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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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THE COMMON MAN IN THE ERA OF THE REBELLION IN UPPER CANADA

By FRED LONDON

The purpose of this paper is to look in upon the common man of the era of 1837 in Upper Canada, who, in the crisis of that year, marched out with Mackenzie or Duncombe, or rallied to the side of Sir Francis Head, or, as was more generally the case, stayed at home and mended his fences. The term "common man" must not be interpreted to mean any inferior group in the province; it includes those who farmed and worked at trades or kept shop; those who attended horse races or wrestling matches as well as those who attended revival meetings; those who came from the United States as well as those from the British Isles; the stage-driver, the inn-keeper, the doctor, the missionary, the postmaster, the editor of the local paper; the Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, or Quaker; the people of whom Abraham Lincoln said that God must have loved them because he made so many of them. Most of these people had some point of view upon the main issues of 1837 and in the mass they must have had some influence upon those issues. We have studied intensively the policies and activities in this period of the Colonial Office and the Upper Canada assembly and legislative council. But how much do we know, for example, concerning the point of view of the Yarmouth Quakers or the Lobo Township Scotch or the London Township Orangemen? Here were three groups within a comparatively few miles of each other who, in December, 1837, took quite different attitudes towards the troubles of the day. How much do we know about the miniature Family Compacts which were to be found here and there throughout the province, adept at feathering their nests, basking in the sunshine of official favour and in some cases contributing quite as much to local discontent as anything that was done by the more famous group which surrounded the lieutenant-governor at York.

☉ The ordinary reader still tends to interpret the words "Rebellion of 1837" as referring to certain military events at the city of Toronto where an attempt to overturn the provincial government was thwarted by the action of certain loyal people who did not wish to see the government overturned, at least not by Mackenzie. This version of events persists because it offers a simple explanation of what is really complex and because it also provides an interesting villain. But is it really so simple as that? We know that the period of the thirties witnessed important democratic movements in Great Britain and on the continent, while in the United States, more close at hand, there was a transformation of society that affected not only government but almost every other phase of human thought and activity. To these American changes has been given the name Jacksonian Democracy, though every student of American history would recognize that Jackson was the product rather than the creator of the new democratic spirit and that he "rode into power on a tide of forces that had been gathering strength for more than a decade and which he had done little or nothing to bring into being".

In Upper Canada William Lyon Mackenzie was the most prominent figure in the agitations that coincided with Jackson's presidency in the United States and the Mackenzie uprising took place in the year in which

Jackson retired from office. In the case of Mackenzie, just as in the case of Jackson, there has been a tendency to make him the creator of conditions of which he was actually rather the reflection. In the United States a new party arose in Jackson's time, made up of diverse elements but having one common bond, hatred of the president. In Upper Canada the Family Compact lost no time in fixing upon Mackenzie the responsibility for the rebellion, knowing how much easier it is to place blame upon an individual than upon a group. Mackenzie's subsequent absurdities, at Niagara and in the United States, strengthened the idea that he was chiefly responsible for the Upper Canada troubles and this tradition has come down to our own day.

The correct estimate of Mackenzie would be that he was first and last an agitator. He cannot be credited with leadership in any of the more prominent issues before 1837. That leadership was assumed by Gourlay, Ryerson, the Bidwells, Robert Baldwin, and lesser figures. But Mackenzie was adept at seizing other people's ideas and promulgating them as his own, though his great weakness was that he could place evils in no order of importance. Ryerson said of him that "every evil which he discerned was in his estimation truly an evil and all evils were about of equal magnitude. . . . He felt a longing desire to right the wrongs which he saw everywhere around him. This, therefore, constituted, as he believed, his mission as a public man in Canada."¹

The source of Mackenzie's basic political theories and ideas has been given careful investigation by Professor R. A. MacKay, who points out that from the year 1824 Mackenzie became more North American in his point of view and that the reforms which he thereafter urged were those which had already been achieved in many of the states and were being agitated for in others. In addition to his reading of American periodicals, Mackenzie made personal contact with the United States by an extended visit in the summer of 1829. During this visit he met many public men, including President Jackson, and was "highly impressed with economic conditions and with the apparent simplicity and cheapness of government".² There has been a tendency of late to discount the influence of Jacksonian democracy upon developments in Upper Canada during the thirties, but it is not at all necessary that there should be in Mackenzie's political theories an analogy with American political theory in order to connect these concurrent North American movements towards greater democracy. So far as Upper Canada was concerned, it was not Washington and the White House that exerted the influence but the newer states of the West. Indeed, throughout the thirties and forties the agency of the national government at Washington was reduced to a minimum. The charter of the Bank of the United States was allowed to expire in 1836. Jackson vetoed legislation for internal improvements and thereby stopped such development under national auspices. Even the tariff, though it continued protective in character, was a compromise between sectional interests rather than a well thought out plan for developing industry.³ Since the national government failed to meet their demands, the people

¹Egerton Ryerson, *Story of My Life* (Toronto, 1884), 186-7.

