

The Madness of his Method: Methodism, Discipline and the British World

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The idea of discipline was and remains central to Methodism. During the nineteenth century, discipline determined who was and who was not a member of the connexion; it comprised the rules that governed the church and it laid out the means of grace through which each Methodist could proceed from conversion to Christian perfection. As Thomas Frank points out, however, the place of discipline in Methodism has received surprisingly little scholarly attention. That may be because of its omnipresent nature: to study Methodist discipline is, potentially, to study the whole of Methodist existence. That is a tall order and, not surprisingly perhaps, this article takes a narrower approach to the topic. It is true, as Frank notes, that there was more to Methodist discipline than the regulation of ministerial behaviour.¹ But it is also true that clerical discipline left behind a particularly rich store of records. Drawing on those sources will allow us to analyze the operation of Methodist discipline within two groups: the Canadian Methodist connexion and the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Britain, including its missionaries in the colonies of Lower and Upper Canada. Adopting this transatlantic perspective, we will see that, despite different approaches to forging discipline, ministers on both sides of the ocean implemented it in similar ways. From the 1820s on, they transformed discipline into a tool of regulation and factional conflict. At the same time, discipline itself operated at a transatlantic level, with sometimes surprising results.

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Forging Discipline

If we are going to understand the meaning of discipline, we have to begin with John Wesley. Even before he felt his “heart strangely warmed” in 1738, Wesley was a stickler for self-regulation. As a young man, he demonstrated both his single-mindedness of purpose and his keen sense of his own sinfulness by vowing never to touch a woman’s breasts again. Wesley almost certainly failed to keep that promise, but, as Methodism took shape in the early 1700s, he applied the same kind of rigorous thinking to all aspects of life.² The question of what one must do in order to be saved was one he asked himself and his growing number of followers; in annual meetings with his ministers, the discipline of Methodism took shape in answer to that question. At first, it concentrated on the organization of the class meetings, those small local gatherings where Methodists strove for Christian perfection; it also included a list of actions that would either contribute to, or stop a person from achieving, that happy state of salvation.³ As Methodism expanded during the remainder of the eighteenth century, however, Wesley and his ministers added to the discipline. What might be called “connexional law” took up an increasing amount of each Conference’s time. The plan fact was that, with a growing number of ministers in the field, the Methodists had to find a way to regulate the pastorate. As a result, discipline came to define who was and who was not a good minister. Given his central role in the connexion, Wesley himself became the model of an effective preacher – abstemious, sexually abstinent outside of marriage, and actuated by an almost fanatical dedication to the oneness of Methodism. But, as E.P. Thompson once pointed out, Wesley was a hard act to follow.⁴

After Wesley’s death in 1791, discipline became a disruptive force among the Methodists on both sides of the Atlantic. Generally speaking, there were three great sins of the nineteenth-century Methodist pastorate: drunkenness, illicit sex, and schism. There was rarely disagreement among the clergy, whether in Britain or the Canadas, about the heinousness of those sins; but how exactly to define them became problematic once the connexional controls were no longer in Wesley’s strong, pure hands. How drunk, for instance, did a minister have to be before he was no longer a trustworthy servant of God? What constituted illicit sex? And what was the difference between criticizing the church and schism? No matter how the Methodists in Britain and the Canadas approached the forging of disci-

pline, these remained difficult questions. Drawing on their American Methodist heritage, the Canadian Methodists made discipline the Conference's responsibility and published a regularly updated book containing all the regulations of the ministry and the connexion as a whole.⁵ In the British connexion, there was no such discrete volume. Instead, British Wesleyanism had the ecclesiastical equivalent of an unwritten constitution; the rules passed at each Conference, and recorded in its published minutes, made up the discipline. It was left to the ministry to gather those rules together in manuals and guides.⁶ In each case, the pastorate was left to regulate itself – to make and enforce the very discipline by which it was governed. That might have been fine if transatlantic Methodism had managed to live up to Wesley's vision of denominational oneness. Oneness, however, was difficult to find during the mid-nineteenth century. Beginning in the 1820s, Methodism in Britain and the Canadas split into factions and various ministerial groups attempted to interpret discipline to serve their own party interests. Discipline was thus transformed into a means of regulating ministerial behaviour and a tool of factional conflict – indeed, the two became increasingly inseparable.

