally obvious one. Toronto was not the province. Even if one can demonstrate that the city suffered severe social tensions on the eve of the Rebellion because of the immigrant influx, one should not assume that those tensions obtained throughout the entire colony.

Can we then argue that as the immigrants spread through the province they created severe demographic pressures in certain areas, the rebel areas, by occupying land so rapidly that farmers already there were unable to acquire more, either for themselves or for their sons, creating economic and social discontent and thus fruitful ground for rebellion? Not likely: the one study we have for the Home District, the region along Lake Ontario centred on Toronto and stretching back to Georgian Bay, of the pattern of land acquisition, based on the granting of land patents (legal titles), concludes that the general disappearance of land there from the market came only in the 1840s. An even more detailed study of a smaller section of that region, the later Peel County, to the west of Toronto, identifies the critical years demographically as being later still. As for the rebel townships in the west, they certainly were capable of absorbing more people than they contained in the Rebellion era. In 1837 the rural sections of those predominantly rural townships had 30,910 people, or 20.9 per square mile. In 1851 the corresponding figures were 69,038 and 46.7, and in 1871, 82.692 and 55.9.

Certainly these rebel areas were capable in 1837 of absorbing more people, as was the province at large. While most Upper Canadians might not have wanted the diseased, the poverty-stricken, or even just the overly pretentious, they generally welcomed new immigrants, knowing that most brought at least a little money that could be spent locally, to the benefit of merchant and farmer alike. As the immigrants settled and succeeded, they benefitted all,
particularly their neighbours, whose property values increased as settlement grew. Within reasonable limits, the more people, the better. Though it may be true, as has been suggested by numerous historians, that a deep demographic crisis existed in the Lower Canada of the 1830s, such was not the case in Upper Canada.

What of the rebels themselves? Even if they came from prosperous regions, were they perhaps economically disadvantaged members of those regions? Evidently not. Occupationally, the insurgents can be grouped into three broad categories: farmers; labourers; and innkeepers, merchants, craftsmen, professionals, and the like. Here, it seems reasonable to suggest that they represented an occupational cross-section of their agrarian society, though indeed some observers have been surprised at the number of doctors caught up in the revolt, perhaps a dozen or so, and of professionals generally. The numbers of those professionals, however, were so small as to render unconvincing for the Upper Canadian rebellion the argument advanced by Fernand Ouellet for the Lower Canadian one: that it was led by liberal professionals who sought to advance their own particular class interests by generalizing them to all the discontented and disadvantaged of their society. Beyond occupational levels, it is worth noting that most of the Upper Canadian rebels were married, and averaged just over thirty years of age. The accumulated facts thus suggest that the rebels were, for the most part, well-settled members of a reasonably prosperous agrarian society.

Other characteristics of the insurgents are significant. The available statistical data show that they were mainly North American, interlaced with significant numbers of Britons, as many as one-third of those about Toronto and one-fifth of those in the west. Those rebels who had religious affiliations tended to be drawn from "non-established" denominations or sects—Episcopal Methodists, Congregationalists, Baptists, even pacifist Quakers. They bore antipathy towards the privileges of the Church of England in the colony and the pretensions of the other "established" or would-be "established" churches, notably the Church of Scotland and the Church of Rome.

The rebels' reasons for taking up arms, therefore, were complex. There is no single cause or grand overriding explanation. A North American orientation which resented a distant power and a colonial system of government, short-term economic dislocation, or more individual motivation, whether family loyalties or personal friendships and animosities, all played a part. So too did specific political grievances as well as the general reform perception that the world was ordered too much in the interests of the few, too little in the interests of the many. Nor should one forget that few rebels understood the real military situation in the Canadas,
having been convinced by a Mackenzie or a Duncombe that successful rebellion was simply a matter of marching.

7. Repercussions

The news of revolt carried quickly over the province. In the east the populace, already frightened by the outbreak of rebellion in the lower province, mustered promptly to defend the upper one, though there were exceptions. Notably, the Laird of MacNab, a feudal Highland chieftain who ruled a domain high up the Ottawa Valley, found it impossible to rally his settlers, who were perhaps more disgusted with him than they were with the provincial government. Magistrates in Merrickville on the Rideau doubted the loyalty of some who belonged to the local political union and arrested them, holding trials. Along the St. Lawrence members of the Brockville political union were also arrested. Panic reigned for a time at Kingston as some believed that the radicals might try to attack the town, now that the garrison at Fort Henry had been removed to Lower Canada. Arms were despatched to the local authorities at Belleville, who were similarly convinced that widespread treason was afoot there. They rounded up a score or so of the local settlers.

