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CANADA'S TWIN "REVOLUTIONARY" TRADITIONS

Societies choose to remember some things and forget others. Examples abound—Scotland's celebration of its largely invented Highland traditions, America's continued love affair with its revolution, Ireland's fixation on its long history of communal troubles; or on the other side of the coin, Japan's amnesia about its soldiers' atrocities, Switzerland's forgetfulness (until recently) of its banks' wartime profiteering, and China's unwillingness to acknowledge its savage occupation and harsh treatment of Tibet. The rebellions of 1837–38 in the Canadas provide further, if more muted, examples of society's capacity to remember, or to forget, selectively.

In 1837–38 the southern parts of modern-day Ontario and Quebec, then termed Upper and Lower Canada respectively, were rent by revolutionary movements which kept those provinces convulsed for many months. The causes of both upheavals were complex and largely interrelated. Among them was the development of political oligarchies with deep ties to entrenched economic interests. Significant too was the evolution of leadership cadres versed in the tenets of political liberty which had influenced the American and French Revolutions and which had helped prompt the rise of rebellions across Europe in 1830 as well as promote the development of Chartism and parliamentary reform in Britain. Another main cause was the onset of economic depression in a period of high immigration which exacerbated existing concerns and fears. Historians, whose staff of life is controversy, often disagree fervently about the causes and consequences of the rebellions, though they generally agree on the course of events.
As the history both of the Canadian rebellions of 1837–38 and the academic and public understanding of those rebellions demonstrates, history and historical traditions can be celebrated or decried, remembered or ignored. This essay will suggest, in very general ways, what the level of understanding or appreciation of the revolts in the two Canadas has been over time, and why the rebellions have been accorded the significance, or lack of significance, that they have. As well, it will examine the influence the insurrections have had on later politicians or those seeking political and social change. On the latter score, I will not address the historical “what if’s.” I leave that to such writers as Philip Resnick (1984, 11-14), who has argued provocatively from the perspective of the political left, that “we have not done justice to the crushing of the 1837 rebellions.” To his mind, the failure of the rebellions was unfortunate, preventing as it did the appearance of a lively democratic tradition and a more liberal state. Resnick, however, is a political scientist, more happy than a historian, one suspects, with hypothetical suggestions.

Of the two rebellions, the one in Lower Canada was by far the more serious, involving as it did three outbreaks from November 1837 to November 1838. These saw movements of several thousand patriotes (rebels) in the Montreal District in the west of the province and at least as many militiamen and troops out against them. While loss of life was comparatively minor (possibly two hundred dead distributed unequally among the contending forces), some of those who died did so in spectacular episodes, such as the burning of the church at St. Eustache north of Montreal on 14 December 1837, when some seventy rebels died as they poured from the burning building and were shot down on the spot or hunted down as they attempted to flee through the countryside and executed summarily. Furthermore, upwards of 2,000 men were imprisoned. The social, economic, and political dislocations attendant upon the conflict were many and have been secured in the collective consciousness of French Canada by a long series of “amateur” as well as professional works, among them AEGIDIEUSS Fauteaux’s Patriotes de 1837-38 (Montreal: Les Editions des Dix, 1950), Robert Rumilly’s two-volume biography of patriote leader Louis-Joseph Papineau, Stanley Ryerson’s 1837: The Birth of Canadian Democracy (Toronto: Francis White, 1937), and more recently Allan Greer’s The Patriots and the People: The Rebellion of 1837 in Rural Lower Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993). Not all of the histories are celebratory, of course, and Fernand Ouellet, for one, in his various articles and in his published doctoral thesis, Histoire économique et sociale du Québec, 1760-1850: structures et conjoncture (Montreal: Fides, 1966), has drawn much criticism, especially in French Canada, for his suggestion that the leaders of the rebels were largely professionals who were denied access to positions of economic and political power under the existing government—which favoured anglophone merchants and some members of the old francophone “aristocracy”—and used the language of universality in an attempt to establish a regime that would vault them into power and preserve social and economic structures, particularly the seigneurial regime, inimical to the interests of the whole.

Allan Greer (1993) has taken issue with Ouellet, utilizing Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony in a somewhat different way from his former teacher. Greer has it that the habitants had a vibrant community life and culture of their own prior to the rebellion as well as a spirit of
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Sir John Colborne, and his forces ultimately torching much of the countryside south of Montreal, the spirit of rebellion was not. It flowed into new traditional channels, into sullen resistance, into non-compliance with unpopular laws. This, the pattern of behaviour among the habitants during the post-conquest period (Brunet 1969, ch. 2), allowed les canadiens to express, at minimal risk, their hostility to existing structures and their solidarity with les patriotes. Ironically, passive resistance can be construed as non-resistance. As Stephen Kenny has noted of the post-rebellion period: “If the observations of several contemporary English speakers are to be believed, French Canadians were often perceived as harmless, happy, unenthusiastic rural bumpkins” (Kenny 1984, 196). Hence the great British liberal, Richard Cobden, safely ensconced in England, could feel confident in his judgement, rendered in 1865, that “the Lower Canadian Frenchman is ... the same amiable[,] thoughtless[,] ignorant[,] happy person he was in 1750” (qtd in Martin 1995, 147). Cobden notwithstanding, the democratic, anti-clerical strains of les patriotes lived on in Lower Canada among les Rouges, who were much inspired by Louis-Joseph Papineau. Papineau returned in 1846 to the Canadas from years of exile in Paris. Les Rouges emerged in the late 1840s and were a significant political force in Lower Canada, leading the opposition there to Confederation, even as Cobden penned his opinion. Papineau was not the only former patriote to appear on the political scene. In fact, “Performance in 1837 became an important benchmark,” Brian Young (1981, 11) has observed, “for a generation of francophone politicians such as George Etienne Cartier,” who had been active at the rebel victory at St. Denis. All this helps explain the ill temper of the English community in Quebec on the occasion of the burning in Montreal of the Parliament Buildings of the united Canadas in 1849. The legislature had passed a Rebellion Losses Bill which many regarded as likely to reward rebels for their treason.

