

“A Canadian, then an English subject”: American Impressions of Egerton Ryerson

SCOTT MCLAREN
York University

Egerton Ryerson was born to United Empire Loyalist parents in Charlotteville about a year after American Methodist Nathan Bangs established the Long Point circuit. More than twenty years later, when Ryerson was himself received on trial at Saltfleet in 1825, the young preacher found himself surrounded by Americans who, like Bangs, felt themselves called to spread the Methodist message not only in their own country, but also in British North America. Not including the six preachers received on trial that year, among them American-born Anson Green, almost 30% of the preachers in attendance were born, bred, and received on trial in the United States. Americans, then, were no strangers to the young Egerton Ryerson. And yet, later that summer, when Ryerson crossed the border into the United States for the first time in his life, he remarked in his journal, as though it came as a kind of revelation, that, “the manners of the people are not pleasant to me.”¹

To describe Ryerson’s views of America and Americans as complex would be to understate the case. Contradictory might be nearer the mark. On the one hand, Ryerson often corresponded with American Methodists and more than once attended the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church as a Canadian delegate; he served as the emissary who personally solicited American Wilbur Fisk to serve as Canada’s first Methodist bishop; and he did not scruple to acknowledge the great debt he owed to Nathan Bangs for the degree to which Bangs’s *Letters to Young Ministers of the Gospel* had shaped and influenced him as a young

Historical Papers: Canadian Society of Church History (2017)

preacher. On the other hand, Ryerson was often at pains to distance Canadian Methodists publically from their American brethren; he routinely denounced any American influence that might further republican leanings north of the border; and not long after taking the helm of the province's educational system, he banned the use of American textbooks outright, even going so far as to argue that, "in precisely those parts of Upper Canada where the United States Books had been used most extensively, there the spirit of insurrection . . . was most prevalent."²

It is the purpose of this paper to explore how Americans and American Methodists responded to Egerton Ryerson. This is no easy undertaking. Even his fellow Canadians hardly took a single view of him. Ryerson was not a man known for his consistency and routinely angered those who felt betrayed by him. Even Ryerson's own brothers were often at odds with him. When his positions appeared friendly to American interests, American Methodists largely treated him as one of their own. When he stood against their interests, they distanced themselves from him. On a few occasions they also used him, or his name, to help resolve their own internal disputes. But for the most part, when they were not simply ignoring him, they seem to have been puzzled by him. For, in the words of one American observer, though universally acknowledged to be "a man of talents," he was also "a clerical politician despised for his political tergiversations."³

Despite the fact that Ryerson rose to undoubted prominence in Upper Canada as the editor of the *Christian Guardian* after 1829, it was not until the early 1830s that the American press much noticed him. Canadian Methodists had been independent of the American General Conference for several years by that time, and a merger with the British Wesleyans was then in the offing. In order to negotiate the terms of the union, Ryerson undertook a trip to London in March 1833 by way of New York. Just before embarking he met with Bangs, Fisk, and other Methodists and promised to send weekly updates from across the Atlantic to the *Christian Advocate*. This he did not do. Instead, upon his return to New York in September, he wrote a letter to the *Advocate* that seemed calculated to curry favour with his American brethren. After describing English Methodism as the very picture of harmonious prosperousness, he added pointedly: "I heard Mr. Bunting and other leading preachers speak in high terms, and in the most affectionate manner, of American Methodism, and of its economy. They do indeed regard it as Wesleyan, and hail it as *fraternal* in the highest sense of the expression." How generous.

Ryerson's letter also alludes ingratiatingly to the "truly Christian and liberal conduct" of the General Conference toward the Canadians and "the reciprocal feelings of brotherly love that exist between the American and Canadian Conferences."⁴

And yet the ink was hardly dry on Ryerson's New York letter when the *Christian Guardian* published his infamous "Impressions Made by our Late Visit to England" in October. The piece marked a sharp turn to the right and offered a thoroughgoing rebuke of republicanism. The antidote for both republicanism and radicalism was, of course, the "moderate toryism" of the British Wesleyans. Although the Americans did not go as far as William Lyon Mackenzie – his *Colonial Advocate* responded by denouncing Ryerson for having "gone over to the enemy" and "hoisted the colours of a cruel, vindictive tory priesthood" – American disapproval was equally unambiguous. A month after Ryerson's "Impressions" appeared in Upper Canada, the New York *Christian Advocate* effectively disowned him, reprinting from his "Impressions" "such paragraphs as are relevant to our purpose" and declaring that, "The American reader will bear in mind that Mr. R. is a British subject writing of British affairs." Had they said, with Mackenzie, that Ryerson had simply "gone over to the enemy" the verdict could not have been clearer. Ryerson had made himself a foreigner.⁵