To the west of Toronto, Hamilton officials were also convinced by the existence of political unions that treason was widespread. Like-minded officials regarded meetings in Eramosa township near Guelph, in the Short Hills back of St. Catharines, and in and about London with great suspicion. But only in Mosa Township to the west of London were there men prepared to rally to the rebel cause. These mustered, thinking that Duncombe was successful or was about to be. Learning the truth of the matter, they scattered to the winds. Most of those arrested outside of the rebel areas had met simply to discuss what to do: to be neutral or to form defensive associations against supposedly hostile tory forces. Perhaps the dominant note in the colony, however, was one of loyalty as men in every area rushed to the defence of the Crown, mostly out of conviction but in some cases out of expediency as settlers felt the necessity of demonstrating their allegiance to, and affection for, the British connection.

Demonstrations of loyalty were made the more essential by the fact that Mackenzie had fled to Buffalo and set about organizing a force to invade Upper Canada. On 13 December he led a few men over to Navy Island in the Niagara River, just above the falls, from whence he issued a grandiloquent proclamation urging Upper Canadians to throw off their yoke of oppression and declaring the establishment of a provisional government. His small force, commanded by an American, Rensaeeller Van Rensaeeller, was opposed by militiamen who rushed to the frontier. In late December, thirty-five of these provided the most startling and controversial incident of the entire Upper Canada Rebellion.
The thirty-five rowed over to Fort Schlosser on the American shore, where, at 2 a.m. on 30 December, they boarded a small steamer, The Caroline, which had been supplying Navy Island. They killed one of those on board, and cut the vessel loose from its moorings. Catching the current, it raced toward the falls, but, legend to the contrary, ran aground and then broke up, rather than plunging intact over the abyss. The episode, however, did plunge British-Canadian-American relations to a new low for the postwar period as many citizens of the republic were outraged at the violation of their soil and their waters and the killing of one of their countrymen. Sympathy for Mackenzie and his cause—the Patriot cause, as it became known—skyrocketed in the United States. This did translate into a number of volunteers to help those on Navy Island, but not enough for them to be able to overcome the several thousand facing them on the Canadian shore. Consequently, they abandoned the island, the last withdrawing on 14 January. But this did not end the Patriot raids. The furore over The Caroline helped ensure that. Most American recruits to the Patriot cause probably hoped to free a country they thought enslaved, as well as to secure revenge. Some others, unemployed in the hard times of the mid-thirties, were as much concerned with the prospect of improving their own position as with helping others. Booty beckoned. Whatever the motivation, the numbers of Patriots were ever small, though their secret organizations and elaborate rituals spread the opposite impression.

The first Patriot raid of the new year occurred along the Detroit River in early January. Some three hundred men, although contemporary estimates put the number as high as two thousand, gathered before seizing a schooner, The Anne, at Detroit. Using her and various small craft, they sailed south. On 8 January The Anne appeared before Fort Malden, firing on the town, sailing off when a steamer with a hundred militiamen from Windsor came in view. The next day, The Anne ventured out again, but the thirty or so on board ran her aground just south of Fort Malden, falling prisoner to the militiamen mustered to oppose them. Despite the inglorious end to this escapade, other Patriots carried on the struggle.

On 23 February several hundred occupied Fighting Island in the Detroit River but were driven off on the 25th by a force from Sandwich—500 militiamen and British Regulars, the latter part of those rushed back to the province following the suppression of the Lower Canadian Rebellion. In the east, in the last week of February, about 200 patriots crossed over from the American shore to Hickory Island in the St. Lawrence, preparatory to an attack on Kingston, but retreated on learning of massive loyalist preparations to repel them. Near month’s end, the western part of the province was again the focus of the Patriots’ attention when approximately 400 raiders crossed the Lake Erie ice from the Sandusky peninsula and landed on Pelee Island. Not until 3 March did 350 British
regulars, militiamen, and Indian volunteers reach the island and drive them off.

All of these abortive attacks caused great concern in a province recently convulsed by rebellion and very much obsessed with the invasions of the War of 1812. The government, which found its jails full of Mackenzie and Duncombe rebels, took extraordinary steps to deal with the Patriot threat. It passed acts forbidding armed drilling and permitting magistrates to seize arms they deemed dangerous to the public peace. Captured Patriots could be tried by court martial.

Other legislation concerned, not the Patriots and the Patriot raids, but the rebels and the Rebellion period. The government enacted legislation exempting loyalists from prosecution for actions taken to put down the Rebellion. As for captured rebels, they could be held without bail and writs of habeas corpus in their cases not returned for thirty days. Those who admitted their guilt could petition the lieutenant governor for pardon, but pardon might involve any number of penalties, including transportation to a penal colony. In fact, of the 262 prisoners in the province eventually indicted for their parts in the rebellion, 181 petitioned under this statute. Fortunately, most were not transported and, in fact, were free by the end of the summer of 1838.