Some thirty years ago Kenneth McCrea (1964, 233) opined, in a controversial article applying the Hartzian9 thesis to Canada, that “a thin thread of social radicalism has remained as a continuing minor theme of French-Canadian intellectual history, never strong enough to dominate the political scene but never wholly absent either.” His comment offers some justice to an aspect of the patriote tradition—the desire to produce a more egalitarian social order. One trenchant and influential critic of the industrial order in Canada was Papineau’s grandson, Henri Bourassa, who objected to the unbridled worship of Mammon and the concentration of wealth it produced (Levitt 1969). Admittedly, unlike

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resistance to tyrannical authority. In supporting the revolutionary movement, they had their own agenda and were not about to be misled by designing professionals into supporting proposals hostile to their own best interests. No naive dupes they! By the time the rebellion was fully under way they had come to the realization that the seigneurial system must be abolished, that it served others’ interests, not theirs.4

While scholars may clash about aspects of the Lower Canadian rebellion, the larger francophone community has generally assumed it to have been of importance. For one thing, more members of that general public are more likely to be familiar with the works of a Robert Rumilly, a popular historian who celebrates the rebellion, than of a Fernand Ouellet, an academic who downplays its significance. For another, a particular aspect of the Lower Canadian rebellion—the clash of cultures—gives it immediate meaning. While it is the case that a significant number of rebels, particularly leaders, were anglophones, the great bulk were not. Of the 1,833 men jailed from November 1837 to February 1839 for their parts, real or suspected, in the Lower Canadian troubles, 1,717, or 93.7 per cent, had francophone names.5 And in opposing the political and economic structures of the day, they were, in effect, opposing the merchants of Montreal, most of them English, as well as the state, foisted on Canada by conquest and largely run by English politicians and bureaucrats, and “les vendus,” as those French who co-operated with the English party were known.6 Hugh MacLennan’s Two Solitudes was well on the way to becoming reality.

The patriotes had gone some distance in destroying the notion that the habitants were compliant and quiescent. Lower Canada had the reputation of being a non-revolutionary state, one that had not responded positively either to the American or the French revolutions. As historians later argued, the arrival of royalist émigré priests from republican France helped establish an anti-democratic, anti-revolutionary cast to the canadien mind.7 But it is easy to overemphasize this development and to confuse official attitudes with those of the people. Indeed, during the rebellion itself, cracks within the supposedly monolithic church establishment were easily discernible, with the hierarchy preaching deference to authority and compliance to the state and with the ordinary parish priests adopting a far more ambivalent attitude, on occasion openly siding with the patriotes (Greer 1993, 236–37): And that very name, patriote, suggests a degree of selfless engagement on the part of those the government would call “rebels” which helped win support among the wavering for those who had taken up arms. Although the rebellion was crushed, with the “Old Firebrand,”
his grand-père, he was a devout Catholic, and as such stood outside the

Figure 2: The art of Henri Julien (1852-1908) often portrayed the eternal virtues of the Quebec countryside, whether its legends or its people. This copy of Julien’s painting, “Un vieu de 37,” celebrating the steadfastness and reliability of the rebel habitant, appeared in Adlais, a compendium of his work published in Montreal by Librairie Beauséjour in 1916. The FLQ used the outline of Julien’s patriote to adorn their manifesto. (NAC 17937)

that criticism reached one climax with the Front Libératien Québécois (FLQ) and the October Crisis of 1970, in that the FLQ married their desire to rearrange social and political affairs with the use of violence, as had the patriotes of old.

On 20 May 1963, the day set aside to celebrate Queen Victoria’s birthday, the FLQ used seventy-five sticks of dynamite to set off a blast beside a Montreal army barracks. Those responsible called this “Opération Chénier” after Jean-Olivier Chénier (Fournier 1984, 37).¹

No vegetarian tiger, the thirty-one year old doctor had led the resistance at St. Eustache in 1837. He died with many comrades when loyalist forces attacked the village and burnt the church. Unlike Papineau, he had a reputation for radicalism and constancy (Bernard 1988, 171-74). The FLQ repeatedly pointed to the patriote example in a seven and a half year campaign of terror which saw seven people killed and forty-one others injured, as well as millions of dollars worth of property damaged (Pelletier 1971, 77). La Cognée, the organization’s paper, declared, “We will follow the trail blazed in 1837” (qtd in Fournier 1984, 47). Chénier’s name re-emerged in 1970, attached to one of the FLQ cells active in the October crisis.

Those who drafted the lengthy FLQ manifesto broadcast across the country after the Cross kidnapping superimposed an outline of a patriote, rifle in hand, on the document.¹² One of their concluding paragraphs proclaimed:

We have to struggle, not one by one, but in a united way, until victory is ours, with every means at our disposal, just like the Patriotes of 1837-1838 (the ones that our Holy Mother the Church was so quick to excommunicate in order to sell herself to British interests).¹³

The bomb which accompanied James Cross and his kidnappers on their wild drive from their hideout to Dorval, escorted by police, was bound in the colours of the patriote flag—red, white, and green (Radwans & Windey 1970, 64-65). That symbolism continues to have appeal. For instance, those colours also adorn the cover of Léandre Bergeron’s potted but popular The History of Quebec: A Patriote’s Handbook (Toronto: NC Press, 1971).¹⁴

The memory of the patriotes, so intrinsically linked with Québécois nationalism, continues to be cherished by many in Quebec. Jean-Paul Bernard in his important Les Rébellions de 1837-1838: Les patriotes du Bas-Canada dans la mémoire collective et chez les historiens (Montréal: Borel Express, 1983) noted the continuing interest in the rebels’ cause. A flurry of reprints of original works, a film on Louis-Joseph
Papineau, several books and plays, including a television production, “le raciste Race de Bâtards,” and an annual celebration of the patriote victory at St. Denis helped convince Bernard of the vibrancy of the revolutionary tradition. He may have been strengthened in his conviction by the appearance on CBC “Newsworld” on 23 October 1996 of a programme devoted to Québec’s artists entitled “L’esprit des Patriotes.”

