

“Bred in the Bone:” Egerton Ryerson, Methodist Polity and Educational Administration, 1844-1850¹

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No one disputes the fact that the appointment of Egerton Ryerson as Superintendent of Education in 1844 was a significant one. Indeed, J.S. Moir has argued that it was “the most important event in the educational history of the province.”² Even though Ryerson did not single-handedly create the Upper Canadian school system out of whole cloth, his appointment nonetheless stands as a watershed event. It was Ryerson who, more than any other single individual, provided the initiative and the ideas to construct an effective system of common schools throughout the province.³

But where did Ryerson get his ideas for this system? What were the sources which influenced him in shaping the fledgling bureaucracy – a state bureaucracy, it must be said, that was virtually the first of its kind in nineteenth-century Ontario?⁴ The received version of the development of public education under Ryerson’s administration begins with his fifteen-month tour to study the educational systems of the eastern United States, Britain and Europe. Upon his return in 1846, Ryerson wrote his observations and recommendations in a *Report on a System of Public Instruction for Upper Canada*, which became the basis for the School Act of 1846 and its subsequent refinements. This is the gist of the argument in C.B. Sissons’ magisterial two-volume biography entitled *Egerton Ryerson: His Life and Letters*. Sissons attributes almost all of Ryerson’s subsequent educational reforms to his overseas experiences. This is also the view taken in J.D. Wilson’s chapter in *Canadian Education: A History*. Wilson argues that Ryerson’s international tour “sets the framework for the public school system that was evolved over the next three decades.”⁵ But unlike

Sissons, Wilson notes that Ryerson's system was "much more highly centralized than that of either New York or Massachusetts, the two American states most often referred to by nineteenth-century educational reformers."⁶ More recently Bruce Curtis has written that the report, which was the blueprint for an efficient system of education, "borrowed its curriculum, teacher training system, and system of inspection from Ireland, its administrative details from New York state and its 'humanistic' philosophy of education from Prussia via Horace Mann."⁷

There are, however, problems with such interpretations. One is that Ryerson's system was far more centralized than even the American examples to which Wilson and Curtis refer. Another is the assumption that Ryerson had to go abroad to find examples. As the intermittent editor of the highly influential weekly newspaper *Christian Guardian* between 1829 and 1842, Ryerson was a keen follower of educational practices in Europe and America. Thus when Ryerson left on his overseas tour his mind was not a *tabula rasa*. Many of his observations could have been made with the knowledge and experience he had acquired before he left.⁸ Equally, Ryerson might well have drawn on indigenous sources for his ideas, building on the earlier failed experiments in system-building attempted by John Strachan, and the debate over school reform during the 1830s and early 1840s. Susan Houston and Alison Prentice point out that foreign examples "figure prominently in the pages of Ryerson's report," but do not maintain that these sources were the inspiration for Ryerson's ideas for administrative reform.⁹ Rather, they suggest that the subsequent school law of 1846, supposedly based upon Ryerson's report, "drew less on foreign example than on its own Upper Canadian predecessors."¹⁰ And in an early article on the subject, R.D. Gidney attributes the development of Ontario's "monolith" to "Upper Canadian conservatism" which sought to develop an efficient and effective educational system to "protect and preserve a fragile political structure within which an indigenous tradition could grow."¹¹

There are elements of truth in all of these interpretive stances, and all, it must be said, are more sophisticated than this brief historiographical review can suggest. But equally, all overlook one critical hypothesis that deserves exploration. Egerton Ryerson was not only the chief architect of the educational system but a Methodist minister, steeped in Methodist beliefs and doctrines. And the origins of his administrative reforms may well lie in his lived experience of Methodism rather than in his foreign tours, his admittedly wide and eclectic reading before 1846, or his political

aspirations for the future of Upper Canadian society.

