

Pulpit, Press, and Politics: Methodists and the Market for Books in Upper Canada by Scott McLaren

Todd Webb

Volume 113, numéro 1, spring 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1076087ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1076087ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Webb, T. (2021). Compte rendu de [*Pulpit, Press, and Politics: Methodists and the Market for Books in Upper Canada* by Scott McLaren]. *Ontario History*, 113(1), 121–123. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1076087ar>

in the twentieth century. From the government of Ontario eliminating textbook grants and educational and library budgets constantly being slashed to the invention of Amazon and big box bookstores and the subsequent death of many Canadian publishers and brick and mortar stores. Technology has revolutionized the way editors and agents communicate with their authors and how publishers promote and advertise their books. These seven women worked hard through these major shifts to keep their businesses successful and to contribute to the cultural works of Canada. This was on top of the common misogyny of their everyday work lives. Similarly, the industry is seeing rapid cultural changes today that are affecting the publishing world in ways we can't yet anticipate. For anyone currently working in the publishing industry or interested in book studies it is critical to know what these and other trailblazers had to endure through their victories and setbacks. While Panofsky's research is impressive, the real highlight is how each of the subjects are humanized through each of their journeys. Unfortunately, publishing is a profession that is often romanticized and it's important to identify the challenges and

root issues within this sphere.

This book is an excellent look at the history of Canadian publishing and should be essential reading for all media students and publishing interns. It examines what Canadian publishing means in today's context, especially in light of all the mergers and acquisition in the past decade alone. It's interesting to wonder what someone like Irene Clarke, co-founder of Clarke, Irwin in 1930 would think of the Globe & Mail bestseller list today. But it's also important to use a critical lens with this work. The term 'nationalist publishing' is used throughout this text to mean, presumably, Canadian. But for me, nationalism is a slippery slope and it's worrisome to think that what some want when they bemoan the lack of Canadian authors are more white voices. Canadian publishing is still young and should be open to the multicultural viewpoints from all across the country and Turtle Island. We are still building our identity and it's important to know where we came from.

Aleks Wrobel
Sales Representative at Penguin Random
House Canada

Pulpit, Press, and Politics

Methodists and the Market for Books in Upper Canada

By Scott McLaren

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019. 264 pages. \$65.00 hardcover.

ISBN: 978-1-44264-923-1 (utorontopress.com)

For all Methodism's reputation for kill-joy earnestness, its historiography has had moments of excitement. In the 1960s, for instance, the great Marxist historian E.P. Thompson took a run at Britain's

Wesleyan movement, memorably declaring that its main impact on the kingdom's common people during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries could be understood in terms of psychic mastur-



bation. (That always seemed like a fun, inexpensive vice, the scholar W.R. Ward quipped years later, could anyone actually figure out how to do it.) The ensuing academic firestorm was foreseeable, generating a great deal of heat and light. During that same period, however, the writing of the history of Canadian Methodism went along, shaped by the larger framework of the colony-to-nation narrative, untroubled by such scholastic battles. It is only recently that historians have begun to link the story of the Methodist church in pre-Confederation Canada to developments in the wider world. Scott McLaren's *Pulpit, Press, and Politics* is a much needed and valuable addition to that growing literature.

In this book, McLaren goes further than any other historian in situating the Methodists of Upper Canada as members of a transcontinental fellow-

ship of believers. This border-crossing identity, he demonstrates, was primarily the product of the marketing strategy of the Methodist Episcopal book concern, headquartered in New York. Books produced by the concern and sold to laity by Methodist preachers in the United States and in Upper Canada were not just commodities, but symbols of denominational identity: the faithful knew that to buy a book printed by the concern was to provide financial support to the Methodist Episcopal Church. This strategy created a cultural bond between Methodist readers in Upper Canada and their brethren in the early republic. While this connection may not have mattered, politically, in the period before the War of 1812, it became problematic after 1815. As British Wesleyan missionaries moved into Upper Canada, with the support of the colonial government, they pointed to the Canadian Methodists' links to the United States as a sign of disloyalty. By mid-1820s, when the Methodist preacher Egerton Ryerson took on the Anglican John Strachan over the issue of church establishment, the marketing practices of the American Methodist Episcopal book concern had turned into a potentially disastrous liability for Canadian Methodism. Could a people who read American-produced books and supported an American church really be loyal subjects of the British Empire? To avoid answering that difficult question, McLaren shows, Ryerson and his brothers tried to move Canadian Methodist print culture into the mainstream of Upper Canada's evolving British identity. This proved to be a difficult maneuver, however. The British Wesleyans, with whom the Canadian Methodists briefly united in 1833, had a great deal of difficulty coming to grips with the problems of dis-

tributing expensive books imported from London, England, in a frontier setting. At the same time, the Methodist leadership in the United States became resistant to the financial demands of the Upper Canadians, who wanted a share in the proceeds of the New York book concern before cutting their last official ties with Methodist Episcopal Church. This two-front war, which McLaren describes with all the attention to detail and drama that it demands, was the context for the emergence of something unique in the wider world of Methodism. In the late 1840s and early 1850s, the Canadian Methodists decoupled print and denominational culture, embracing a fully consumerist approach to their marketplace that was unknown among the American Methodists and British Wesleyans. For the Canadian Methodists, it no longer mattered where books came from, whether the United States or Britain, as long as the price was right, and their church could turn a profit.

There is a great deal to admire in the way that McLaren tells this complex story of cultural transformation and denominational infighting, much of which was motivated by a combination of political and financial issues. There are, nevertheless, a few questions that his approach raises that are worth noting. He certainly makes a case for the centrality of print culture in the formation of a Methodist identity in Upper Canada, but at the cost of downplaying other aspects of the Methodist experience. What, for instance, was the place of print culture in Canadian Methodism's shift from the emotional revivals that characterized its early colonial years towards middle-class respectability in the Victorian period? That might have been a question worth pursuing, given the dis-

cussion of Methodist revivalism in Upper Canada in the opening chapters of *Pulpit, Press, and Politics*. That section of the book also presents a rather romantic account of the seeding and spread of American Methodism in the colony. Is it unfair to suggest that this heroic image, created by the nineteenth-century chroniclers of Upper Canadian Methodism, should be examined more critically? Those early denominational historians also created a very North American-focused narrative which McLaren makes his own. The result is that, with few exceptions, McLaren's British Wesleyan missionaries come across as hapless fellows, with little feel for, or understanding of, American Methodism or its approach to print. This is a little implausible, given the fact that the British Wesleyan and Methodist Episcopal churches maintained a constant interchange of delegates and of official and unofficial communications throughout the nineteenth century.

Even taking such relatively minor criticisms into account, McLaren has undoubtedly done vital work in repositioning the story of Canadian Methodism in its transcontinental context. By focusing on print culture, he has also demonstrated one of the most important ways in which Methodism in Upper Canada adopted British Wesleyan church structures, developed its own British identity, and maintained its North American heart, while avoiding the taint of political disloyalty. Egerton Ryerson, his brothers, and their fellow Canadian Methodist preachers showed a degree of genius in achieving that fine balance.

Todd Webb
Associate Professor, Department of
History, Laurentian University