As Bernard pointed out, the October Crisis introduced a note of caution among the indépendantiste forces—among those who inherited a part at least of the tradition of 1837. For these groups generally are anxious to establish their democratic credentials and their inherent rationality and reasonableness. The November 1970 anniversary of the battle of St. Denis, after the kidnapping of James Cross and Pierre Laporte and the murder of the latter, abounded with symbolism. Some 3,000 people attended. Camille Laurin, the leader of the Parti Québécois in the National Assembly, must have dampened the enthusiasm of some by speaking against violence. Though “on emploie des moyens de plus en plus insidieux pour maintenir le colonialisme au Québec,” he declared, “c’est par des moyens pacifiques que le Québec obtiendra son indépendance” (Bernard 1983, 13). In murdering Laporte the FLQists had gone too far. The following year representatives of the Parti Québécois were not at the commemoration of Saint Denis by their absence. Violence could not be condoned, at least not in the immediate aftermath of October 1970.

By 1977, however, the FLQ crisis was sufficiently distant that the Parti Québécois (PQ), now in power, felt able to rename a provincial highway, “le chemin des Patriotes” (Bernard 1983, 14). It evidently made no objection when the Saint-Jean Baptiste Society proclaimed Camille Laurin, then the minister of cultural development, “Patriote de l’année” for the introduction and passage of Bill 101, Québec’s famous—or infamous—language law. A few years later the same society demonstrated the close marriage between the past and the present when it proclaimed nationalist historian, Lionel Groulx, “Patriote du 20e siècle” (Bernard 1983, 16). Equally, in 1982 the PQ government proclaimed the Sunday nearest November 23, the date of the patriotes’ victory at St. Denis, “Journée Nationale des Patriotes” (Munro 1995, 18). In 1994 a Bloc Québécois M.P., Stéphane Bergeron, suggested it become a Canada-wide day of remembrance (Munro 1995, 18). It has not.

The essential ambivalence of some nationalistes since 1970 to the revolutionary inheritance of the patriotes has been captured in several ways, not the least through the remark of a former organizer of the St. Denis celebrations that he preferred waving a flag to carrying a gun (Munro 1995, 15). During the 1995 referendum campaign, the PQ

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\caption{This portrait of Louis-Joseph Papineau (c.1832) by R. A. Sproule (d.1845) captures well the notion of Papineau’s republican virtue. He was, to many, “the tribune of the people.” (NAC C5462)}
\end{figure}

Figure 3
Already in 1774, through the Quebec Act, the conqueror recognized the distinct nature of their [the Québécois'] institutions. Neither attempts at assimilation nor the Act of Union of 1840 could break their endurance. ("The Time has Come" 1995, A23)

By contrast, several newspaper articles traced the nationaliste tradition from the patriotes to the PQ. For instance, a lengthy piece in the Montreal Gazette on Tuesday 17 October 1995 by Hubert Bauch entitled, "Quebec's Memory [...] Our master, the past" is a compelling presence for modern-day Quebec nationalists," described 1837 as the "key date" for Quebec. The article not only featured a drawing of the battle at St. Eustache, where Chénier died, and a portrait of Papineau, but it also devoted ten paragraphs to the rebellion and its aftermath. Bauch quoted historian Mason Wade approvingly to the effect that French Canadians "live in the past" to a degree "almost inconceivable" to most North Americans. Despite the evident vibrancy of French Canada's historical memory, Le Devoir, the creation of Henri Bourassa and the favoured journal of Quebec's separatist intelligentsia, made no mention in November 1995 of the Battle of St. Denis or of its anniversary. Perhaps the paper was just in the post-referendum doldrums, but this seems unlikely. Evidently "je me souviens" no longer applies to les patriotes. This, with apologies to Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, might be termed the "de-invention of tradition," or, more aptly, the attempt to de-invent tradition, for the effort is likely to prove unsuccessful, so firmly rooted are the rebels in the historical consciousness of Quebec, a province where children, appropriately enough, learn about the lives of the patriotes at school.

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The rebellion in Upper Canada has never had quite the cachet of the one downstream. The Upper Canadian rebellion would never have occurred without the Lower Canadian one to "kick-start" it. In the upper province, newspaper editor William Lyon Mackenzie led a band of some 500 to 700 farmers, artisans, and workers against the provincial capital, Toronto, in early December of 1837. The radicals and rebels had made several appeals to US, and British, revolutionary precedents. On 24 November 1837 the members of the Hamilton political union declared their willingness

to lay down our lives—to expend our property and our time, in the manner of our English forefathers at Runnymede, or of our

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neighbours the Americans—believing, that to live as slaves is worse than to die. (Read & Stagg 1985, 104–105)

Mackenzie, for his part, promised the Tories that the rebels would follow the lead of the American revolutionaries and confiscate their lands (Read & Stagg 1985, 106). Such promises were not universally popular.

Government supporters rushed to the defence of Toronto. A short engagement between a large and growing government force and an ever-dwindling number of insurgents saw the latter put to flight. Mackenzie and most other prominent leaders escaped to the United States. To the west of Toronto, a further band of rebels gathered, mistakenly believing that their brethren had been successful. Soon they too scattered in the face of the loyalist response. The leaders of this second revolt also fled to the United States, where they combined with Mackenzie and others to help organize border incursions against the province manned by escaped rebels and US sympathizers. In many respects these raids, which persisted for a year, represented the most serious threat posed in the rebellion period, raising as they did the spectre of Britain and the US going to war over the depredations involved. In the event, such a frightful prospect was not translated into reality. Not until the Civil War did further significant filibustering occur and similar fears arise.