²"The Political Ideas of William Lyon Mackenzie" (*Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, Feb., 1937, 12-3).

³C. R. Fish, *The Rise of the Common Man, 1830-1850* (New York, 1927), 34-5.

turned, where it was possible, to the state governments which throughout this period were the scene of great activity in debate and in legislation. Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, and the other states of the West were dealing with the very subjects that were of greatest interest to the common man in Upper Canada: non-sectarian common schools, roads and bridges, solemnization of marriage, the franchise and elections, tenure of office, and freedom of religion. It was the state, not the national government at Washington which was legislating in those fields which most closely touched the life of the individual, and though the common man in Upper Canada may not have known much of the reign of King Andrew the First at the White House, he had only to spend an evening at the nearest tavern or inn to learn from some American immigrant or traveller what was going on in the neighbouring states.

Here we have indicated one of the means by which the spread of ideas took place. To-day we are subjected to the influence of such agencies as the press and radio, public assembly, and easy facilities of travel. None of these, except public assembly, was common in the thirties. The part played by the press is particularly possible of exaggeration. Though there were more than a score of newspapers published in the province in the early thirties, they were all weeklies, most of them with but a limited local circulation and not all of them attempting any serious comment upon the public affairs of the province. The majority of the people of the province did not see a newspaper of any kind regularly and even those who had access to newspapers sometimes found their days so occupied with other tasks that they could give little time to this occupation. The Rev. William Proudfoot, an educated and intelligent man, records more than once in his diary that he had not read a newspaper in some time, simply because he was otherwise busily occupied.

A continuous and effective agency in the spread of ideas was the tavern or inn. The erection of a school-house generally preceded that of a church or chapel in Upper Canada but earlier than either came the mill and the tavern. The school-house usually touched only the children, the church influenced a settled group, but the tavern, open frequently on Sundays as well as week days, saw a steady procession of newcomers, few of them remaining more than a night but all of them bringing some tidings of the outside world, to be retailed again and again by the inn-keeper who, in many cases, would be found to be an American. In the records of travel of the thirties there are constant references to the inns and to conversation with strangers, and also mention of evenings spent about the fireside with much debate and discussion.

A similar source of ideas was the constant addition to the community of newcomers from the British Isles and from the United States, part of the large immigration of the period. In proportion to the number of settlers at the beginning of the decade, the number of immigrants was large. The opportunities for contact with people from the outside world were numerous and in a time of starved social life these contacts were more appreciated than they would be to-day.

One of the most effective agencies for disseminating ideas, however, was the public assembly of the people, of whatever type this might be. The religious service and the revivals, the militia muster, the temperance society, the bee, the agricultural fair, the meeting of the court of quarter

sessions, all these occasions brought people together and gave just such opportunity for interchange of news and ideas as similar gatherings do even in our own day. Despite the scarcity of ministers of religion, there were numerous religious assemblies held in school-houses, in homes, and not infrequently in barns. Political gatherings were less numerous than at a later period but frequently became riotous in character as bitterness of political feeling increased.

The moral conditions of Upper Canada in the era of the rebellion were the subject of special comment at the time, since church leaders of the day placed much of the blame for the outbreak upon the lack of religious agencies within the province, or, more maliciously, placed the blame upon the fanatical doctrines of their competitors in the field. Extreme views with regard to the morals of Upper Canada are likely to be unsafe. The traditional piety of the forefathers, so often dwelt upon at anniversary gatherings, requires qualifications. A contrasting picture of Upper Canada in terms of traditional frontier life would be equally inaccurate. It would be a safe judgment to say that the morals of Upper Canada a hundred years ago were in general about the same as they are to-day, with this difference, that for the more primitive sins which were then more conspicuous we have managed to find some new forms of digression from the straight and narrow path.

