

## **Eld. David Marks: Free Will Baptist Itinerant Preacher in Ontario**

Craig B. Cameron

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David Marks's (1805-1845) *Memoirs* opens a window on the soul of one zealous itinerant of an American evangelical group in the first part of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The Free Will Baptists, founded by Benjamin Randall in New Hampshire during the Revolutionary War and known as an evangelical "New Light Stir," grew along with settlements in northern New England, New York, the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys.<sup>2</sup> As part of this westward migration of New Englanders, the Free Will Baptists established their work in the Eastern Townships of Lower Canada and somewhat later, in the western portion of Upper Canada.

Marks is a representative figure in the Second Great Awakening of the evangelical Christian mindset known as "ultraism" that flourished in western New York between 1820 and 1840.<sup>3</sup> The term "ultraism" was first coined by a Presbyterian writer in the heart of the "Burned-over District" to describe evangelical Christians of this particular ethos.<sup>4</sup> The author in question used it disparagingly as a short-hand expression for "religious fanaticism," referring more to a mind-set than a specific group; there nevertheless seems to have been a high percentage of Free Will Baptists who fit the description.

Ultraists tended to translate moral principles into social and ethical absolutes; they were either completely for a practice or group or in vehement opposition. David Marks's resistance to Free Will Baptists being members of secret societies, such as the Free Masons, is illustrative:

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I mourn that so soon the evil is gaining ground in the rapid spread of the society of Odd Fellows . . . But let this selfish organization be confirmed as children of the devil, whence it originated and where it belongs, and let not the followers . . . of the Savior turn aside to be taken in by its snares, deceiving and being deceived.<sup>5</sup>

Marks and others of his ilk turned their guns against slavery, the liquor traffic and work on Sunday with vigorous campaigns for moral reform. It is easy to see why they were viewed by contemporaries as extremists.

The zeal of David Marks may have been misdirected at times but there can be no question as to the sincerity of his motives. While only seventeen Marks wrote,

I retired to a grove and dedicated myself anew to the Lord; solemnly covenanting to live nearer the fountain of goodness that I might know the height and depth of perfect love and be more successful in winning souls to Christ. Alas! how many when the Lord calls and makes them sensible of the awful danger of living in sins still harden their hearts and refuse their best, only eternal friend admission . . . unprepared to meet the awful swelling of Jordan. O Savior, help me, teach me to persuade them.<sup>6</sup>

This vision of the high and holy nature of his calling as a preacher of the Christian message undergirded all Marks's endeavours.

### *Early Life and Conversion*

David Marks was born in Shakenden, NY in December 1805 but soon moved with his family to Junius, NY near Seneca Lake, in the Finger Lakes district. He grew up in a Baptist family; he identifies his mother as "godly" but says little about his father. Like John Wesley almost exactly one hundred years earlier, Marks was providentially rescued from a fire at the age of four.<sup>7</sup> David Marks seems to have been a unusually sensitive and introspective child. When David was seven his older brother Benjamin died prompting the younger Marks to think about the meaning of life.

Marks's account of his conversion is also typical of evangelicals in the nineteenth century. A fall from a horse and personal injury at age eleven raised the whole question of his eternal destiny and why he had been spared from death when his brother had not been.<sup>8</sup> Reminiscent of

Martin Luther's struggle, he relates that he despaired of being saved because of God's justice until ". . . Jesus, in a still small voice, removed my guilt and filled my soul with peace and joy, the experience was opposite to my expectation."<sup>9</sup> He then like Luther, saw that assurance of salvation was possible. Unlike Luther, however, and much like Henry Aline and Benjamin Randall, his assurance was rooted primarily in his experience and spiritual impressions and not in a Scriptural text.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike many of his Free Will Baptist contemporaries who eschewed formal education, Marks very early decided that learning and piety were not incompatible.<sup>11</sup> At age thirteen, he set out from his parental home in central N.Y. and walked to Providence, RI, a distance of nearly 600 kilometers (368 miles) to seek admission to Brown University. President Messers told him that tuition was free but that room and board was not. Marks did not think of appealing to Rhode Island Free Will Baptists and so trudged dejectedly homeward.