Figure 4 Contrary to what this wood engraving might suggest, the battle of Montgomery's Tavern in Toronto produced little loss of life. (NAC 11322)
The general fiasco of the Upper Canadian rebels’ military attempts, and their subsequent involvement with American invaders, helped alienate a population which knew how sharp the eagle’s talons could be. After all, the War of 1812 was of relatively recent memory. As Syd Wise (1967, 16-43) and Donald Beer (1984, 155) have pointed out, the conservatives of Upper Canada had their fighting spirit and their suspicion of reformers, radicals, and republicans renewed by the rebellion.

While the future did not lie with the fossilized Toryism which saw rebellion in every proposal for change, and while within a generation new commercial and industrial realities helped produce moderate and broadly based parties of both the reform and conservative stripe, neither had room for the revolutionary tradition represented by Mackenzie and his comrades.

Though the erstwhile leader of the Lower Canadian rebellion, Louis-Joseph Papineau, became a controversial figure after the revolt, with charges and countercharges flying over whether he had played the coward once the fighting started—the weight of evidence suggesting he had—Papineau was never quite the contentious figure in the post-rebellion period that Mackenzie was. Eventually allowed to return to the provinces they had both attempted to revolutionize and to re-enter politics, the two espoused certain radical causes, only to find themselves, for the most part, outside the mainstream of politics.22

Historiographically, however, Mackenzie took centre stage. Inevitably, controversies about the rights and wrongs of the rebellion in Lower Canada centred, not on Papineau, but on issues of “race”—the peculiar Canadian term for French—English” ethnic conflict. In 1855 Robert Christie’s last volume of A History of the Late Province of Lower Canada formed the “English” counterpart to François-Xavier Garneau’s recently revised Histoire du Canada (1852), which canvassed the rebellion period. In the upper province, though, Mackenzie dominated. John MacMullen, an Irish immigrant who published The History of Canada, from Its First Discovery to the Present Time in 1855, judged Mackenzie’s course criminal, asserting that he “must ever be held morally responsible for much of the bloodshed” that occurred (MacMullen 1868, 469). However, Mackenzie’s son-in-law, Charles Lindsey, ironically a conservative in philosophy and politics, soon wrote an admiring two-volume biography of him (The Life and Times of William Lyon Mackenzie, Toronto: P.R. Randall, 1862). Much of it was devoted to explaining how he had not been at fault for the rebellion’s failure; instead, another leader, Dr John Rolph, had almost systematically subverted the revolutionary enterprise.

This eventually drew a lengthy apology for Rolph in the form of a two-volume work by journalist John Charles Dent (The Story of the Upper Canadian Rebellion: Largely Derived from Original Sources and Documents, Toronto: C. Blackett Robinson, 1885). In this emotionally charged atmosphere it was difficult for Mackenzie, and the rebellion he represented, to assume moral primacy, much to the distress of the Mackenzie clan. Lawyer John King, the husband of Mackenzie’s youngest child, Isabel, replied to Dent in an extended pamphlet entitled The Other Side of the Story: Being Some Reviews of Mr. J.C. Dent’s First Volume of “The Story of the Upper Canadian Rebellion,” and the Letters in the Mackenzie-Rolph Controversy: Also, a Critique, hitherto unpublished, on “The New Story” (Toronto: J. Murray, 1886). John and Isabel’s eldest son, William Lyon Mackenzie, deputy minister of the Department of Labour, helped to secure the suppression of a work on Mackenzie by W.D. LeSueur23 because the portrayal of its protagonist did little or nothing for his memory (Stacey 1976, 217).

The King family grew up in Tory Toronto, sensitive to the slight of those who despised the little rebel. Reportedly, a neighbour shunned them because of their unfortunate ancestry (Dawson 1958, 26). “Most Canadians” of the day had the notion, Bruce Hutchison (1952, 12-13) later argued, that the rebellion had had “a comic or criminal flavour.” R. MacGregor Dawson, one of Mackenzie King’s biographers, suggested that all this influenced King’s mother to teach her children, young Willie included, to revere their grandfather, for “there was a score to be settled; ... to right a wrong, ... to vindicate for the benefit of all sceptics the name of her father and her family” (Hutchison 1952, 26-27). Not all Canadians, of course, were like the offensive neighbour of King’s childhood and much to his satisfaction he witnessed occasions when others celebrated his grandfather. King was thrilled when he heard Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier, who had earlier met Louis Joseph Papineau and who had not been much impressed by the great tribute (Schull 1965, 32),24 speak well of the rebellions during a tribute to Queen Victoria in the Commons (Dawson 1958, 113). Happily, when King first declared his candidacy for a Commons seat in 1907, a reporter for the Toronto News proclaimed him, a grandson of Mackenzie, “a most suitable recruit for Ontario Federal Liberalism” (qtd in Dawson 1958, 183). Delightfully, J.W. Bengough wrote a “little poem” celebrating Mackenzie’s influence on King on the occasion of the
1919 convention which appointed him Liberal party leader (Stacey 1976, 182).