Discipline as Regulation

That is not to say, however, that factional interests drove all cases of clerical discipline. Every year, at their local district meetings and at the Conference, the Wesleyan ministers in Britain questioned one another's character. And almost every year, there were cases of bad behaviour that, to the majority of the ministry, clearly required some form of punishment, whether suspension or outright expulsion from the pastorate. These were cases of pure regulation. For example, one evening in 1841, a minister named Smith found a young preacher, Mr. Simpson, "in his daughter's bed-room, when she was in bed, sitting on the side of her bed, without his clothes." When called to account for this extraordinary scene, Simpson rather disingenuously claimed that, "he went to her room, in accordance with her earnest request, to finish a conversation which had been commenced in the parlour, but which had been interrupted by a visitor." Of course, that did not really explain the whole naked thing. This affair was so potentially scandalous that one of the leading men of the connexion, John Hannah, personally interviewed Simpson and strongly suggested that he should resign from the ministry.⁷ That was likely the preferred method

of proceeding; it would forestall any embarrassing questions, including how such a flawed a man could have become a minister in the first place.

The need for pure regulation was felt with equal force on the other side of the Atlantic, among the British Wesleyan missionaries and Canadian Methodists in Lower and Upper Canada. Far away from the connexional centre, ministerial misbehaviour appears to have been rife among the missionaries; or perhaps, given how few of them there were in the colonies at any given point, it was simply more noticeable than it was in Britain. Whatever the case, these transplanted British ministers accused one another of “intoxication,” schism, and sexual indiscretions.⁸ Every year, at their annual district meetings, they also uncovered a host of other sins requiring prompt correction, including being “deficient” in their knowledge of Methodism, resisting the authority of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (hereafter WMMS) in Britain, and becoming involved in unsuitable political causes.⁹ In each instance, the missionaries sent a report to the WMMS and the connexional authorities in London decreed a suitable punishment. In particularly egregious instances, the offending party might be sent home to Britain to defend himself.¹⁰ The Canadian Methodist ministers, in contrast, regulated the pastorate at their own district meetings and Conferences, even when they were united with the British Wesleyans between 1833 and 1840 and again from 1847 to 1874. So, when, in February 1858, one of the leading preachers of Canadian Methodism, Egerton Ryerson, failed to attend the means of grace at Adelaide Street Church in Toronto and allowed his daughter Sophia to attend a public dance, it was a fellow minister, John Borland, who accused him of moral laxity.¹¹ When Egerton’s brother, John Ryerson, became addicted to brandy and opium, tumbled off a dock and had to be fished out of the water by the police and other passersby, it was the Canada Conference of 1858 that suspended him from the ministry for a year.¹² And it was that same Conference of 1858 that expelled Edwy Ryerson from the connexion for reasons that, to this day, remain unclear.¹³

Discipline as Factionalism

Even in these instances, however, it was difficult, if not impossible, to separate regulation and factionalism. The events of 1858, while based on matters of regulation, were also the culmination of a factional conflict that began four years earlier, pitting Egerton Ryerson and his supporters

against the more conservative wing of the Canada Conference. In 1854, Ryerson started to push for the elimination of one of the key points of the discipline: the requirement that all church members attend class meetings. He encountered such vehement opposition from his fellow ministers that he felt obliged to withdraw from the pastorate. Over the next two years, Ryerson maintained his ground on class meetings and attempted to gain readmission to the ministry on his own terms. Two other ministers, John Borland and James Spencer, opposed him. They were keen supporters of “Methodism as it is” and saw no reason to tamper with a section of the discipline that Wesley himself had established. And neither Borland nor Spencer seemed to be disturbed in the least by Ryerson’s argument that, under the discipline, all church members had the right to criticize the connexion.