The Americans paid little further attention to Ryerson until the union between the Wesleyans and the Canadians was in peril. In May 1838, Ryerson published a scathing rebuke of the *Christian Guardian* and the British Wesleyans in the *Upper Canada Herald* for supporting the executions of Samuel Lount and Peter Matthews in the wake of the rebellions. A month later, at the Canada Conference held in Kingston under the concluding presidency of British Wesleyan William Harvard, Ryerson stirred controversy once again by regaining editorial control over the *Christian Guardian* and, much to the irritation of the British Wesleyan Missionary Committee, set about using it as a platform to advocate for the secularization of the Clergy Reserves. Around the same time, an American visiting Toronto attended Ryerson's church with some eagerness to hear him preach. Like the British Wesleyans, however, he held that Ryerson's political advocacy was unbecoming to a preacher. "I had long disliked the man," he observed in the pages of the *New York Evangelist*, "for becoming a political champion, when he should have preached the gospel." Ryerson, moreover, preached a poor sermon. "I expected an intellectual sermon from him," the writer continued, "as a man of talents, and not one very

evangelical, as he was a clerical politician. I was disappointed: his style was diffuse and feeble – his sermon was not logical in its construction . . . without much unity or point.”⁶

By the spring of 1840, an impossible impasse had grown up between the Wesleyans and the Ryerson brothers. In fact, things had deteriorated to such an extent that in May John and Egerton Ryerson attended the General Conference in Baltimore and made arrangements through Nathan Bangs to take pulpits in New York if their Canadian brethren failed to support them in the teeth of Wesleyan opposition. At the Canada conference next month, however, not only was Egerton Ryerson cleared of all charges: he was also selected, with his brother William, to visit England and deal directly with the Wesleyans. Not surprisingly, with delegates as objectionable as these, the Wesleyans put an end to the union almost immediately. The Americans were not displeased. “In the meantime,” the editors of the *Western Christian Advocate* wrote, “we would just say, that the separation will be for the benefit of the Canadian Methodists.” The same month rumours that Egerton Ryerson might be appointed a Methodist Bishop in Canada appeared in *The New-Yorker* and *Niles’s National Register*. In a way that rumour was prescient. But it was in the colonial government, not the church, that Ryerson’s promotion awaited him.⁷

In November 1843, Governor General Charles Metcalfe found himself in an awkward spot when his reform ministers resigned in the wake of a conflict over patronage. Metcalfe turned to Ryerson for advice in January and it is just possible that he offered him the position of Chief Superintendent of Education in exchange for his help. Ryerson responded by publishing a series of nine tracts in the *British Colonist* arguing in favour of Metcalfe’s position. Hodgins called it, “unquestionably the most memorable act of Dr. Ryerson’s long and eventful life.” Predictably, however, the *Christian Advocate* ignored the whole affair. Like the Wesleyans and, indeed, the writer in the *New York Evangelist*, American Methodists seemed not to have been particularly enamoured with the idea of a preacher meddling in politics. But *The Albion*, a New York weekly known for reprinting articles from English journals (like the *Boston Atheneum* and the *Philadelphia National Recorder*), could not have been more delighted with Ryerson’s interference. “Seven devils were cast out of Mary Magdalene,” the paper enthused, “and if Mr. Ryerson can succeed in casting only one evil spirit out of Canada – we mean the spirit of discontent – we shall be willing to canonize him!”⁸

The next few years were difficult but heady ones for Ryerson. American Methodists ignored his appointment as Chief Superintendent of Education and the political struggles that role entailed. But not all Americans turned a blind eye to Ryerson's educational efforts. In fact, the first lengthy biography of Ryerson to appear south of the border was published in the *American Journal of Education* – the “most important periodical of its class” according to Frank Mott – in the spring of 1868. By that time Ryerson was firmly established in the role, but poor health had led to talk of an imminent retirement. The biography is remarkable chiefly for its inconsistency. Ryerson's activities as a preacher, for example, are presented as even-handed and reasonable – his conflict with John Strachan, his time at the helm of the *Christian Guardian*, his efforts on behalf of the Academy, even his infamous “Impressions” are glossed over as reflections “on various social, political and clerical questions in England, which attracted much attention, and created a good deal of discussion.” It is somewhat surprising, then, that the piece goes on to detail at great length Ryerson's opposition to the use of American textbooks in Canadian schools, even citing his 1847 Special Report that drew a link between American textbooks and the rebellions. Even more surprising is that, though the piece does go on to discuss Ryerson's efforts to establish public school libraries in 1854, no mention is made of the fact that his 1857 catalogue of approved books included titles of British as well as American manufacture and origin. Were the readers of the *Journal* simply expected to accept Ryerson's anti-Americanism and not hold it against him on the grounds that he had done so much to further the cause of education more broadly? Or was this a deliberate effort at distortion? Further research is required.⁹