Marks soon became disenchanted with the Baptist church he was attending; no one spoke to him when he declared himself a candidate for baptism. The sensitive teenager, feeling rejected, then found fault with "particular election" and closed communion, two distinctives of Calvinistic Baptists, though this may have been largely because of his emotional reaction to the perceived slight. Soon he encountered a Free Will Baptist, of whom there were increasing numbers in western New York as "fires" of revival burned.<sup>12</sup> Eld. Zebulon Dean persuaded him to join; he was finally baptized in 1819 just before his fourteenth birthday. Soon he was "exhorting" in classic Awakening style for several weeks at protracted meetings in January 1821 with Eld. Dean.<sup>13</sup> During these meetings Marks felt the overwhelming impression that his life was to be spent preaching the Christian gospel and that he was to live a short life. This feeling was prophetic as Marks died at the age of forty-five, his premature demise, in part, being hastened by his almost frantic exertions and privations in the course of his work as an evangelistic preacher.

### ***Marks's Itinerant Ministry***

In 1821 David Marks commenced preaching with the Benton Quarterly Meeting of the Free Will Baptists in western New York at the age of fifteen. With the exception of two brief periods, one in 1835-37, while a pastor in Rochester, NY, and 1843-45 while in Oberlin, Ohio, his

entire adult life of twenty-four years was spent as an itinerant preacher. Marks claimed to have travelled 42,353 miles in the first ten years of his ministry, and preached at 3,489 meetings.<sup>14</sup> This is over 4,000 miles a year and a sermon every day. Compare this with John Wesley who travelled 250,000 miles in 52 years of ministry.<sup>15</sup>

Crowds assembled at first largely because of his youth; he was known as the “boy preacher.” Within his first year, he had travelled throughout the state of New York, crossed the Ohio River to preach to a group of slaves in Kentucky and crossed the Niagara into Upper Canada in October 1822 on his first of ten Canadian tours. Marks preached at a Methodist camp meeting during his first brief visit to Canada. The young preacher’s frenetic schedule would take him regularly back and forth from New England to western New York, Upper Canada and Ohio.

**Physical Difficulties.** One obvious but often neglected fact about itineracy was the physical difficulties associated with the peripatetic life. The famous *Harper’s Weekly* drawing of a Methodist circuit preacher on horse holding an umbrella over his head in the pouring rain is suggestive. During his first summer preaching Marks reported that

I preached in China. The day after I walked 13 miles in the rain and attended three meetings. My shoes were worn off my feet on reaching the last appointment in Boston, Erie County, and I was much wearied; my feet were blistered and so painful that I was obliged to sit on a pillow while speaking to the people . . . my sufferings for the cause of Christ . . . [were made bearable] by seeing one sinner this evening persuaded to turn and live.<sup>16</sup>

The early years were difficult ones for young Marks. In June 1822, he was on a Lake Erie steam boat bound for Sandusky, Ohio. The captain set his passengers on an isthmus of land, six miles away from Sandusky. Marks went forty hours without food. He took refuge for the night in a lighthouse though hunger pangs kept sleep at bay. The lighthouse keeper brought a cracker and pint of milk for his breakfast: “this was a delicious morsel and received with thanks.”<sup>17</sup> Marks tried to pilot an old skiff across the bay to Sandusky after walking for some time but the wind and waves were too strong. Soon a vessel appeared and took him across: he hoisted his portmanteau on his shoulder and walked nine miles before coming to a house. The residents refused him hospitality and he walked three more miles until

encountering a Free Will Baptist family who received him warmly.