On the one hand, an older generation of historians, in most cases scholars not primarily concerned with educational history, have at least recognized the centrality of religion even if they assume its influence on institution-building rather than explain that influence. C.B. Sissons wrote that “the primary and dominant motive of his [Ryerson’s] life was religious.”¹² According to Robin Harris, “Ryerson was a Christian, first, last, and all the time . . . [Ryerson] was a particular kind of Christian, a Methodist, and he subscribed fully to the doctrines of that Church.”¹³ Aside from an overlooked article by Goldwin French and an unpublished Ph.D. dissertation by Alberto Fiorino, little effort has been made to examine precisely how Ryerson’s Methodism shaped his concept of education.¹⁴ More important, none of these authors attempt to compare Methodist polity with Ryerson’s organizational schemes.

The revisionist educational historians who began writing in the late 1960s and 1970s, on the other hand, have generally been reluctant even to acknowledge the power of religious conviction in shaping secular institutions, or to attribute nascent forms of social organization to pre-existing models, and this applies not only to the administrative structure itself but to the promotion of schooling generally. For example, in neither of his early articles on these subjects does R.D. Gidney give religion any sustained attention.¹⁵ And though a decade later he would begin a short biography of Ryerson by pointing to the centrality of religion in Ryerson’s life, he does not pursue the idea with respect to the school system itself.¹⁶ Both Susan Houston and Alison Prentice explain the development of the province’s school system in terms of the efforts of the state and various interest groups to produce an industrious, loyal, sober and “respectable” citizenry.¹⁷ In *Building the Educational State* Bruce Curtis maintains that a coercive and centralized bureaucracy was designed to promote bourgeois and capitalist forms of state formation and to create a populace loyal and subservient to those forms. Whatever the particular interpretive emphasis, in any case, religion, and more particularly the role of Methodism, gets short shrift.

Ontario’s educational historians, nonetheless, have been in good company on this point: the academic study of religion has been *terra incognita* for most social historians over the last thirty years, and not just in Ontario but elsewhere as well. Too often the role of religious sentiment as a means of effecting social, economic and political change has been dismissed, underestimated or maligned outright. Perhaps the most specta-

cular example of the latter case, but one that has been enormously influential, is E.P. Thompson's landmark work, *The Making of the English Working Class*. Thompson credits Methodism with almost single-handedly defusing early nineteenth-century working-class discontent in England through "religious terrorism" in Methodist-run Sunday Schools.¹⁸

Only in recent years has the importance of religion as a social force has been given a more positive and judicious reading. J.C.D. Clark challenges Thompson's cynicism regarding the socio-political function of religious institutions. According to Clark, one cannot begin to understand eighteenth and early nineteenth-century British society unless one understands the paramount influence of religious feeling amongst all classes. Clark contends that British society's "motives and values essentially . . . depended first and foremost on religion."¹⁹ Similarly, the respectability of evangelical Christianity as an intellectual movement has been partially restored by Boyd Hilton, a British political economist. Hilton, like Clark, argues that "before 1850, especially, religious feeling and biblical terminology so permeated all aspects of thought (including atheism) that it is hard to dismiss as epiphenomenal."²⁰ This permeation of religious sentiment in British society, particularly amongst the middle classes, Hilton argues, had a profound impact upon the social, political and economic institutions which developed throughout the nineteenth century.²¹

Similar conclusions have been reached by influential American historians. Nathan O. Hatch has re-examined the importance of evangelical Protestantism in post-revolutionary America. Religion, far from acting as an agent of social control as Thompson would argue, was a popular and dynamic element in the promotion of egalitarian republicanism. Evangelical sects such as the Baptists and Methodists demanded fundamental social reform. Radical measures such as the abolition of slavery, universal manhood suffrage, temperance and publicly funded schooling were major causes which these religious groups advocated.²² To ignore or deprecate the impact of evangelical denominational sentiment on a barely literate society in either Britain or North America is to ignore a critical force for change in those societies. "Only land," Hatch argues, "could compete with Christianity as the pulse of a new democratic society."²³