Doctor Thomas Rolph published in 1836 a statement of criminal statistics for the years 1830-5. The trials included 47 murder, 20 manslaughter, 10 rape, 53 felony, 13 arson, 25 forgery, 17 perjury, 266 larceny, and 28 horse-stealing. The number of murder charges appears large but the others are not abnormal.⁴ Offences such as assault and battery, which were very numerous, were dealt with by the courts of quarter sessions.

Every denominational group which was active in Upper Canada dwelt in its reports upon the religious destitution of the province, but this rather generally referred to the lack of church buildings and the absence of formal congregational organization. More remote parts of the province might not see a preacher or missionary of any denomination for months at a time, but this was not true of the more settled portions and in the towns there were frequently three, four, or even more separate congregations. School-houses were often utilized for meeting places and there were even instances of union church buildings.

The lack of Sabbath observance shocked the ministers and also shocked many of the newcomers from the British Isles who had been accustomed to see the day decently observed. In 1819 John Goldie, then visiting Canada, wrote: "It must give uneasiness to any person who has any regard for religion to witness the general inattention to even the external duties of the Sabbath, both in the States and in Canada. Instead of preserving a tolerably decent behaviour on that day, it is commonly spent in drinking, shooting, fishing, or some such amusement, and that even by many who consider themselves to have good moral character. Any person newly arrived would not recognize the Sabbath at all. No

⁴Thomas Rolph, *A Brief Account together with Observations, made during a Visit in the West Indies, and a Tour through the United States of America, in Parts of the Years 1832-33; together with a Statistical Account of Upper Canada* (Dundas, 1836), appendix, n.p.

doubt there are many people who behave otherwise, but they certainly are in the minority."⁵

The Rev. William Proudfoot was in York on Good Friday of 1833 and though the shops were closed, which he attributed to the influence of the Episcopal Church, the day was one of feasting and sport. Yet it was much quieter, he observed, than the preceding Sabbath when there was much loitering and disorderly conduct on the streets. "The Canadians grudge the observance of the Sabbath", was his comment. A few days before, in Elgin County, he had noted in his diary that he had never in his life seen a Sabbath less observed as it ought to be.⁶

Writing shortly after the rebellion year, John R. Godley said of conditions in Upper Canada: "There is much to lament in the religious conditions of most of the rural districts, as must always be the case where the population is much scattered, and allowed to outgrow the supply of ecclesiastical administration. From never having the subject forced upon them, they begin to forget it, gradually neglect the observance of the Lord's Day, or else employ it as a day simply of bodily relaxation and amusement, omit to have their children baptized, and end by living as though they had no religion at all."⁷

The prevalence of drinking and the evils that grew out of drinking in this period are well known. At such assemblages of people as bees and militia musters, drinking was carried to great excess. When the Rev. William Proudfoot raised a barn on his little farm in Middlesex County in 1833 he had the assistance of the people of his community, who spent three days on the job. Of the first day he says: "The people wrought very well in the morning, but after dinner they did very little." Of the second day's operations he writes: "There were more today than yesterday, yet they did far less work, owing to their having had too much whiskey, I suppose. There were many who came for no other purpose than to drink whiskey." At the end of the third day he recorded in his diary: "And now that the raising is over, I am able to form my own opinion of these bees. From first to last there have been at this raising the work of ninety men for one day, which was the very least about two thirds more than was necessary. . . . Many of the people came for the sole purpose of drinking, and never once assisted in lifting a log. Many of them got drunk. There was such a quantity of swearing and low buffoonery that the whole thing was very painful. Upon the whole I would never again make a bee if I could help it."

The wide-spread use of hard liquor was accompanied by much fighting and other disorderly practices. W. H. Merritt, promoter of the Welland Canal, said of conditions: "At every bee, every militia training, even at our dances, swearing, cursing, quarreling, fighting, biting and even gouging was of common occurrence."⁸

The efforts of organized religion to combat such evils as have been described and to aid the isolated settlers form an appealing phase of the

⁵John Goldie, *Diary of a Journey through Upper Canada and Some of the New England States, 1819* (Toronto, 1897), 55.

⁶Entries of March 24 and April 5 (Ontario Historical Society, *Papers and Records*, XXVI, 1930).

⁷John R. Godley, *Letters from America* (2 vols., London, 1844), I, 174-5.