American Methodists had few opportunities to read about Ryerson again in their own publications until the Wesleyan Methodist Church, the Conference of Eastern British America, and the New Connexion Church united in 1874. On that occasion the *Christian Advocate* published a lengthy article describing “the first General Conference of the Methodist Church of Canada” over which Ryerson served as President. The writer heaped praise on Ryerson throughout the piece in a way that seemed calculated to swell both Canadian and American breasts: “Of all the great men that Canadian – perhaps I should have said American – Methodism has produced, it has not produced a greater . . . than the Rev. Egerton Ryerson.” The sentence can be read in two ways. On the one hand, the writer may simply mean that Ryerson ranks amongst not only the greatest

Canadian but also the greatest American Methodists. On the other hand, it could also mean that Ryerson is as much a product of American Methodism as he is of Canadian Methodism. In view of the fact that the piece itself is framed for American readers as something of interest because, “the Methodism of this country [Canada] is largely the development and outgrowth of the products of the pioneer labors of some of the early preachers of the Methodist Episcopal Church,” the latter reading is not entirely implausible. In any event, the ambiguity is telling.¹⁰

In February 1876, Ryerson finally retired as Chief Superintendent of Education and devoted himself to what he described as his true life’s work: his two-volume study *The Loyalists of America and Their Times*. The first mention of this work appeared in the *Christian Advocate* some fifteen years earlier in a column titled “Literary Items”—the column was not signed, but its appearance perhaps suggests that Ryerson entertained hopes the work might appeal to readers in the American market. Among other things, the work was promised to include a history of Canada and to compare its government “with that of the United States and Great Britain.” No mention of the work is made again until 1876, when a kind of warning about its contents appeared in a piece simply signed “X Y Z”: “If the book is published at all . . . it will make an outcry in some quarters when it appears. In one part the claims of the Calvinistic Puritans to be the founders of religious liberty, whether in England or in America, are closely sifted. The verdict is given against them.” When the book finally did appear in 1880, American Methodists all but ignored it. And this despite what seemed an effort on the part of Canadians to have it noticed. Although the *Christian Advocate* refused to review it, a letter appeared in *Zion’s Herald*, written by a Canadian, pretending to be an account of Methodist activities north of the border. In fact, at least a quarter of the article comprised a close description – and even a kind of apology for – Ryerson’s *Loyalists* – so that the letter seems almost a kind of pretext to advertise its publication to American readers. “While [Ryerson] is a staunch advocate of liberty to all classes,” the correspondent admitted, “he does not sympathize with those who brought about the American Revolution; though in so doing it must not be supposed that the author does not entertain kindly feelings towards the United States.” And, just in case anyone might want to order it, the writer added, “The work is published in two handsome octavo volumes, by the Methodist Book Room, Toronto.”¹¹

When Ryerson died in February 1882 a short obituary appeared in

Zion's Herald. Two lengthier obituaries, written by Canadians, appeared in March in *Zion's Herald* and in January in *The Methodist Quarterly Review*. Because Canadian Methodists authored both pieces, however, they must be understood to say more about how Canadians hoped Americans would perceive Ryerson than about how Americans themselves actually perceived him. A more accurate sense of what American Methodists thought of Ryerson after his death is contained in a review of *The Story of My Life* that appeared in the *Christian Advocate* in the summer of 1883. Here Ryerson is framed by the American reviewer as a commendable "leader of Canadian affairs . . . a scholar of a high order," but also as a kind of weird curiosity that no American would ever truly understand. "It seems strange to a citizen of the United States," the reviewer observed, "that, so near our own borders, there should be a nation troubled with just the questions which are seeking solution in England Indeed, there is large evidence that some parts of Canada are more English than England, a slavish copying after English methods being manifest in a country whose social conditions make such imitation ridiculous. Dr. Ryerson was, first of all, a Canadian, then an English subject."¹²

The assessment is reminiscent of the *Christian Advocate's* assertion in 1833, on the occasion of the publication of his "Impressions Made by our Late Visit to England," that Ryerson was "a British subject writing of British affairs." From a political point of view, then, there was little common ground between Ryerson and Americans or American Methodists. Even his adroit political agitations on behalf of Canadian Methodism were not viewed with much enthusiasm south of the border. And yet, when viewed primarily as a religious figure, American Methodists certainly had the capacity to appreciate Ryerson for what he had achieved. In a way, this harkens back to Ryerson's own experience as a young preacher being received on trial in 1825. He was at that moment surrounded by preachers whom he regarded not as Americans, but as American Methodists. Thus he could express genuine surprise that the manners of Americans – and not American Methodists – were disagreeable to him when he crossed the border. In this way the religious identities of North American Methodists seems to have trumped their political identities – at least in the denominational press – and this opened the way for transnational linkages and mutual respect between Ryerson and American Methodists founded on a common religious identity. It was thus that Ryerson himself could observe with truth, after a lifetime of political struggle in 1876, that he felt himself

as much united to American Methodists “this day as I did fifty years ago” and even that, had American Methodist Wilbur Fisk consented to his request, half a century earlier, to become Methodism’s first bishop north of the border, “it would have been a great blessing to Methodism in Canada.”¹³