Parallel arguments have been advanced for developments in British North America. Michael Gauvreau, for example, has pointed to the link between evangelical religion and secular state-building. Far from perceiving Protestant evangelicalism as a "dead-hand" which inhibited social change, Gauvreau concludes that "evangelicalism must be viewed as a

movement of liberation.”²⁴ According to Gauvreau, “evangelicalism supplied the essential mind-set by which English-Canada entered the modern age.”²⁵ He sees in evangelicalism an attempt to reconstruct society. Upper Canadian “concepts of order, respectability, and the patterns of personal and social behaviour which were to prove most influential in forging the values and institutions of the maturing English Canadian society were provided by evangelicalism.”²⁶ In the early nineteenth-century, when institutional apparatus was almost non-existent, the evangelical movement proved to be the most dynamic influence upon Upper Canadian culture.²⁷

Two other recent works have also developed this theme of the relationship between religious sentiment and secular decision-making. One of William Westfall’s main contentions in *Two Worlds* is that religious beliefs and values permeated every aspect of Upper Canadian life in the early decades of the nineteenth-century and thus, until at least mid-century, the clergy was still very active in civic affairs. Westfall underscores the impact of Protestant culture upon Upper Canadian statecraft: the inter-denominational Protestant culture that emerged in Upper Canada sought to join together, “the secular and sacred worlds.”²⁸ John Webster Grant reached similar conclusions regarding the intimate relationship between Protestant evangelicalism and state institutional growth in Upper Canada. Grant draws attention to the devoutly religious character of many of the interest groups, such as temperance unions, literary societies and benevolent organizations, which shaped government policy.²⁹ In early Upper Canadian society it did not occur to the inhabitants that “official neutrality” in matters concerning religion meant the exclusion of clerical leadership in matters concerning the state. Boundaries that would separate church and state affairs had yet to be established.³⁰

Following the example of historians like Clark, Hatch, Gauvreau, Westfall and Grant, I believe a reassessment of the role of religion in the creation of the Ontario school system is long overdue. In shaping this system and in making it work, I will argue, Ryerson was profoundly influenced by his experience with Methodist organization. Converted in 1815 at age twelve to his Methodist faith, Ryerson virtually came of age with Upper Canadian Methodism itself. Both its message and its “machinery,” its doctrines and discipline, were “bred in the bone.” Moreover, as his society began to change, Ryerson responded with a critique of his denomination that called for greater education among the ministry and more financial and personal commitment among the laity. Cumulatively, it was these influences which would form the intellectual backdrop as he

turned his hand to building the Upper Canadian school system. One cannot study Ryerson as chief superintendent of education apart from Ryerson the Methodist minister. Prior to becoming superintendent of schools for Upper Canada, Ryerson's only experience with an organizational structure was within the Methodist polity. Many of the organizational reforms that he attempted to introduce had already been articulated in the *Christian Guardian* or derived from John Wesley's *Doctrines and Discipline of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Canada*, which Ryerson believed was a description of "a system . . . which God has signally blessed."³¹ Indeed his central goal was expressed in the phraseology he had once used to describe the virtues of Methodism itself, that is, to impose "uniformity, simplicity and efficiency" upon the Province's schools.³²

How, then, did Ryerson's Methodism infuse his reform of educational administration, and what parallels can be drawn between his experience as a leading Methodist minister and his role in creating a state system of schools? As I have suggested elsewhere, there are in fact many parallels,³³ but given the limits of this short article I propose to illustrate my argument by focusing on three of them: the similarities between the duties and responsibilities of the office of superintendent in the Methodist polity and the school system; Ryerson's imposition of Methodist statistical collection procedures upon educational administration; and the spiritual dimension with which Ryerson sought to infuse the educational system.