References to Mackenzie in the King diary abound, leading C.P. Stacey (1976, 105), for one, to conclude that his grandfather, along with his mother and Laurier, were the three biggest "inspirations" of King's life. King hung a portrait of Mackenzie in his house where guests would be sure to see it, and, when Prime Minister, he did the same with a proclamation issued after the rebellion offering a thousand pounds' reward for the little rebel (Hutchison 1952, 15). In later years he reflected with satisfaction that Mackenzie's life work had been to bring "about a real brotherhood among the common people of the earth" (Pickersgill & Forster 1970, 143). But this was not an opinion universally shared as King was sometimes made painfully aware. For instance, during the King-Byng affair of 1926 an opposing member of the House taunted him about the rebellion (Neatby 1976, 154). While a member of the Quebec assembly, Peter Bercovitch attempted to invest a controversial anti-hate bill he was sponsoring, by appealing to the memory of Louis-Joseph Papineau, the "immortal patriot" who had brought a measure into the legislature one hundred years before guaranteeing Jews equality before the law (Robin 1992, 133), yet few in English Canada regarded Mackenzie as "immortal." "No one in Canada has suffered more from" being "misinterpreted and misrepresented to future generations... than my grandfather," King lamented (Pickersgill & Forster 1970, 23). He particularly resented the Tory party's seeking "to make out that my grandfather was disloyal" (Pickersgill & Forster 1970, 91). All this helps explain why, for some time, he considered getting a book out on Mackenzie (Stacey 1976, 217 note), and why his will provided for the writing of a biography of his unappreciated ancestor. He even chose a suitable author, Catherine Macdonald Maclean, a Scot, not a Canadian, who, sadly, died before completing the project (Stacey 1976, 217).

Unfortunately for Mackenzie's memory, a popular work published to coincide with the centenary of the rebellion, Edwin C. Guillet's The Lives and Times of the Patriots: An Account of the Rebellion in Upper Canada, 1837-1838 and of the Patriot Agitation in the United States, 1837-1842 (Toronto: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1938) criticized him for his weak leadership. King took pleasure, though, from Stanley Brehaut Ryerson's 1837: The Birth of Canadian Democracy. He happily read the copy which Ryerson had sent to him, though Ryerson's Marxist analysis in which he celebrated the rank and file of the Upper and Lower Canadian patriots as working class champions, evidently caused him some disquiet. He recorded in the presumed sanctity of his diary:

I like the bright young mind of this young man—he has the right attitude and is fundamentally sound. Like youth, inclined perhaps to go a little too far—but in the right direction. (Typescripts 1937, 117)

Of course, the works of academics were in some measure responsible for the relatively low repute of Ontario's Ned Kelly's. Conservative Donald Grant Creighton (1938) characterized the rebels in both provinces as representative of unprogressive agrarians in their dealings with the enterprising commercialists of their age. He would have agreed
with Aileen Dunham (1927) and Gerald M. Craig (1963), who writing almost forty years apart, asserted that the rebellions were unnecessary. They saw them as an aberration or as a short detour on the highroad to economic and political development. So strongly did Dunham feel about their role that she ended her study of political disaffection in the province in 1836, a year before the rebellion’s outbreak. My own work, and that of Ron Stagg on the rebellion,\(^{30}\) utilizes collective biography, but it has done little to rehabilitate the memory of the rebels. It indicates that while they certainly had their grievances,\(^{31}\) national and religious issues also underlay their resort to arms. As for their leader, F.H. Armstrong (1971) debunked him thoroughly in an article titled “William Lyon Mackenzie: The Persistent Hero.”

Historiography, of course, does not stand still, and no historian can expect to have the final word on any subject. In recent years other scholars have taken up cudgels on the rebels’ behalf, arguing, for instance, that the Tories committed unpardonable sins against the rule of law. Hence they, not those who finally shouldered arms to right wrongs, were the real transgressors, the ones most responsible for the resort to violence.\(^{31}\) Recently, Allan Greer (1995) has proposed that the rebellions in the two Canadas were precipitated by a crisis of legitimacy, the governments of both provinces being disdained and distrusted by the people. He has provocatively suggested that historians like the present author have made a monumental mistake in concentrating on the differences between the rebellions in the two Canadas. They had common roots, in both cases being produced by a crisis of confidence in the governments of the day.

In fact, those twentieth-century historians who sat down to write for high school students and university undergraduates about the rebellions often faced something of a dilemma. Not only had the rebels resorted to violence to achieve their ends—seemingly a most un-Canadian thing to do—but they had been unsuccessful. Their risings, especially the Upper Canadian one, were quickly crushed. Such historians were often influenced by a wiggish view of the past, in which all that happened was grist for Clio’s mill in her quest to lead Canada and Canadians to greater glories. To them the rebellions often became, to borrow Michael S. Cross’s (1982) phrase, “necessary failures” in that they embarrassed the British government into doing something about the terrible wrongs that existed. The Upper Canadian rebellion was “one of those cases where nothing succeeds like failure,” wrote Edgar McInnis (1969, 258) in his highly successful, Canada: A Political and Social History; “It jolted the British government into a realization that only a drastic readjustment could remove the causes of discontent in Canada.” True, the British Colonial Office had tended to take the Canadas for granted, finding New South Wales and Cape Colony, to take two notorious examples, far more worthy of attention because of the greater obstreperousness of their populations (Thompson 1995, 22–23), but the logic of the “necessary failure” argument is nonetheless a little strained. Most notably, the rebellions in the Canadas occurred in 1837–38; the

 acceptance by the British of responsible government as part of the “constitution” of the united Canadas came a full ten years later.

Undeniably, the Upper Canadian rebellion has had something of “a following” amongst the historically literate of Ontario. In Toronto a plaque commemorating the rebellion can be found at Eglinton and Yonge; and there is a plaque for the western uprising in the village of Scotland, near Brantford. In much of the public commemorative
material on the rebellion, Mackenzie King would be happy to know, his grandfather has taken centre stage. At Queen's Park a bust of him is part of an elaborate centenary sponsored by the William Lyon Mackenzie Centennial Committee on the one hundredth anniversary of the rebellion. The rococo display, paid for by “public subscription” (Bayer 1984, 231), links the little rebel, the establishment of responsible government, and the glories of the British Commonwealth. Portraits of Mackenzie hang inside the provincial legislature as well as at Toronto City Hall. A plaque to his memory adorns the west side of Nathan Phillips Square, near the latter. His last home, on Toronto’s Bond Street, has been turned into a museum. Nevertheless, the public declarations about Mackenzie’s character and contributions on the unveiling of plaques or the opening of museums is at times ambivalent, with mention made of his “contradictory” assertions or his “scorileous” attacks on opponents.