Endnotes

1. Wesleyan-Methodist Church in Canada, *The Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Wesleyan-Methodist Church in Canada from 1824 to 1845 Inclusive* (Toronto: Anson Green, 1846), 6-9; George Playter, *The History of Methodism in Canada* (Toronto: Anson Green, 1862), 271; and C.B. Sissons, *Egerton Ryerson: His Life and Letters* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Company, 1937-47), 1:15.
2. John Carroll, *Case and His Cotemporaries* (Toronto: Methodist Conference Office, 1871), 3:215; Sissons, *Life and Letters*, 1:575; Egerton Ryerson, *Special Report on the Operations of the Common School Act of 1846 in Documentary History of Education in Upper Canada*, ed. J. George Hodgins (Toronto: L.K. Cameron, 1900): 7:110.
3. “Ramblings of an Invalid,” *New York Evangelist* (NY: New York), 14 March 1840, 44.
4. Sissons, *Life and Letters*, 1:171; Carroll, *Case and His Cotemporaries*, 3:362; Egerton Ryerson, *The Story of My Life*, ed. J. George Hodgins (Toronto: William Briggs, 1883), 115; and Egerton Ryerson, “Ryerson’s Letter,” *Christian Advocate* (NY: New York), 12 July 1833, 182.
5. Egerton Ryerson, “Impressions Made by our Late Visit to England,” *Christian Guardian* (Toronto, Upper Canada), 30 October 1833; William Lyon Mackenzie, *Colonial Advocate* (Toronto, Upper Canada), 30 October 1833; “English Affairs,” *Christian Advocate*, 29 November 1833, 53. See also Sissons, *Life and Letters*, 1:193-205; and Goldwin French, *Parsons and Politics* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1962), 142-44.
6. Wesleyan-Methodist Church in Canada, *Minutes of Conferences*, 188; Sissons, *Life and Letters*, 1:434; French, *Parsons & Politics*, 161; “Rambles of an Invalid,” *New York Evangelist*, 14 March 1840, 44.
7. Sissons, *Life and Letters*, 1.453-54, 1.549-51; Ryerson, *Story of My Life*, 269-70, French, *Parsons and Politics*, 187-8; *New-Yorker*, 24 October 1840, 90; *Niles’s National Register*, 24 October 1840, 128; and “The Methodist Church of Canada and the Wesleyan Methodist Conference of England,” *Western Christian Advocate*, 9 October 1840, 98.

8. Ryerson, *Story of My Life*, 312ff.; Sissons, *Life and Letters*, 2.42-75; Egerton Ryerson, *Sir Charles Metcalfe Defended Against the Attacks of His Late Counsellors* (Toronto: British Colonist Office, 1844), *passim*; *The Albion*, 22 June 1844, 304.
9. Sissons, *Life and Letters*, 2:76ff; "Educational Biography, Egerton Ryerson, D.D., LL.D.," *The American Journal of Education* (April 1868): 577; Ryerson, *Special Report*, 7:110; and *General Catalogue of Books in Every Department of Literature for Public School Libraries in Canada* (Toronto: Department for Public Instruction for Upper Canada, 1857).
10. "The Methodist Church in Canada," *Christian Advocate*, 26 November 1874, 377.
11. Ryerson, *Story of my Life*, 592; Egerton Ryerson, *The Loyalists of America and Their Times*, 2 vols., (Toronto: William Briggs, 1880); "Literary Items," *Christian Advocate*, 30 May 1861, 175; "Our English Letter," *Christian Advocate*, 19 October 1876, 332; and "Correspondence, from Canada," *Zion's Herald*, 21 October 1880, 338.
12. "Brief Mention," *Zion's Herald*, 22 February 1882, 60; "Rev. Egerton Ryerson," *Zion's Herald*, 22 March 1882, n.p.; "Rev. Egerton Ryerson," *Methodist Quarterly Review* (January 1833): 76-96; and "Literature," *Christian Advocate*, 30 August 1883, 556.
13. Egerton Ryerson, "A Pleasant Letter From Canada," *Christian Advocate*, 1 June 1876, 174.