The difficulties of itineracy continued for David Marks throughout his career. In February 1824, while travelling between Chesterfield, VT and Stoddard, NH, he recorded that

A little before sunset when still six miles from the place, I found the road filled with drifted snow and could proceed but slowly. I had to face a piercing wind with rain and hail. At length I found that my beast was wandering in a field and I knew not where to go. My clothes were frozen around me-the wind had increased to a gale and soon my way was again hedged by drifts.<sup>18</sup>

The itinerant life was strenuous enough for a person with a strong constitution. Marks was a large man (235 lbs) but his health from youth onward was poor. While only twenty-two in January 1828, at Scriba, NY, Marks retired from a sermon when a “death-like feeling came over him, blood flowed freely from his lungs” and he thought his life was over.<sup>19</sup> In addition to the usual colds and flu, Marks suffered from rheumatic fever, pleurisy, dyspepsia, jaundice, and fatally, dropsy. It is all the more remarkable that he persevered with this kind of life given these health problems.

**Preaching in Upper Canada.** David Marks made five of his ten tours to Upper Canada in the six years from 1827 to 1832. His normal itinerary was St. Catherines, Hamilton, Ancaster and then out Dundas Street to Oxford county. Another small Baptist group of American genesis (the Free or Open Communion Baptists) was centred around Woodstock and Marks made their acquaintance in the course of his travels. David Marks met his future wife, Marilla Turner, from nearby Zorra township at a revival meeting he conducted.<sup>20</sup> Marks’s road led westward to Westminster township and the town of London. He made a further circuit from London through Westminster to Southwold and Dunwich townships southward on Lake Erie where small Free Will Baptist congregations were located.

Frederick Norwood has observed that Methodists worked out a system ideal to the frontier whereby itinerant circuit preachers co-operated with local class meeting leaders to bring the gospel message to pioneering settlers.<sup>21</sup> The Free Will Baptists employed both Methodist and Baptist approaches, relying on a combination of itinerants and local farmer-

preachers until the mid-nineteenth century. In contrast to the Methodist system of class meetings and circuit riders, the Free Will Baptists' approach was more ad hoc and individualistic. David Marks is an excellent example of this tendency; his initial concern for Upper Canada was based upon a spiritual "impression" not a systematic plan by his Yearly Meeting.<sup>22</sup> Marks and several other preachers supplemented the efforts of the very few local preachers resident in Upper Canada.<sup>23</sup>

### ***Social Role of Itineracy***

Aside from the issue of denominational growth, itinerant preaching filled a significant social need among church and non-church folk alike. Marks indicated that he preached extempore street sermons in St. Catharines and Ancaster enroute to points further west. On one occasion in May 1828, Marks reported that he preached from Amos 4:12 and Exodus 4:13 from the back of a wagon in St. Catharines.<sup>24</sup> The word must have circulated that an itinerant preacher was in town, as on his return journey to New York, he reported preaching to a crowd of approximately 1,000 people in the town square. Even if this total is exaggerated, the numbers relative to the population of the town (about 3,000) are significant.

**Itineracy as Entertainment.** How can we make sense of the appeal of itinerant preaching to folk in small-town Ontario in the nineteenth century? One aspect of the social function of itinerant preaching appears to have been entertainment. The visiting preacher was a new face who provided relief from the tedium of people's daily routines. During the First Great Awakening in New England and Middle Colonies, people left their businesses and work to hear visiting preachers, most notably George Whitefield, the Grand Itinerant.<sup>25</sup> This phenomenon was continued and extended during the period of revivals in the first three decades of the nineteenth century. Young David Marks himself was a novelty as the "boy preacher" who spoke as a "warm-up" to the infamous Lorenzo Dow in the summer of 1823 to crowds as large as 6,000 persons in western New York.<sup>26</sup>