⁸J. P. Merritt, *Biography of the Hon. W. H. Merritt* (St. Catharines, 1875),

early religious history of the province. At the same time, however, a most distracting and dividing conflict was under way between the several denominations over such questions as clergy reserves, clerical control of education, the solemnization of marriage, and, after 1837, over the nice question of loyalty. It is not a pretty picture that presents itself.

The most spectacular quarrel was that between the Church of England and the Methodists, or, perhaps more accurately, between John Strachan and Egerton Ryerson as the doughty champions of those two bodies. A century of repetition has built up the tradition of a bold and courageous Ryerson storming the Strachan castle of privilege and eventually breaking down its walls. That tradition may gain added strength with the recent appearance of a highly documented life of Ryerson because the other side of the story has yet to be adequately presented.

There is good reason to believe that the Church of England in Canada would have been much more democratic in its policy in this earlier period had it been less dependent upon, and less under the control of, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. The S.P.G. at this time was in close harmony in its religious policies with the political policies of the Colonial Office. The Society greatly influenced the church policies in Upper Canada and to have run counter to it would have been to risk the financial support which it gave. The late Professor A. H. Young believed that domination from London, a truly "baneful domination" in this instance, was responsible for many things that were done by Archdeacon Strachan which at the time and since excited criticism. It is greatly to be regretted that Professor Young did not live to write the life of John Strachan to which he devoted so many years. Had we this biography to place beside that of Egerton Ryerson, we would approach the study of the period with greater confidence. Departing from more generally accepted judgments, Professor Young believed that there was a distinct strain of democracy in Strachan but that powerful external influences forced him into positions in which he seemed to be the very personification of special privilege.

That some at least of the clergy of the Church of England believed that a more democratic organization would better suit the conditions of Upper Canada is recorded by the Rev. Isaac Fidler, rector of Thornhill. "Many of the Episcopal ministers of Canada", he wrote, "think favorably of the American church, and imagine that, if their own were made to approximate more clearly to it in church government, they would find it become more flourishing and interest more warmly the lay members of its body. More energy would, they thought, be thereby infused into it, and its measures invigorated."⁹

⁹Isaac Fidler, *Observations on Professions, Literature, Manners and Emigrations in the United States and Canada made during Residence there in 1832* (London, 1833), 426-7. Archdeacon Strachan's point of view on the limitations caused by the close connection of church and state given by Fidler is as follows: "The Archdeacon of York, in Upper Canada, was of the opinion that the system of church government, which connects church and state so closely together as to admit of no trifling alterations being made without the intervention of Parliament, is untenable by scripture, and hurtful to the interests of the church itself. The Church of England, he remarked, is the only religious community which does not possess inherent rights to regulate its own affairs. There are no synods of its clergy, no unity of counsels and proceedings, like what were possessed originally by the christian church, or like what are adopted by other denominations of the present day. The national church ought to be so modelled, as to be able to conform itself, in its outward ceremonies, to the improvements of the age" (p. 427).

Religious controversy weakened, and to some degree tended to discredit, the representatives of the denominations which were engaged in it but there was another phase of denominational rivalry which was equally unpleasant. This was the unholy delight shown by the clergy of one denomination in adding to their number strollers from other folds. Both the practice and the apparent gratification that arise therefrom have persisted into our own day, but in an era when large sections of the province were without regular religious ministrations these proselytizing efforts appear particularly obnoxious. Yet the effort was, in many cases, actuated by a sincere belief that to snatch the erring one from the doctrines which he professed was to save him from destruction. "I deeply lament", wrote the Rev. William Proudfoot, an earnest Presbyterian, "the ascendancy which Methodists have acquired in this country. Their doctrines are frightfully in opposition to the grand, the glorious doctrines of the Gospel."¹⁰ He was shocked to find that a Presbyterian church in York permitted Methodists to come to communion and still more shocked when he was informed that at least one Methodist had been at the table when he assisted the resident minister. On the effects of Methodism he writes:

I have fancied that in every place where I have preached where Methodism prevails, that the people are exceedingly careless in hearing the Word, whether it is because I have not given them the highly seasoned food which they are accustomed to, because they care not for scriptural statements, I know not, but the fact is as I have stated it. The Methodists have had almost no opposition the whole of the people in the Townships, on the lake side, and the majority of the people do not even profess religion and these are the men who are said to have done good, and who tell of the good they have done. Something must be done to dislodge these pretenders, these so distant preachers. The country will never become Christian till these fellows be dislodged.¹¹