Of course, public interest in the rebellion often extends well beyond Mackenzie. Toronto’s first post office contains a permanent display of the city in 1837, for which a guide has been published. The rebel centre of Lloydtown, north of Toronto, is home to a society devoted entirely to the rebellion. The Ontario Historical Society held a “a week-long 150th anniversary celebration” of the uprising in 1987, deeming it “one of the most popular historical conferences ever presented in Ontario.” Its 257 registrants obliged the Society to crowd the participants into ever larger halls (Duncan & Lockwood 1988, 5). The society published the papers presented under the title 1837 Rebellion Remembered. As with the battle of St. Denis, a re-enactment of the Toronto skirmish is staged every year. Recently the rebellion was re-held in February when the opponents of the provincial government’s proposal to create a megacity government for metropolitan Toronto staged a “Rebellion of ’97 Democracy Parade—in the spirit of William Lyon Mackenzie.” A modern Mackenzie led a parade a kilometre long and then harangued the assembled throng on the necessity of resisting the corporate compact dominating the province (“Megacity Foes,” 1997, A3; “Thousands March,” 1997, A5).

Not surprisingly, the rebellion has been the subject of considerable artistic and literary endeavour, including historical novels, television shows, a feature film or two, and a play by Rick Salutin and the Theatre Passe Muraille entitled, 1837—The Farmers’ Revolt. The most recent addition to this corpus of material is a historical novel by Marianne Brandis, Rebellion, published in May 1996 by The Porcupine’s Quill, Inc. My colleague, well-known author, playwright, and poet James Reaney has told me that he is writing the libretto for an opera about the Navy Island affair, the first raid on the province from the United States in the aftermath of the rebellion.

Clearly, there is a considerable audience for rebellion material, but it would be wrong to assume that the passion is uniform. Though the December re-enactment of the Battle of Montgomery’s Tavern has been advertised at least once on an electronic billboard near the Skydome, and though it has been mentioned occasionally in the press, it has just as often been ignored by the media. And it is not entirely clear that those who participate in it are motivated solely by a desire to celebrate Ontario’s history. A caller to the Toronto CBC A.M. station’s programme, “Radio Noon,” on March 20, 1996 identified himself as one of those who dressed up in period costume to participate in the re-enactment. When asked why he did it, he said he liked beer. A pub crawl follows the event, suitably enough since rebel headquarters was a tavern and since a beer (the Upper Canada Brewing Company’s “Rebellion Ale”) helps commemorate the revolt.

I would venture the guess that most residents of Ontario, certainly most residents of Canada, are unaware of the rebellion in Upper Canada. In part that is attributable to the weakness of the Marxist tradition in Canadian historical scholarship, for Marxist scholars have, typically, been willing to celebrate armed struggle as welcome evidence that the oppressed have been willing to battle the oppressors. And that has, generally, been the line of those Marxists writing about Upper Canada’s rebellions, but (Stanley Ryerson aside) their voices have have been raised relatively recently and only briefly, and hence have not yet been much heard by the general public. In part, too, ignorance of the rebellion is attributable to a school curriculum in Ontario, and in much of the rest of Canada, which provides students with distressingly little Canadian history. They are not alone in their ignorance. In general, Canadians have little knowledge about Canada’s past.

Gallup pollsters in the summer of 1988 quizzed a representative sample of adult Canadians about their country’s history, asking respondents to identify Canada’s first Prime Minister, its longest serving Prime Minister, the leader of the North West Rebellion, and the leaders at the Battle of the Plains of Abraham. They also asked them to name the date of Confederation. (Nothing so hard as the date of the rebellions!) Only 4 per cent of respondents answered all six questions correctly. Sixty-four per cent got three or fewer. The largest group, 32 per cent, had everything wrong! (Gallup Poll 1988). The whole sorry
process was repeated in 1991 with a quiz designed for CBC television, leading one enraged commentator to declare that “the amused reaction of many of those interviewed” when they were unable to answer questions “suggests that many Canadians put a premium on ignorance” (Fraser 1991, A7).

The dismal poll results are partly explicable by the fact that the questions asked tested knowledge about Canada’s more distant past. Canada’s population has declining percentages of the two “charter” groups—French and English—and increasing proportions of more recent immigrants, who may well regard early Canadian history as other than “theirs.”

Possibly, two and three generations ago (unfortunately, we have no polls to tell) Canadians knew more about the rebellions, knew more about the entire pre-Confederation epoch than they do now. Society has changed and historians’ work has changed with it. As Allan Greer (1996, 575–90) has recently pointed out, the writing of pre-Confederation history has been in the doldrums, with ever more resources devoted to the post-Confederation era. This may result in a greater public awareness of the more recent past, but that awareness is likely to be highly selective, given the essential ahistoricism of present society and the current quest for relevance. Those aspects of Canada’s past most likely to become rooted in modern consciousness are those which will be most “usable”—multicultural, native, and women’s history, for example. In light of all this, perhaps the surprising thing is that the rebellion in Upper Canada is remembered at all!

A further reason exists for the relative weakness of the Upper Canadian revolutionary tradition. Lower Canada speaks in some respects to a “national” audience and can, and has been used, for present purposes. It has been incorporated into the Québécois’ nationalist tradition. The Upper Canadian rebellion occurred in Ontario, a particular corner of English Canada. As such, it has no national audience. To people on the prairies, for instance, revolutionary politics is best exemplified by the twin Riel risings, that of 1870 in Manitoba and that of 1885 in neighbouring Saskatchewan. Those events continue to resonate. The Gallup poll of 1988 showed that far more people on the prairies knew who led the Northwest Rebellion than did those elsewhere. Dissatisfied westerners can see in the Riel Rebellions western opposition to eastern “imperialism.” Those sympathetic to native and Métis claims for redress can view the risings as protests against the would-be hegemony of the Eurocentric Canadian state. Members of the small francophone communities in the west, as well as those of Quebec and elsewhere, can view the rebellions as welcome evidence of Catholic French-speakers’ resistance to Protestant English-speakers’ intolerance. In this sense, the thesis of Robert Bothwell’s recent book, so well summed up in its title, Canada and Quebec: One Country. Two Histories, is inadequate, for, in some respects, the country has more than two histories. Nevertheless, the central contention of the Bothwell book—that English and French Canada have different appreciations and understandings of the past—is undoubtedly correct.