Indeed, Borland and Spencer proceeded to make whatever use they could of discipline to keep Ryerson out of the pastorate, or, at the very least, to muzzle him on the class meeting issue. In 1856, Spencer raised objections to Ryerson’s character at the Toronto district meeting and in the pages of the Canadian Methodist newspaper, the *Christian Guardian*, of which he was the editor. At the Conference that year, Borland pressed the attack home, proposing a resolution censoring Ryerson’s conduct and calling for his exclusion from the ministry for at least another year. Borland’s motion split the ministry, dividing them into pro- and anti-Ryerson factions. As the President of the Conference, Enoch Wood, observed, “[t]wo days and a half were consumed with this . . . matter . . .” The debate itself was vicious – Wood compared it to “[t]umultuous waves hurled together by changing currents of wind after being agitated by a tropical hurricane . . .” In the end, the dispute was resolved through a compromise: Borland’s resolution was defeated, but the class meeting remained firmly at the centre of Canadian Methodist discipline.¹⁴ Borland and Spencer had to wait until 1858, when they and their supporters controlled the key positions in the Conference, to exact what vengeance they could on Egerton Ryerson through his hapless brothers, John and Edwy.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the group of Wesleyan ministers that gathered around Jabez Bunting also raised the mixing of regulation and factionalism to a fine art. The Buntingites, as they were called, saw enemies all around them; and they too attempted to use discipline to shape Wesleyanism in their own image. In 1833, for instance, Bunting feared that

his reputation “might be injured in the opinion of the Junior preachers” by a rogue Methodist newspaper, the *Christian Advocate*. He and his allies used the annual trial of each minister’s character at the Conference as an opportunity to crush any discontent that might exist in the connexion. When Bunting’s character came up for consideration, the Buntingites praised him to the skies and denounced anyone who read or contributed to the *Christian Advocate* as “cowards, Blackguards & assassins.” Since a Methodist layman edited the newspaper, he had no opportunity to defend himself before the Conference, which included only members of the ministry. The Buntingites also passed an official resolution commending their chief and all his actions.¹⁵ Despite these tactics, however, discontent festered among those ministers who were either excluded from Bunting’s inner circle or who simply did not agree with his views. Joseph Rayner Stephens was one such preacher. Throughout the early 1830s, Stephens attacked the Buntingites’ support for the church establishment. Wesley’s position on the relationship between Methodism and Anglicanism was, to say the least, ambivalent, but Bunting and his allies believed that they knew exactly what the great man had believed. In 1834, they charged Stephens with schism and drummed him out of the church.¹⁶ Through a pitiless use of discipline, the Buntingites secured their interpretation of the Wesleyan tradition and their position at the centre of the connexion.

Transatlantic Discipline

Of course, factionalism was never just about attacking others; it also involved protecting ministers who were on your side. It was in the latter context that Methodism’s transatlantic context took on particular significance. The wider British world, of which both British Wesleyanism and Canadian Methodism were a part, frequently served as a connexional safety valve, allowing the church authorities to lessen disciplinary pressure when it suited their interests to do so. Take, for example, the case of the British Wesleyan missionary J.B. Selley. Selley arrived in Lower Canada in 1845. The secretaries of the WMMS declared him “a *superior* young man” and he married the daughter of Peter Langlois, the grandest lay grandee of Quebec City Methodism.¹⁷ A year later, in 1846, Selley’s fellow missionaries charged him with “delinquency in reference to his servant girl.”¹⁸ At a special district meeting held just to deal with the case, the missionaries examined Selley’s character and found him guilty. As