Donald E. Bryne observes that some came to hear the "preacher" with thoughts of diversion and fun foremost in their minds.<sup>27</sup> These hecklers and never-do-wells were a perpetual problem for wandering preachers. The itinerant had to deal decisively with them or lose credibility. Mockers in Ancaster (near Hamilton), Upper Canada, in May 1828, challenged the

young New Yorker to preach on “nothing.”<sup>28</sup> Marks showed his aplomb and ability by preaching a message on this theme under six points: 1) *creatio ex nihilo* – man was created out of nothing; 2) man under the law (of God) can do nothing just; 3) nothing justifies impenitent sinners; 4) nothing will comfort them in death or save them from judgment; 5) God’s righteous ones also have nothing meritorious in their sinful nature but have nothing to fear from death and nothing will bring grief in heaven; and 6) nothing will turn to the advantage of the wicked in this life, or in the one to come, unless they repent.<sup>29</sup> Marks may have expanded his original message later as he reflected on the occasion; nevertheless, the call upon his personal fortitude and ingenuity cannot be doubted. On his return the mockers again gathered and Marks favoured them with a sermon on the word “something.” Obviously some of the same people were again in attendance.

**Itineracy as a Civilizing Agent.** S.D. Clark has asserted that the various Baptist groups in Ontario were part of a “movement of social masses . . . cut off from the traditional social order-on the margins of the community without strong social attachments.”<sup>30</sup> This observation has some truth as Free Will Baptists were rural in orientation and did not number the leading people of society in their ranks. However, as Louis B. Wright has observed, itinerants brought a civilizing and humanizing influence to the rural frontier.

Actually, these hard riding, fearless Methodist preachers who rode the endless frontier circuits performed a far greater service in civilizing people than we have recognized. They carried tracts which they taught people to read. They insisted upon Bible reading as a mark of Christian piety. And a little later in the frontier period, they preached in behalf of public education.<sup>31</sup>

These comments also apply to the itinerant Free Will Baptist preachers such as David Marks and help explain some of the appeal of itinerants in the early nineteenth century.

While the legend of the rough and ready itinerant, zealous but ignorant and uncouth, is appealing, it is not quite accurate. Baptist, Methodist and other evangelical preachers were often called on to speak at camp and protracted meetings and to work with ministers of differing views and social status. David Marks himself, though not formally edu-

cated, many times made contact with significant community leaders. In 1832, for example, during a cholera epidemic he was invited to the palatial residence of Col. Charles Ingersoll, M.P. near Woodstock.<sup>32</sup> The colonel's thoughts had turned to spiritual issues because of the epidemic and the death of his daughter. He related a dream which Marks recorded in his journal. It centred about a black beast pursuing him, which then stood beside his daughter's grave on a hillside before approaching his house. Marks had likely cultivated this relationship on previous visits and Col. Ingersoll trusted him enough to disclose such personal information.

### ***Conclusion***

The significance of David Marks's career as an itinerant preacher extends beyond his efforts to plant Free Will Baptist churches in Canada. The propagation of the Christian message was certainly the primary motivation for the itinerant.<sup>33</sup> Marks was a key player in the establishment of his denomination in Ontario.

Nevertheless, viewed from the perspective of their auditors, these roving preachers played a substantial social role in rural communities in the nineteenth century. They represented human companionship and contact with the outside world; they told news and stories for which many frontier settlers were hungry. When not preaching, itinerants like David Marks were sharing meals with families, visiting the sick and counselling the anxious. As an extension of this fellowship dimension, itinerants provided cheap and often stimulating entertainment. At another level, they brought certain elements of Anglo-American civilization to those cut off from the larger currents of western society. It takes some imagination in our recreation-oriented age to identify with the life of rural folk in the past century and the enjoyment they received in listening to a spoken message. David Marks's career as a Free Will Baptist preacher, is a paradigm of itinerancy on the North American frontier. One major social significance of itinerant evangelical ministers was that they provided a humanizing and civilizing influence through their lives, spoken words and personal influence, where it was greatly needed.