The office of superintendent was a post created by John Wesley to "properly take care of the internal state" of the church.³⁴ Superintendents, who held responsibility for several circuits, acted as inspectors and liaisons between the circuits and the district chairman.³⁵ Within *Doctrines and Discipline* more space is devoted to the duties of the superintendent than any other office.³⁶ The circuit superintendents were to make quarterly reports to the district chairman on a wide variety of matters. Among other duties they were "to see that other preachers behave well and want nothing; to enquire . . . what each Member can give for the salary; to appoint all the Leaders and change them when he sees it necessary; but not contrary to the wish of the Class, or without consulting the Leader's Meeting." Other responsibilities requiring a great deal of paperwork, included maintaining accurate records of the status of membership of each circuit. Printed forms were available to keep records of everything from "Backsliding" members to those admitted on trial.³⁷ Superintendents were: to examine the finances of the Stewards (treasurers) of each circuit to oversee the creation of new bands and classes; to adjudicate complaints

and problems between members; to recruit potential candidates for ordination and class leaders and to license such people with consultation with local class leaders; and, in general, “to enforce, vigorously, but calmly, all the rules of the Society.”³⁸

Yet the most important task delegated to the superintendents was the inspection of preachers, class leaders, and exhorters. Each of these was subject to licensing and quarterly inspections. The unpaid and untrained volunteers who made up the corps of class leaders and exhorters were, in principle, subject to “strict enquiry” in regard to their moral character, punctuality and “everything that relates to their office.”³⁹ Their examination and inspection was of the utmost importance to the movement to ensure orthodoxy and the movement’s growth.

The substantial duties and responsibilities demanded from the superintendents required considerable powers to enforce them – powers entrusted to the district chairman, who was “to see that every part of the Discipline is duly enforced.”⁴⁰ The district chairman could change, replace and suspend any preacher found wanting. He could overturn any decision made by the superintendent. The district chairman could be called upon by any superintendent, preacher, or lay leader when difficulties arose. Wesley wrote that the district chairman was given “considerable powers . . . that no Chairman may have cause to complain of the want of power.”⁴¹

Local superintendents were also to play a vital role in Ryerson’s educational machinery. Though not new to the education department, the office of superintendent under Ryerson took on greater significance.⁴² As “the mainspring of the system,” Ryerson recommended an impressive array of clearly defined powers for superintendents in the 1846 report.⁴³ As in Methodist organization, this office carried tremendous responsibilities with broad powers of enforcement. Indeed, the 1846 report averred that “there is no class of officers in the whole machinery of elementary instruction on whom so much depends for its efficient and successful working, as upon the local Superintendents.”⁴⁴ Wesley’s dictum that superintendents should “enforce, vigorously, but calmly, all the rules of Society” was put into practice by Ryerson in education as well.⁴⁵ Local school superintendents were “to see that the general principles of the Law . . . are in no instance contravened.”⁴⁶

Other parallel duties which the superintendents of both organizations were to oversee were the condition of church/school buildings and accompanying furnishings.⁴⁷ In the same way that Methodist superintendents were to supply and recommend books to their circuits from lists

provided by the Methodist Book Committee, so educational superintendents were "to provide or recommend books . . . suitable . . . for the use of their Schools" from lists provided by the General Board of Education.⁴⁸ Local superintendents, as proxies of the central authority, were allotted substantial powers to enforce compliance with school regulations. In 1846 Ryerson recommended that district superintendents be empowered with "the examining and licensing of teachers," a recommendation subsequently adopted in the 1846 and 1850 school acts.⁴⁹ Conversely, teaching certificates could be revoked, and the use of unapproved text books could mean an end to the legislative grant.⁵⁰ Although Methodist superintendents could not cancel something as significant as the legislative grant, they were empowered to examine clerical candidates and grant temporary preaching licences, or, if candidates were found deficient at the quarterly meetings, preaching licences could be suspended.⁵¹

Yet the local superintendents' "most vitally important duty," Ryerson insisted, was "the inspection of Schools."⁵² This rapid change in the role of educational inspectors is explained by Ryerson's experience with an already functioning and efficient Methodist superintendency. Drawing upon this first-hand knowledge, Ryerson was able to create an effective inspectoral system accountable to the centre in a relatively short period of time. This was an advantage that railroad, canal and prison reformers at the time could not match. As Peter Baskerville noted, the first effective corps of government inspectors was "most obvious in the educational sphere."⁵³