discipline required, they wrote to the WMMS, noting that, “[t]he *final* decision” in the case “lies with you, and the sooner you can put us in possession of it the better.” The missionaries also suggested that the connexional authorities in Britain should “exercise . . . all that mercy they can consistently extend.” That recommendation was made “with the full conviction that Mr. Selley is truly and deeply penitent – for the very serious offence he had committed against God and the Church.”¹⁹ The WMMS took the hint; it would hardly be politick to recall and expel a minister who was related to one of the most important laymen in Lower Canada. Instead, the secretaries of the WMMS took advantage of Methodism’s transoceanic missionary field: they assigned Selley to another part of the British world altogether – the West Indies – where his disgrace was unknown and where he could start again. Eventually, in 1853, when enough time had passed, the WMMS permitted Selley and his family to return to Lower Canada.²⁰ In the meantime, however, Methodism’s position in the British world had allowed the WMMS to maintain the appearance of upholding discipline, while, in actuality, circumventing it.

As effective as that tactic could be, it is also important to note that there were instances when it backfired. The transatlantic career of the missionary John Barry provides a striking example of this point. By the time the WMMS sent Barry to Upper Canada in 1832, he had already established a reputation not only as a highly talented preacher whom the connexion would be reluctant to lose, but also as an incorrigible hell-raiser. While stationed in Ireland in 1819, Barry threw himself into a very public dispute between the Wesleyan connexion and the rival Primitive Wesleyan Methodist church in Kinsale; and, when the WMMS packed him off to Jamaica in 1825, he quarreled with his own ministerial colleagues and then crossed swords with a leading magistrate and newspaper editor over the issue of slavery – Barry being a determined opponent of the “peculiar institution.”²¹ As soon as the WMMS transferred him to the Canadas, Barry was at it again. By 1833, he had become one of the most vocal opponents of the union that the leaders of the British Wesleyan connexion had just negotiated with the Canadian Methodists. In letters to the WMMS, Barry argued that the Canada connexion had “no object in view *but the total and final expulsion of all that is English from Canada.*”²² This insubordination appalled the secretaries of the WMMS in Britain, and, once again, they turned to the discipline to deal with the situation. Jabez Bunting suggested that they should “recall” Barry to Britain, “or send him

. . . to South Africa, or some other place quite out of range of North American feeling and influence.”²³ In the end, the WMMS sent Barry to Bermuda, having, one assumes, learned the thoroughly ironic lesson that mixing discipline and Methodism’s transoceanic reach had the potential both to promote and disrupt connexional order across the British world.²⁴

For the most part, however, transatlantic discipline did work to the advantage of British Wesleyanism and Canadian Methodism, drawing the two connexions together in ways that benefited each of them. In 1867, for instance, the British Wesleyan preacher William Morley Punshon agreed to become President of the Canada Conference. Punshon’s appointment was quite a coup for the Canadian Methodists; he was one of the most celebrated preachers of his day and a proficient fundraiser.²⁵ But there was more going on here than met the eye. In part, at least, Punshon accepted the Canadian Methodist invitation to cross the ocean because it would allow him to get around his own connexion’s discipline. Punshon was determined to marry his dead wife’s sister – an action that was illegal in England, but permissible in Canada. As Egerton Ryerson pointed out, “[t]he lawfulness of a man’s marrying his deceased wife’s sister has never been called into question in this country.” In fact, a “leading Physician in Toronto & an influential member of our Church” had “married his deceased wife’s sister three or four years since” in the presence of “[s]everal Wesleyan Ministers,” including Ryerson himself. That was good enough for Punshon and for his friends in the British Wesleyan Conference. He came to Canada, married Fanny Vickers in August 1868 and served as President of the Canada Conference until he returned to Britain in 1873.²⁶ And yet, despite the many successes of those five years, there were still some members of the British Wesleyan connexion who objected to his marriage “on Scriptural grounds.”²⁷ With Punshon on the other side of the Atlantic, however, there was little they could do about it and British Wesleyanism was spared what would likely have been a divisive debate on the subject. When it was convenient, discipline could fall victim to the tyranny of distance.