Three petitioners, including Samuel Lount and Peter Matthews in Toronto, were denied pardons, their crimes being considered too great. They were among the fifty-three tried that spring in the normal court system of the colony for treason—twelve in Toronto, twenty-six in Hamilton, and fifteen in London. Lount and Matthews were peculiarly unfortunate. Found guilty, they were condemned to die and were hanged on 12 April, despite many appeals for clemency on their behalf. Thirty-one of those tried were far more fortunate. Found not guilty, they were released. The remaining twenty were judged guilty but did not share Lount and Matthews' fate, being subjected to a variety of lesser punishments, the most severe of which was transportation to Australia.

The treatment of the prisoners, particularly the two hangings, became a cause of great grievance with many reformers. These, however, were ill placed to help those for whom they agitated. In the assembly itself four reformers—accused traitors Charles Duncombe of Oxford, John Rolph of Norfolk, William Benjamin Wells of Grenville, and David Gibson of the first riding of York—were unseated. As for the reform press, it was clearly in retreat. A few of the remaining papers were occasionally emboldened to protest harassment of the reform populace, which occurred more often and more severely in the Home District than elsewhere, but on the whole the climate of opinion was such that none dared be too critical of the government or its self-proclaimed agents.
These conditions helped persuade the Patriots that they must persist in their activities. Early on the morning of 30 May in the St. Lawrence, a small band rousted the passengers of the Upper Canadian-owned steamship, the Sir Robert Peel, and sank her. In June thirty-two men slipped across the Niagara frontier from the United States and, joined by about seventy locals, robbed a few houses on the night of 20 June, then attacked an inn housing thirteen militia cavalrymen. These they captured, then released before fleeing themselves. Several raiders were taken and tried. One was hanged, three sent to penitentiary, and seventeen sentenced to transportation. These severe punishments were enacted in part to dissuade the Patriots from further activities. The Patriots did relent for a time, but only a time.

On 11-12 November, 150-180 raiders landed from two schooners near Prescott and took up position in a windmill. Attacked on the thirteenth by about 500 militiamen and regulars, they drove them back. The attackers returned on the sixteenth, their numbers doubled, and carried the day, but only after a bloody battle. And still the Patriots persisted.

Early on the night of 2 December, some 150 crossed the Detroit River above Windsor. They attacked a militia barracks containing twenty men or so, killing several. They then met and murdered two others before being confronted by approximately 300 more, who put them to flight. Twenty-five patriots died in battle and five who had been taken captive were shot summarily on the orders of Colonel John Prince, “a Prince by nature as he is by name,” or so one elated tory thought.

The Patriots captured at Windsor and Prescott were treated even more harshly than their predecessors, being tried before court martials, not civil courts. No fewer than seventeen were hanged. This helped persuade the Patriots to cease their activities. Though border outrages did continue for a year or more, these were all relatively minor as the Patriot movement, after a year of effort without a single significant success to its credit and many of its most devoted adherents dead or in jail, ran out of steam.

8. Conclusions

Even though the Upper Canadian Rebellion, which led to the Patriot raids, was a failure, it generally has been viewed as an ultimate success by historians, who have typically considered it an important, if somewhat faltering, step forward in the province’s political evolution. Their argument is that the Canadian Rebellions forced the British government to rethink its colonial policy, which it signified in Upper Canada by replacing the inept Francis Bond Head as lieutenant governor, though it rather unfortunately chose the rigid Sir George Arthur as his replacement, and by charging Lord Durham to investigate the causes of the Rebellion in the upper, as well as in the lower, province and to make appropriate recommendations. Durham,
who visited Upper Canada only briefly in the summer of 1838, blamed the outbreak of rebellion there mostly on the Family Compact’s rigid control of government. Improve the governmental system, he concluded, and generally all would be well. It is said that his famous report, released in 1839 after he had resigned his post, proposed to improve that system by granting responsible government to the two Canadas after they had been united. Hence the Rebellion, the argument goes, led to the granting of responsible government. This overlooks several salient facts: Durham did not use the term “responsible government” in his report, though the phrase appeared in the margins of the printed version. He spoke of “self government” rather than “responsible government.” More significantly, responsible government was not soon granted by a British government worried about the loyalty of Canada’s colonists, some of whom had lately been in arms. Responsible government came only after a long parliamentary struggle in the 1840s, being formally achieved in 1848, shortly after it had been won in Nova Scotia, which had not suffered a rebellion.

The Rebellion and the succeeding Patriot raids had several unfortunate repercussions. Despite the effects of British garrison expenditures, the economic depression in place before the Rebellion deepened. The dislocations caused by unrest added to the unfortunate effects of the continuing shortage of specie and sub-standard harvests. Emigration increased from the colony, not just of rebels and their families, but of those fearing political and social turmoil. Significantly, population loss was greatest in the rebel areas. While the population of the province as a whole grew from 396,719 in 1837 to 406,842 in 1839, it increased microscopically in the rebel townships, from 104,341 to just 104,955. In fact, the number in those townships in 1839 had declined from the 105,271 of the previous year. Immigration and natural increase were more than offset by those who fled the turmoil. Across the province those who left sold farms, and property generally, at distress prices.