Furthermore, just as Methodist superintendents, according to *Doctrines and Discipline*, were "to make strict enquiry . . . into the moral character of all the leaders," so school superintendents were to examine the "character of candidates for teaching."⁵⁴ Ryerson expected superintendents to look beyond the classroom to investigate the "character of the Teachers" as well.⁵⁵ Much as a Methodist superintendent was to see that clergy "behave well and want nothing" by ascertaining from the district chairmen whether "all the Preacher's characters were examined," teachers were to undergo a similar ritual with the district superintendents.⁵⁶ Just as the Methodist superintendents were the animating spirit behind the local circuit organization, Ryerson wanted the school superintendents to "impart vigour" to "Teachers, Trustees and parents . . . by every available means."⁵⁷

Ryerson envisioned that educational superintendents would become evangelists preaching the benefits of common schooling. Previously, at the

1837 Conference, Ryerson successfully introduced a motion that circuit superintendents “deliver at least one sermon at each appointment on his Circuit during the year, on the importance and advantages of Sabbath Schools.”⁵⁸ Under the provisions of the 1850 School Act, the local school superintendent, like his Methodist counterpart, was “to do all in his power to persuade and animate parents, guardians, Trustees and Teachers, to improve the character and efficiency of the Common Schools.”⁵⁹

Using the language of an evangelical preacher, Ryerson exhorted his school superintendents “to awaken the spirit, and arouse to action the populace” of the country.⁶⁰ “If the right spirit glows in the bosom of every Superintendent,” he believed, “it will appear in any Public Lecture, in every School Visit.”⁶¹ As editor of the *Christian Guardian*, Ryerson admonished the Sabbath school superintendent to “daily bear the interests of the school under his care” by frequent visitation.⁶² The local common school superintendent was, when possible, to preside over the proceedings and was encouraged to arouse “the spirit and action of the people.”⁶³

Ryerson anticipated that the local superintendents would, like their Methodist counterparts, be an active, visible and familiar presence in the school sections. He intended that, “what the Government is to the system, and what the Teacher is to the School, the local Inspector, or Superintendent of Schools, should be within the limits of his District.”⁶⁴ Although the local superintendents were to be a visible presence amongst the communities in which they served, however, they were not to be heavy-handed. Ryerson cautioned local superintendents to be sparing in the use of their powers. The cancelling of a teacher’s certificate was considered by Ryerson “an extreme use of power” and except in the case of “proven immorality” a local superintendent should be reluctant to use it.⁶⁵ As Methodist preachers were aware of the necessity of local support, so too was Ryerson as chief superintendent of schools.

The 1850 School Act required the superintendent “to visit each Common School within his jurisdiction at least twice a year (once in Summer and once in Winter) and oftener, if practicable *once in each quarter*.”⁶⁶ Even quarterly visits were not enough for Ryerson. In the 1850 circular to the local superintendents, he made four visits each year the minimum. He demanded that each superintendent “visit each School within his jurisdiction at least once in each quarter.”⁶⁷ Although not specified, Ryerson intended that these visits should coincide whenever possible with the quarterly public examinations over which local superintendents were encouraged to preside.⁶⁸ Likewise, *Doctrines and Discipline* required cir-

cuit superintendents “to visit each class at least quarterly” to offer encouragement, read the rules of the connexion and ensure that Conference directives were being enforced.⁶⁹

A second critically important organizational mechanism that Ryerson carried over from Methodist practice was the collection and gathering of statistical data. Although Robert Murray, Ryerson’s predecessor, had attempted as early as 1843 to create standardized forms for inspectorial reports on the quality and character of the common schools there were no specific guidelines provided on how to complete the forms, nor on what criteria were to be used to evaluate schools.⁷⁰ Before 1847 superintendents, by necessity, relied upon little more than highly subjective personal impressions.⁷¹ As Chief Superintendent, one of Ryerson’s first endeavours was the preparation of “suitable forms and Regulations for making all Reports and conducting all necessary proceedings.”⁷² So important was standardized statistical reporting to Ryerson that he argued the success of common schooling was “doubtless” due to “the Forms and Regulations furnished for . . . [the] execution” of the 1846 school law.⁷³