Conclusion

Like many other aspects of the Methodist experience, discipline becomes more complex the closer we examine it. In part, discipline was a tool for shaping the ministry, but, because the pastorate itself was

responsible for forging and enforcing it, it was always open to abuse. With the rise of factions in both British Wesleyanism and Canadian Methodism, such abuse became almost unavoidable. And if that were not complicated enough, discipline also had another transatlantic dimension that should not be ignored. If, as Alan Lester argues, there were circuits of empire – channels of information that drew the British world together in the nineteenth century – there were also circuits of discipline within Methodism.²⁸ Disciplinary issues in one part of the Methodist gospel field could, and often did, affect connexional affairs in another part. Methodism's transatlantic reach certainly allowed ministers to play fast and loose with their own regulations, though, as in the case of William Morley Punshon, with beneficial results for the movement as a whole. Throwing discipline to the winds was, at times, the best move that the Methodist ministry could make.

Endnotes

1. Thomas Edward Frank, "Discipline," in *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*, eds. William J. Abraham and James E. Kirby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 245-61.
2. Richard P. Heitzenrater and W.R. Ward, eds., *The Works of John Wesley: Journals and Diaries* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988-2003), 1:250; Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism*, 3rd ed. (London: Epworth Press, 2002), 78-83, 257-69.
3. John Lawson, "The People Called Methodists 2. 'Our Discipline,'" in *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, eds. Rupert Davies and Gordon Rupp, 3 vols. (London: Epworth Press, 1965-1988), 1:191-94.
4. Lawson, "Our Discipline," 1:199-200; Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 174-76, 205-6, 237, 298; and E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin Books, 1968), 389.
5. For examples of the American and Canadian Methodist approach to discipline see *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: T. Kirk, 1804); and *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Canada* (Toronto: Anson Green, 1864).

6. Edmund Grindrod, *A Compendium of the Laws and Regulations of Welseyan Methodism*, 8th ed. (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1865), x-xvii; and Russell E. Richey, *The Methodist Conference in America: A History* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1996), 16-19.
7. John Hannah to Jabez Bunting, 7 May 1841, MAM PLP 49.4.43, John Hannah papers, Methodist Archives and Research Centre, John Rylands University Library of Manchester, Manchester (hereafter MARC).
8. 12 February 1821, Reel 3, District Minutes (Canada/Lower Canada), Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society Correspondence (hereafter WMMS-C), United Church Archives, Toronto, ON (hereafter UCA); 15 May 1829, Reel 3, District Minutes (Canada/Lower Canada) WMMS-C, UCA; 18 May 1843, Reel 3, District Minutes (Canada/Lower Canada) WMMS-C, UCA; and 8 May 1847, Reel 3, District Minutes (Canada/Lower Canada), WMMS-C, UCA.
9. 18 May 1827, Reel 3, District Minutes (Canada/Lower Canada), WMMS-C, UCA; 31 May 1832, Reel 3, District Minutes (Canada/Lower Canada), WMMS-C, UCA; and 20 May 1841, Reel 3, District Minutes (Canada/Lower Canada), WMMS-C, UCA.
10. See, for example, the case of William Sutcliffe who was “charged with being overcome by liquor.” R. Williams and R.L. Lusher to Joseph Taylor, 7 September 1821, Box 5, File 44, #31, WMMS-C, UCA; and John Hick and John DePutron to the General Secretaries of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, 9 February 1822, Box 6, File 48 #15, WMMS-C, UCA.
11. C.B. Sissons, *Egerton Ryerson: His Life and Letters*, 2 vols. (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin and Company Ltd., 1937-1947), 2:365-66.
12. Enoch Wood to the General Secretaries of the WMMS, 5 July 1858, Box 40, File 296, #12, WMMS-C, UCA.
13. Minutes of Several Conversations between the Ministers of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Canada (Toronto: George R. Sanderson, 1858), 9; and Sissons, *Egerton Ryerson*, 2:367.
14. This account of the class meeting debate is based on Goldwin French, “James Spencer,” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967-), 9:737; Neil Semple, *The Lord’s Dominion: The History of Canadian Methodism* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996), 229-31, 500 note 62; Sissons, *Egerton Ryerson*, 2:285-326. See also John Borland, *Dialogues between Two Methodists, Algernon Newways and Samuel Oldpaths* (Toronto: John Donogh, 1856), 5-7,