Some, of course, were not free to leave. As the following table shows, over one thousand men found themselves jailed for their parts, real or supposed, in the Rebellion and the Patriot raids. Fortunately, most were imprisoned

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for relatively short periods, but some were not. Over one hundred were sent to the penal colonies. Twenty climbed the gallows. One wonders what they would have replied had they been asked if the Rebellion had been for good or ill.

While perhaps one can appreciate the courage or conviction of those who resorted to arms, one must be aware that their actions, directly or indirectly, added to the catalogue of human suffering. This was one occasion when violent protest did not succeed. It did, however, serve to strengthen the resolve of conservatives like John Beverley Robinson to stand on guard for the colony, sure as they were that, had the Rebellion succeeded, the young province would soon have been absorbed by the United States—a reasonable assumption. If so, then the compact tories represented a position not so alien to Canada's successful national development as earlier generations of pro-reform historians alleged.

Of course, the rebels have their admirers, who find comfort in the reflection that the rebels, springing from the ranks of the reformers, articulated very real grievances and their protests eventually helped produce many needed changes. And the rebels, in taking up arms, dramatically demonstrated the courage of their convictions in resisting perceived oppression. Such considerations provide a much more solid historical apology for the insurgents of 1837 than earlier conclusions that the Rebellion in Upper Canada led directly to the granting of responsible government, a notion where wishful thinking rather than historical reality is clearly father to the thought.
SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Gerald M. Craig's *Upper Canada: The Formative Years, 1784-1841* (Toronto, 1963) is an excellent canvass of the colony's history. A still useful introduction to the politics of the day is Aileen Dunham's *Political Unrest in Upper Canada, 1816-1836* (London, 1927).


For the Rebellion itself, several authors have offered large interpretations of the era. D.G. Creighton's provocative, landmark study, *The Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence, 1760-1850* (Toronto, 1938), encompasses both Canadas and argues that the Rebellions, like much of the political conflict in the long sweep of years he studied, can best be understood as a conflict between merchant and agrarian interests. More thorough if less rigorous class analyses are provided by Stanley Ryerson, *1837: The Birth of Canadian Democracy* (Toronto, 1937); and Greg Keilty, *1837: Revolution in the Canadas* (Toronto, 1974). Both examine events in the two Canadas from Marxist perspectives. Michael S. Cross refines the class perspective somewhat in his "Afterword" to *The Wait Letters*, introduced by Mary Brown (Erin, Ontario, 1976), arguing that a rural debt crisis explains much about the Rebellion. Cross' piece is interesting, but lacking in empirical foundations.

Contemporary perspectives on the events and issues of the Rebellion period are provided in Sir Francis Bond Head's *A Narrative, with Notes by*
William Lyon Mackenzie, edited by S.F. Wise (Toronto, 1969); of course, the volume must be used carefully as the reader has to deal with two wildly conflicting accounts by two of Upper Canada's most heroic liars. Useful too, but just as biased, this time in favour of John Rolph, is J.C. Dent's *The Story of the Upper Canadian Rebellion; Largely Derived from Original Sources and Documents*, 2 volumes (Toronto, 1885). Fred Landon's *Western Ontario and the American Frontier* (Toronto, 1941) devotes three chapters to the Rebellion era in the western peninsula; Colin Read has expanded this considerably in *The Rising in Western Upper Canada, 1837-38: The Duncombe Revolt and After* (Toronto, 1982). A recent documentary study of the Rebellion is Colin Read and Ronald J. Stagg's Champlain Society volume, *The Rebellion of 1837 in Upper Canada* (Ottawa, 1985).

Edwin C. Guillet's *The Lives and Times of the Patriots* (Toronto, 1938) covers both the events of the Rebellion and of the Patriot raids, but should be used with some care. A brief but good study of the Patriot phenomenon is Oscar A. Kinchen, *The Rise and Fall of the Patriot Hunters* (New York, 1956), while A.B. Corey, *The Crisis of 1830-42 in Canadian-American Relations* (New Haven, 1941) helps put the troubles of 1837-38 in the larger diplomatic context. Peter Burroughs, *The Canada Crisis and British Colonial Policy, 1828-41* (London, 1972); and Phillip A. Buckner, *The Transition to Responsible Government: British Policy in British North America, 1815-1850* (Connecticut, 1985) provide the necessary imperial background, as well as the broader picture of other parts of British North America. A large number of works address the parallel Rebellion in Lower Canada; a forthcoming booklet in this series will contain a listing of the most important authors and titles.