We must recognize, however, that there was another side to the picture. This same dour old Scot, with all his bigotry and narrowness of mind, possessed the spirit of the true missionary and it is a most engaging picture that he has left us of the first administration of the Sacrament to his little congregation in the village of London:

June 1st, 1833. When I went into London, the meeting house was full and many outside. It was judged proper to have the service outside. The people in a twinkling made a pulpit outside—boards laid upon two casks—seats were placed all around and the audience all comfortably seated. Preached from Luke 23: 33, "And they crucified Him". The sermon went off well. I fenced the tables also out of doors. . . . After the fencings we went into the meeting house. There were four table services. I also gave an address after the service was over. The place was not very convenient for the service, but I never saw a Sacrament conducted with more external decorum. I was much afraid of disorderly behaviour at the outdoor service,

¹⁰Diary of the Rev. William Proudfoot, April 20, 1833.

¹¹Diary of the Rev. William Proudfoot, March 24, 1833.

but was happily disappointed. I did not give an evening sermon—lest I should weary the people, I had already spoken for six hours.

A pleasant picture of a Sunday service in the backwoods in 1834 is given by D. Wilkie in his *Sketches of a Summer Trip*: "The farmers as they arrived, some from many miles distance, threw the bridles of their horses over a convenient stump or branch at the door, quaffed a bowl of water from a pailful placed at the roadside, on the root of a fallen tree, and then, Bible in hand, slipped into their places with all the unobtrusive simplicity of the Covenanters of old. When the solemn chant of the unsophisticated Psalmody rose from the lips of the little flock, it presented a vivid and pleasant picture of the primitive Church of Scotland in the olden time."¹²

And where may one find a more living picture of the church militant than that left by John Carroll describing the closing scene of a conference of Methodist preachers:

Anticipating the time when the Bishop would announce their appointments, the preachers came to the church with their horses and saddle-bags, ready to start for their homes as soon as they should learn their destination. The larger number of them were on horse-back; and forming near the church in regular order, two abreast, they slowly moved away over the hill and out of sight, soon to separate, however, and disperse to their several fields of labor, probably never all to meet again.

Our equipage for the battle field was a portmanteau and valise; in them we stored our wearing apparel, Bible and what other books we were able to get, and but a few dollars in our pockets. Our outward dress and appearance when mounted gave us the name of the Methodist cavalry.¹³

In any analysis of the causes of unrest in Upper Canada in the period before 1837, emphasis is properly laid upon the constitutional aspects of the situation because the faults of the constitution had ramifications which extended even to the daily life of the humble settler in remote districts. ~~The land question seemed to be ever present in one form or another.~~ The clergy reserves, the crown reserves, and the large blocks of land allotted to friends of the government interfered with the life of the small farmer who paid taxes and did road work, from both of which some other people seemed to be absolved. The land policy of Upper Canada abounded in mistakes, the chief of which was the lavish alienation, so that in the end a large area was held by absentee owners who did nothing to improve their holdings, but merely held it for speculative purposes. Benedict Arnold, of American Revolutionary War fame, received 5000 acres in Gwillimbury North and East as a retired colonel, with an additional grant of 8,400 acres in Elmsley Township in the names of his wife and children. Two sons also received 2000 acres each, so that the total amount received by the traitor to the American colonial cause was 15,400 acres. In the

¹²D. Wilkie, *Sketches of a Summer Trip to New York and the Canadas* (Edinburgh, 1837), 163.

¹³John Carroll, *Case and his Cotemporaries or Canadian Itinerants' Memorial* (Toronto, 1869-74), II, 157 and 319.

Talbot Settlement on the north shore of Lake Erie, the eccentric Colonel Talbot long kept two fine townships almost entirely out of settlement, holding them back for his own profit and sending applicants for land off to other sections. When called to account from time to time, his device was to secure intervention on his behalf by influential friends in England, a method which was invariably successful. It is not without significance that Doctor Duncombe's force in 1837 was recruited almost entirely from the area over which Colonel Thomas Talbot held sway.