- 10; and Enoch Wood to Elijah Hoole, George Osborne and William Arthur, 28 June 1856, Box 40, File 291, #13, WMMS-C, UCA. The quotations are from Wood's letter.
15. John Rattenbury to Mary Rattenbury, 2 August 1833, MAM PLP 86.28.74, John Rattenbury papers, MARC. See also the record of the debates in the Conference in Benjamin Gregory, *Side Lights on the Conflicts of Methodism during the Second Quarter of the Nineteenth Century, 1827-1852* (London: Cassell and Company, Ltd., 1898), 129-32.
 16. Michael S. Edwards, *Purge This Realm: A Life of Joseph Rayner Stephens* (London: Epworth Pres, 1994), 2-16; Gregory, *Side Lights*, 161-64. See also John Rattenbury to Mary Rattenbury, 6 August 1834, MAM PLP 86.28.76, John Rattenbury papers, MARC.
 17. William Lunn to Robert Alder, 22 February 1845, Box 29, File 202, #9, WMMS-C, UCA. Emphasis in original. See also Peter Langlois to Robert Alder, 19 October 1849, Box 33, File 235, #17, WMMS-C, UCA.
 18. Matthew Richey to Robert Alder, 27 October 1846, Box 29, File 210, #16, WMMS-C, UCA.
 19. Matthew Richey to Robert Alder, 25 November 1846, Box 29, File 210, #19, WMMS-C, UCA; 8 May 1847, Reel 3, District Minutes (Canada/Lower Canada), WMMS-C, UCA.
 20. George H. Cornish, *Cyclopaedia of Methodism in Canada* (Toronto: Methodist Book and Publishing House, 1881), 137; Peter Langlois to Robert Alder, 19 October 1849, Box 33, File 235, #17, WMMS-C, UCA.
 21. Norman W. Taggart, *The Irish in World Methodism, 1760-1900* (London: Epworth Press, 1986), 151-53.
 22. John Barry to the General Secretaries of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, 2 August 1833, Box 17, File 106, #35, WMMS-C, UCA. Emphasis in original.
 23. Jabez Bunting to Robert Alder and John Beecham, 18 November 1833, MAM PLP 18.15.10, Jabez Bunting papers, MARC.
 24. Taggart, *Irish in World Methodism*, 165-66.
 25. William Westfall, "William Morley Punshon," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967-), 11:719-20.

26. Egerton Ryerson to William Morley Punshon, 19 June 1867, Portraits and Letters of the Presidents of the Canadian Conference, UCA. See also William Morley Punshon to Mr. Parkin, 18 August 1868, William Morley Punshon papers, UCA; Westfall, "Punshon," 11:719. For the legal niceties of Punshon's case, see Peter Ward, *Courtship, Love, and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century English Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 35-37.
27. Gervase Smith to Egerton Ryerson, 17 August 1868, Box 5, File 153, Egerton Ryerson Papers, UCA.
28. Alan Lester has analyzed these "circuits of empire" in a number of articles, including Alan Lester, "British Settler Discourse and the Circuits of Empire," *History Workshop Journal* 54 (2002): 25-48; Alan Lester, "Imperial Circuits and Networks: Geographies of the British Empire," *History Compass* 3 (2005): 1-18; Alan Lester, "Humanitarians and White Settlers in the Nineteenth Century," in *Missions and Empire*, ed., Norman Etherington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 64-85; and David Lambert and Alan Lester, "Introduction: Imperial Spaces, Imperial Subjects," in *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century*, eds. David Lambert and Alan Lester (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1-31.