**Endnotes**

1. David Marks's *Journal* was published in 1831 on the occasion of his tenth anniversary as an itinerant preacher. *Memoirs of Mr. David Marks Free Will Baptist Minister of the Gospel* was edited by his wife Marilla Marks in 1846 following Marks's death (Dover: Free Will Baptist Printing Establishment). The first twenty-three chapters reproduce, with very small abridgement, the 1831 *Journal* supplemented by other materials including Marks's later journal entries and correspondence. The *Memoirs* conclude with the funeral sermon given by Charles G. Finney in December 1845, whom Marks came to know while at Oberlin College in Ohio. The first run of 5,000 copies was quickly sold out and a further 5,000 published in 1847. A projected publication for western readers never came to fruition.
2. Except for I.D. Stewart's, *The History of the Free Will Baptists for Half a Century, 1780-1830* (Dover: Free Will Baptist Printing Establishment, 1862), a predominantly partisan and hagiographic account of Free Will Baptist development, there were no scholarly attempts to write a history of the denomination until the mid-twentieth century (see Norman A. Baxter, *History of the Free Will Baptists: A Study in New England Separatism* [(Rochester: American Baptist Historical Society, 1957)]. More recently, Stephen A. Marini, *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), found many similar characteristics between the Shakers, Universalists and Free Will Baptists all of whom had their origins in the Revolutionary War period.
3. See Whitney L. Cross, *The Burned-over District: A Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York 1799-1850*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).
4. William B. Sprague, *Religious Ultraism* (Albany: 1835).
5. *Morning Star*, 15 October 1845.
6. *Memoirs*, 113.
7. *Memoirs*, 12.
8. *Memoirs*, 16.
9. *Memoirs*, 21.
10. "And when a silent voice has removed their burden and composure of soul with love to God and his people has succeeded. They have passed the test of conversion without a witness of it," (*Memoirs*, 21).

11. Ruth S. Bordin, "The Sect to Denomination Process in America: The Free Will Baptist Experience," *Church History* 33 (December, 1965): 77-94. This article examines the validity of the Troeltsch-Niebuhr thesis using the Free Will Baptists as a case study. Bordin observes that Free Will Baptists only began to accept the importance of higher education for clergy beginning in the 1830s. Despite considerable resistance to this trend, a higher percentage of younger men becoming preachers received at least an undergraduate degree by the time of the Civil War. She concludes that the Free Will Baptist ministry was largely professionalized by the 1890s, later than many evangelical groups.
12. Cross, 16.
13. Stewart, 402.
14. *Memoirs*, 477.
15. Albert C. Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), I:45.
16. *Memoirs*, 41.
17. *Memoirs*, 105.
18. *Memoirs*, 121.
19. Stewart, 411.
20. *Free Will Baptist Magazine* III, No. 8 (30 June 1830): 175. Marilla Marks became a notable figure in her own right; she married three Free Will Baptist ministers and was a leader among women of the denomination.
21. Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism: A History of United Methodists and Their Relations* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), 146.
22. *Religious Informer*, March 1822. Eld. Hermon Jenkins from Bethany, NY departed for Upper Canada 5 November 1821, "feeling a special call to go and preach Christ to them."
23. *Morning Star*, 18 June 1828. Eld. Hermon Jenkins reported on the work of David Marks and Freeborn Straight from New York in the province. Jenkins was requested to visit, baptize converts and form a church, which he did. He then commented that he had visited the townships of Dunwich and Southwold six times since 1821.
24. *Morning Star*, 6 August 1828.

25. Sarah Edwards, "A Thousand People Hang on His Words", in *Religious Enthusiasm and the Great Awakening*, ed. David S. Lovejoy (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 33-4. Mrs. Edwards reported that in Northampton, MS, "mechanics shut up their shops and day laborers throw down their tools to go and hear him [Whitefield] preach, and few return unaffected."
26. *Memoirs*, 111.
27. Part III "Humor and Heroes," in *No Foot of Land: Folklore of American Methodist Itinerants* (Metuchan: Scarecrow, 1975), 178-308.
28. *Memoirs*, 175.
29. *Memoirs*, 184.
30. *Church and Sect in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1948), 164.
31. *Culture on the Moving Frontier* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 99.
32. *Morning Star*, 7 March 1833.
33. Robert T. Handy, "American Methodism and its Historical Frontier," *Methodist History* 23, No. 1 (October 1984): 44-53.