Ironically, much of Bothwell’s (1955, 31–33) section of Canada and Quebec dealing with the rebellion consists of an interview with Alan Greer, who is of the firm opinion that the Lower and Upper Canadian rebellions should all be seen as part of the same revolutionary crisis—a line of thought that, in some measure, a Stanley Ryerson or a Donald Creighton, in their structuralist analyses of the rebellions, would share. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the two rebellions have produced somewhat different traditions. While both are linked with the attempt to use violence to achieve radical political change, the social significance of the Lower Canadian event, identified as it has been with the assault on the seigneurial system, and even more importantly, with the divide between English and French Canada, has been the more firmly situated in the public mind because it is associated with the rise of French Canadian nationalism within Quebec. This is unlikely to change, despite the effort by the Parti Québécois to distance itself, and Québécois nationalism generally, from its revolutionary past because of the latter’s seemingly unsavoury connection with a violence that conjures up in modern minds visions of the FLQ. The Lower Canadian revolutionary tradition will remain ever more vibrant, more alive, more meaningful to “its” public than the Upper Canadian one. In this important sense the years 1837–38 bequeathed Canada two distinct “revolutionary” traditions.

NOTES

I should like to thank Professor Donald Bier of the University of New England, Frederick H. Armstrong, of the University of Western Ontario, and Professors Douglas Leighton of Haren College, and Gerald Killen of King’s College, both of the University of Western Ontario, for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I also benefited greatly from the discussion of the paper at the meeting of the Association of Canadian Studies of Australia and New Zealand held in Hobart in July 1996, and from the insightful comments of the reader who reviewed the piece for this journal.
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9 The Hartzian thesis argues that New World societies are ideological fragments of their parent nation, never establishing the full range of political ideologies of the latter, since, essentially their political cultures converged about the ideas and notions the original settlers brought with them.


11 A committee was struck to help those arrested. It was named "Comité Chérif" (Fournier 1984, 40).

12 The publisher of Fournier’s FLQ used the same device, superimposing the same outline of the patriote on a scene of soldiers in a Montreal street on the cover of the book.

13 The text of the manifesto is available in Fournier 1984 (223-27). The church did excommunicate the patriotes after the rebellion. The 120 and more who had been killed were buried outside of Catholic cemeteries, in sections devoted to unbaptized babies, or in open ground. In 1837 Quebec’s bishops lifted the ban on burial in consecrated ground. "Patriote may go to final resting place: Religious Burials OK for Rebels of 1837," Montreal Gazette Friday, April 3, 1987, A3. It seems, however, that the ban had not applied to those who died after the rebellion, in fact, a monument to the patriotes was established on the fifty-fifth anniversary of the rebellion in the Côte des Neiges cemetery in Montreal, and in 1897 a noted former rebel, Léon Ducharme, was buried at its foot. Previously, in 1891, former patriote leader, François Xavier Proven, had been buried at the cemetery. Beverley Bogoly, A Deep Sense of Wrong: The treason, Trials, and Transportation to New South Wales of Lower Canadian Rebels after the 1838 Rebellion (Toronto: Dundurn, 1995); 278; and Fred Landon, An Exile from Canada to Van Diemen’s Land... (Toronto: Longmans, Green, 1960): 306, 310.


15 I am relying on memory for this title. Queries to the CBC all went unanswered and unacknowledged.

16 Munro (1995, 18) gives the date as 1979.
Muaro points out that the PQ government also established a museum to the patriotes at St. Denis.


This was the lead story in "The Choice" section of the paper.

On 23 November, the anniversary of the battle, the paper's editorials dealt with Bosnia and Brian Mulroney's alleged corruption. Admittedly, a quick cursory scan of the paper showed that its record of noticing the anniversary has been spotty at best. In just two of the three years preceding the FLQ crisis it covered the event. Nevertheless the paper has had an ongoing interest in the rebellion. For example, in November 1977, 100 years after the outbreak, it carried advertisements about a forthcoming lecture by Felix Desrochers, the librarian of Canada's Parliament. On Friday 26 November it devoted almost two full columns to M. Desrochers' lecture, which had heated praise on the rebels.

For some stimulating essays on the reverse phenomenon, see Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., The Invention of Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1983). Admittedly, the essayists' use of the word "tradition" is not the same as mine in this paper: by "tradition" they generally mean "ritual and symbolic" processes (p. 4), the singing of national anthems or the flying of national flags, for instance, rather than the flow of ideas and attitudes over time.

This is not to say that they were both uniformly in favour of radical causes. Mackenzie waxed and waned as a pro-annexationist while Papineau continued his fight against the abolition of seigneurial tenure.


Schull notes that Laurier found Papineau irreplaceably a man of the past, sunk in old quarrels and dislike,


See, for example, Stacey (1976), photograph 20.

This is not to say that in this period no-one praised Mackenzie. On 10 June 1947 in a speech in the Commons, Ian Macdonald (no relation), the Minister of Veterans Affairs, spoke of the many positive influences on the Prime Minister's life, including that of his rebel grandfather. Pickersgill & Fesper (1970, 40).

Evidently the manuscript on which she was working was destroyed.

See Colin Read, The Rising in Western Upper Canada, 1837-38; The Duncombe Revolt and After (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1982); Ronald J. Stagg, "The Yonge Street Rebellion of 1837: An Examination of the Social Background and a Reassessment of the Events," (Ph.D. Diss., University of Toronto, 1976); and Colin Read, and Ronald J. Stagg, eds., The Rebellion of 1837 in Upper Canada (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1983).