Ryerson required that teachers and trustees submit quarterly reports to district superintendents, who in turn would collate the data and pass them on to the central authority.⁷⁴ These teacher reports were also to be completed on standardized forms drafted by Ryerson “in the plainest language” possible to ensure simplicity.⁷⁵ The resulting superintendents’ reports were compiled by Ryerson into the *Annual Report(s)*, first published in 1847. “Almost entirely new,” Ryerson boasted, the *Annual Report(s)* were by far the most comprehensive and detailed collection of statistics that any government department had yet assembled.⁷⁶ They gave detailed district-by-district breakdowns of statistics on the numbers, kind, quality, size and finances of the schools. Running to several hundred pages, the reports gave the Chief Superintendent, and the public, a comprehensive quantitative analysis of the state of the common schools. Although superintendents could disagree on what made a good teacher, or schoolhouse design, standardized forms and questionnaires ensured a degree of efficiency and uniformity hitherto unheard of in education or any other government department.⁷⁷

This easy familiarity with the preparation of standardized forms was not new to Ryerson. As Chief Superintendent, he was able to draw upon an efficient and well-developed system of data collection and reporting already in operation within the Methodist organization. The annual Conferences invariably opened with a recorded statement listing the

numbers of ordained preachers, preachers on trial, retired, or died, in addition to the number of members in the connexion reported by district and circuit. Data regarding church finances, the money collected and apportioned by the circuits, and circuits “deficient” in the payment of dues were also included in the annual statement issued on the first day of the Conference.⁷⁸ As with the common schools, Methodist district chairmen were required by *Doctrines and Discipline* to collate data reported by the circuit superintendents who, in turn, gathered information from the circuit preachers who were required to maintain up-to-date circuit registries with the assistance of the local class leaders. These district reports were then presented to the Conference. The annual Conference reports were then printed in the minutes of the meeting for analysis and discussion about future directions.⁷⁹

Ryerson was not just an observer of the reporting process in the Methodist church but was an active participant in its development. One of the duties of the circuit superintendent was “to prepare and present to Conference an Annual Report on the state of Sabbath Schools on his Circuit.”⁸⁰ In 1831 Ryerson recommended to the Conference that the circuit superintendents’ annual Sunday school reports should include statistics on attendance, enrolment trends, and hours of operation, as well as detailed lesson plans with aims and objectives.⁸¹ As secretary of the Methodist Conference in 1834, Ryerson was authorized to draft “printed forms” for the use of Superintendents, stewards, circuit preachers and class leaders to record attendance, the payment of dues, and the condition of church buildings.⁸² In addition to enrolment figures, Ryerson’s forms required preachers to keep accurate attendance registers recording the amount of money each member had contributed.⁸³ All of these criteria also appeared in the *Annual Report(s)*. In developing school statistical report forms, Ryerson adapted and elaborated upon existing Methodist statistical gathering procedures to gauge the strengths, deficiencies and progress of the schools.

Effective “machinery” promoting unity and efficiency was important to Ryerson. But more than this, Ryerson sought to imbue the educational system with a “spiritual” character in order to mobilize its participants to a high level of enthusiasm and commitment to the cause. While this intention is evident, as already suggested, in the language he used and the kinds of expectations he held with respect to the role of superintendents, it showed itself in yet another way, and one more generally neglected by historians – perhaps because they have paid so little attention to Ryerson’s

son's Methodist roots. This was his conviction that meetings, conferences and conventions were of critical importance to the maintenance of collective morale. Ryerson spoke of school conferences as the most effectual means "to erect unanimity of views and feelings and to excite a general interest in the cause of Popular Education."⁸⁴

Methodism in nineteenth-century Ontario was able to achieve unity and harmony through the use of various conferences, quarterly and camp meetings, so that the organization could feel connected as a larger body. In remote and scattered settlements, these meetings were events eagerly anticipated by Methodist adherents. Regular meetings helped weld the organization together. Camp, circuit and district meetings were powerful tools to promote unity amongst the faithful. These gatherings ensured continuity in church standards, re-kindled enthusiasm for the faith and instilled a sense of belonging to a society larger than one's own remote community.⁸⁵ Whether it be in education or Methodism, Ryerson believed that conferences were an important agency in the efficient operation of the system.