Carol Wilson-Siegel, in an effort to establish convenient "straw men", strongly—though incorrectly—implies that we deny the existence of grievances that were widely felt. See Carol Wilson, "A Firebrand amongst the People: The Durham Meetings and Popular Politics in Upper Canada," Canadian Historical Review 75:3 (September 1994), 353.


Bayer notes that the Mackenzie monument was the last one built at Queen's Park. It originally had a reflecting pool, which was removed in 1950 for reasons of safety.

Provincial plaques also commemorate his first newspaper, the Colonial Advocate, and his escape to the United States after the rebellion.

The museum was opened in 1950 by a private foundation and turned over to the city in 1960. Archives of Ontario, Historical Plaque 31, press release.


Private communication from Dorothy Duncan, 24 May 1996.
Colin Read

All this led Professor Ronald Stagg, an acknowledged expert on Mackenzie, to write an opinion piece expressing his view that the demonstrations had used Mackenzie's memory inappropriately. "Taking the firebrand's name in vain," Toronto Star, 24 February 1997, A19.

This text of the play is available in Rick Salutin and Theatre Passe Muraille, 1837: William Lyon Mackenzie and the Canadian Revolution (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1976).

I could find no mention of it in the Toronto Star this past December.

Perhaps it is a mark of cultural difference that Cavée des Patriotes, a wine rather than a beer, is bottled in Quebec and sold there in honour of the Lower Canadian rebels.

Two examples of Marxist commentary on the rebellion are provided by Bryan D. Palmer, Working-Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour, 1869–1960 (Toronto: Butterworth, 1963): 48–51; and Leo A. Johnson, History of Guelph, 1827–1927 (Guelph: Guelph Historical Society: 1977), 55–62. Johnson's analysis, written for a smaller audience than Palmer's work but intended to provide a popular history, is quite muted. I am grateful to Brian Young for reminding me of the weakness of the Marxist tradition in English-speaking Canada with respect to the rebellion.

For some evidence on the perception that the population of Canada at large are unaware of the rebellions and for some evidence of student knowledge and opinion on the subject, see the Appendix.

The national censuses reveal that in 1901 the French formed 30.7 per cent of the population and the British 57.0 per cent. In 1981 the respective percentages were 26.7 and 40.2. The raw data from the 1991 census suggests an even more precipitous decline for the British proportion of the population, but that census allowed people to indicate multiple and single origins, so it must be used with care. New citizens do have to pass a history test, so it is not necessarily the case that an immigrant population translates into little public knowledge about early Canadian history. It may do so.

Allan Greer, "Canadian History: Ancient and Modern," Canadian Historical Review 77.4 (December 1996): 375–90. Greer offers several explanations for the trend—the rise of microhistory, the feeling that social history is best pursued from modern sources, the changing school curriculum and the desire of students to deal with material with which they have some familiarity, for example—but he does not venture a demographic explanation.

Fifty-six per cent on the prairies knew the correct answer, while only 37 per cent did nationally. Gallup Poll, for release, Saturday 13 August 1988.

For a stimulating essay on various interpretations placed on the 1885 rebellion, see J.R. Miller, "From Riel to the Métis," Canadian Historical Review 69.1 (March 1988): 1–20.

The Canadian Press reported of the heritage quiz carried on television in 1991 that French Canadians knew more about French Canadian history than did English Canadians and vice versa.

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Canadian Press, "Canadians fail heritage test," Montreal Gazette 1 April 1991, A7. An anonymous reviewer of this article suggested that the decline of interest in and knowledge of Ontario's past, including the Upper Canadian rebellion, may reflect the fact that over the past twenty years Ontario has abandoned its position of leadership within Canada and no longer exerts the intellectual shadow it used to do. In the reviewer's opinion part of the reason for the abandonment has been the changing face of Ontario society and the end to the sense that the people of the province have a common history. These ideas are provocative and should be explored further.

See Greer 1995 (1–18).

APPENDIX

I asked the twenty-three students who attended my lecture of January 23, 1996 in Pre-Confederation Canadian history, which concluded my discussion of the rebellions in the Canadas, to respond to four questions and to offer any comments they might wish to make. The students were a mix of second, third and fourth-year Honours and General students. I acknowledge that their responses form a generally unscientific survey, but nevertheless I think that they do capture the relatively low level of consciousness in English Canada about the rebellions and about Canadian history generally, as well as the parochial position of Canadian history as a subject in the school system.

Most, but not all, of the students were born into English speaking families in Canada.

Numbers in parentheses indicate the number of students who chose that response.

1. How well informed about the rebellions were you before this course?
   a) well (9)
   b) moderately well (4)
   c) poorly (9)
   d) not at all (10)

2. When did you last study the rebellions — in what grade or year of university?
   2nd [i.e., my course?] — (1)
   OAC — (2)
   Grade 12 — (2)
   Grade 10 — (3)
   Grade 9 (in French) — (1)
   Grades 8/7/6 — (1)
   Grade 8 — (3)
   Grade 7 — (2)
   Grade 7 — (1)
   Never, Grade 7, maybe? — (1)
   Never — (5)
   Never, not from Canada — (1)

3. How well do you feel that the public are informed about the rebellions?
   a) well — (0)
   b) moderately well — (0)
   c) poorly — (15)
   d) not at all — (8)

4. Identify any public monuments, buildings, roads, or anniversaries identified with of named after, or in honour of, the rebels and/or the leaders of the rebellions.
   a) Port Henry, Kingston; troops were despatched from it — (1)
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Dent, John Charles. 1885. The Story of the Upper Canadian Rebellion; Largely Derived from Original Sources and Documents. Toronto: C. Blackett Robinson.


"Thousands march against Toronto megacity proposal." London Free Press 17 February, A5.


Typescripts of the King Diary. 1937. University of Western Ontario, 1177, December 7.