John Bowmer termed the Methodist concept of meetings and conferences as "Classical Wesleyanism."⁸⁶ The various levels of meetings within the Methodist connexion were effective instruments that kept the spirit alive. The principle, moreover, extended from top to bottom. From the beginning, Ryerson wanted to be more than an anonymous state administrator. In the manner of the Conference President, who was empowered "to travel through the Connexion at large and oversee the spiritual and temporal business of the Church," Ryerson embarked in 1847 on a province-wide educational tour.⁸⁷ He met with as many local school officials as possible to answer questions of the school law and finances, recommend plans for libraries, and hear suggestions for the improvement of the schools.⁸⁸ Ryerson was convinced that his annual visits as Chief Superintendent of Schools "would intensively promote the great object of public instruction."⁸⁹ Similarly, the Conference President was expected to attend as many of the annual district meetings as possible to deliver sermons explain and enforce Conference directives, arbitrate disputes and discuss "what can be done to improve" the financial and spiritual well-being of the movements.⁹⁰

Other sorts of meetings were no less important. As a former circuit preacher, Ryerson recognized the need to build professional morale amongst the local representatives of the organization who worked in isolation. Teacher institutes, established in 1849, were to be occasions for

common school teachers to gather with other members of their profession. Teacher conferences were, Ryerson believed, “the most important measure that can be adopted to perfect our own admirable school system.”⁹¹ Likewise, within the Methodist organization, the clergy gathered at annual district meetings to discuss issues of common interest.⁹² In both the Methodist and common school organizations, the *esprit de corps* of the local representatives was vital to the organization’s continued success.

The other level of school conference was the quarterly public examination in each school section. Although Ryerson claimed that he was “not aware of such a provision existing in any other Common School law,” there was a precedent in Methodism.⁹³ The Methodist quarterly meetings brought together all of the local officers of the circuit, both lay and clerical, to hear sermons, discuss business and meet with brother Methodists.⁹⁴ The quarterly examinations, like the Methodist circuit meetings, were intended to rejuvenate and maintain local interest in the organization in order to prevent local officials from backsliding into indifference.⁹⁵

In his inimitable fashion, nonetheless, Ryerson conceived of these meetings as far more than occasions to do “business.” They were to become “regular school *celebrations*” (italics added).⁹⁶ Ryerson entertained hopes that the quarterly examinations would become part of the Upper Canadian culture as they were to be “accompanied with addresses, music, refreshments, etc.”⁹⁷ He anticipated that the public quarterly examinations would be “attended by the clergy, and other leading persons of various persuasions, as well as by the parents and friends of the pupils.”⁹⁸ Perhaps – indeed probably – this is one case of Ryerson’s enthusiasm and imagination running wildly beyond local commitment or inclination. Yet that is not the point here. Ryerson’s view that “regular conventions by parents, teachers, inspectors and clerical, and other official visitors were essential to the vitality of the whole” organization.⁹⁹ And they were “essential” because, like the Methodist quarterly meetings, they were opportunities for all local participants to congregate, observe first-hand, celebrate achievements, diagnose problems, and above all, re-affirm their faith in the educational enterprise.

Commenting in 1846 on his plans for education in Upper Canada, Ryerson remarked that “we are not left to rude conjectures, or untried theories, in this work.”¹⁰⁰ There was, in other words, a fund of precedents and exemplars that Ryerson was aware of and could draw upon in constructing a suitable administrative structure for the school system. And there is no reason to think that he did not borrow his ideas from many

sources. Indeed as Bruce Curtis has pointed out, "the educational office did not begin in a vacuum: bureaucratic practice was established in other jurisdictions and was accessible to educational activists as a model."¹⁰¹ Like other innovators of his generation, Ryerson was not only well-read in the contemporary literature on educational reform but made a deliberate effort to visit other jurisdictions in preparation for his work as Chief Superintendent. Throughout his 1846 report, moreover, he attributed each recommendation to a particular European country or American state. On the face of it, then, it appears eminently plausible to look for the origins of his ideas in an international arena, and in comparable secular examples of system-building.

Yet all of this, I would argue, was filtered through Ryerson's central life experience as a Methodist. For Ryerson, "system," and system of a particular kind, was "bred in the bone." Methodist polity as set forth in Wesley's *Doctrines and Discipline* was proclaimed by Ryerson to be perfect in theory and referred to as "Our Excellent *Discipline*."¹⁰² Not surprisingly, then, there were powerful and indicative parallels between Methodism and the organizational structure he created for the schools.

Many historians and sociologists in recent years have invested a substantial amount of time in identifying the process, and tracing the origins, of "state formation" during the middle decades of the nineteenth-century.¹⁰³ The tendency, however, has been to stress essentially secular models ranging from Benthamite utilitarianism to an emergent bourgeois hegemony. What is missing in nearly all these accounts is the potent influence of religious conviction and the extant ecclesiastical organizational models already in place. In framing the administrative system for education in Upper Canada, I have argued, Ryerson drew primarily from his lived experience of Methodist polity. And whatever other influences were at work, and there were undoubtedly many, I suggest that it is time that other scholars look more closely, and critically, at explanations of state formation that rest entirely upon secular foundations.

Endnotes

1. I gratefully acknowledge the helpful advice and criticism of Professor R.D. Gidney in preparing this article and supervising the thesis on which it is based.
2. *Church and State in Canada West: Three Studies in the Relation of Denominationalism and Nationalism, 1841-1867* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1959), 135.
3. There are now several important studies of the growth of the Upper Canadian educational administrative system. Among them are R.D. Gidney and Douglas A. Lawr, "The Development of an Administrative System for the Public Schools: The First Stage, 1841-1850," in *Egerton Ryerson and His Times: Essays on the History of Education*, eds. Alf Chaiton and Neil McDonald, 160-184 (Toronto: MacMillan, 1978); R.D. Gidney and D.A. Lawr, "Bureaucracy vs. Community? The Origins of Bureaucratic Procedure in the Upper Canadian School System," in *Historical Essays on Upper Canada*, ed. J.K. Johnson, 369-399 (Ottawa: Carleton Univ. Press, 1989); R.D. Gidney, "Centralization and Education: The Origins of an Ontario Tradition," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 7, 4 (November 1972): 33-48; and Susan Houston and Alison Prentice, *Schooling and Scholars* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1988). Two recent books by Bruce Curtis are also sure to set the terms for future debate: *Building the Educational State: Canada West, 1836-1871* (London: Falmer and Althouse Press, 1988); and *True Government by Choice Men? Inspection, Education and State Formation in Canada West* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1992).
4. Peter Baskerville, "Transportation, Social Change, and State Formation, Upper Canada, 1841-1864," in *Colonial Leviathan: State Formation in Mid-Nineteenth Century Canada*, eds. Ian Radforth and Allan Greer (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto, 1992), 231-232.
5. J. Donald Wilson, Robert M. Stamp, and Louis-Philippe Audet, *Canadian Education: A History* (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall of Canada, 1970), 217.
6. *Canadian Education*, 212.
7. *True Government*, 62.
8. David Onn, "Egerton Ryerson's Philosophy of Education: Something Borrowed or Something New?" *Ontario History* 61, No. 2 (1969): 77.

9. *Schooling and Scholars*, 114.
10. *Schooling and Scholars*, 116.
11. "Centralization and Education," 33.
12. *Egerton Ryerson: His Life and Letters* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin Ltd., 1937-1947), I: 3.
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26. Michael Gauvreau, "Protestantism Transformed: Personal Piety and the Evangelical Social Vision, 1815-1867," in *The Canadian Protestant Experience, 1760-1990*, ed. George A. Rawlyk (Burlington: Welch Publishing Company, 1990), 50.
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29. *A Profusion of Spires: Religion in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1988), 198-200.
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58. *Minutes*, 1837, 159-160.
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