Land speculation had made its appearance in Upper Canada in the first decade of the province's history when the executive council had to refuse applications from many people who did not intend to be settlers. But even with such care as was exercised, abuses soon began to creep in, among them some which had official sanction from London. In the end Upper Canada became a Paradise for the land speculators who were eventually able to enlist the help of government servants at York. "A half pay officer in Canada", writing in the *United Service Journal* of January, 1839, declared that it was notorious in Canada that every clerk in every public office was speculating in public lands in the name of some friend.¹⁴ This was the reason that so little land seemed to be available for the ordinary settler. Writing again in the February, 1839, issue he drew attention to the enormous number of United Empire Loyalist rights being granted. "The number of claims of this nature established within the last few years is truly miraculous", he said, adding that when new surveys were made the best lots were gone at once under U.E.L. rights and immigrants had no choice. Speculators merely held the lands for a rise in value.

When the public departments at York were investigated in the year after the rebellion, reference was made in the report to the "system of partiality, favoritism and corruption" in the surveyor-general's department, "begun at an early date and continued, with but few interruptions, up to the present time".¹⁴ J. G. Chewett, of the surveyor-general's department, in his statement said: "The system upon which lands have been granted is the greatest prostitution of the sovereign's bounty ever practiced in any country. The intentions of the sovereign's will evidently appear, from the instructions given for the settlement of the country, wise and guarded—but the system pursued was corrupt; actual settlement was required upon the grants, but the influence of interest obtained for individuals whose claim could not exceed 200 acres large grants to themselves and their families, dead parents as well as infants who never lived to walk out of their cradles had orders-in-council passed in their names and their families eventually obtained the lands."¹⁵ Of the operations of the chief clerk in the office of the commissioner of crown lands it was stated that "his policy has secured for him a numerous band of partizans, as the list of names he was able to command when soliciting . . . the appointment of Surveyor-General sufficiently testifies".¹⁶

During the years after 1830 the speculative land fever rapidly spread,

¹⁴Report on public departments, 5th session, 13th parliament, 1840, 233.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 247. The *Cobourg Reformer* said: "Whenever he [a settler] buys his land, whether from the Crown or The Canada Company, more or less fraud is mixed up with, or flows from the transaction" (quoted in *St. Thomas Liberal*, Aug. 8, 1833).

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 20.

despite the fact that many settlers were in deplorable economic conditions. Travellers reported that small settlers were offering their holdings at prices that were sometimes lower than the upset price at the public sales. Patrick Shirreff had much to say concerning the situation as he found it in 1833.

To the system of disposing of land by credit [he wrote] much of the wretchedness and poverty of the present Canadian landholders may be justly attributed. The experience of the United States government demonstrated this, and a law was passed to abolish credit on the price of land.

Much land is held by absentee proprietors, or the members of the party who sway the councils of the province. It is commonly in the hands of agents empowered to sell. The prices are generally higher than crown lands and credit unlimited. . . . There is never any hesitation in selling land to a man without capital, as the rights are withheld. Every tree which is cut down enhances the value of the property which is unproductive while they are standing. When a settler absconds after some years residence, a case by no means rare, the proprietor derives great advantage from his operations. . . . In almost every district people are found anxious to sell land, and small farms may be bought on cheaper terms than land belonging to the Crown, Canada Company, or large proprietors, more especially if cash is paid. Indeed the necessities of many people are so urgent, and credit so general, that an individual with cash in his pocket may drive a good bargain at all times. . . . The whole system of settling land in Canada has been bad for many years.¹⁷

Shirreff had much more to say upon the abuses in the government's land policies but the above will serve to illustrate his criticisms. Some of the accompaniments of modern land booms were present in this era in Upper Canada. John Howison reported that in embryo towns in Upper Canada he had been shown sites for universities, hospitals, and churches before even a hotel had been erected. Evidence could be multiplied to show the prevalence of land speculation. Some of the fever was caught from the Western States where a wild orgy was in progress, soon to be given a disastrous check by Jackson's "specie circular" in the summer of 1836. Another factor was the disproportionate idea held by settlers as to the actual value of land. In Upper Canada the immigrant from the British Isles, hitherto a servant, once he had acquired land felt that he had become a proprietor, equal to his former master. Land was therefore viewed as a sort of deity capable of raising the poor to a better station. In this respect it was not unlike the populist deification of silver in the Western States forty-five years ago. Behind the religious agitation concerning the disposal of the clergy reserves, there was doubtless also much land jobbing influence, just as behind the Populist's free silver demands lay the personal interests of the Western silver producers.

A special grievance in connection with the disposal of public lands was aired in the St. Thomas *Liberal* in the summer of 1833. The *Liberal*

¹⁷Patrick Shirreff, *A Tour through North America, together with a Comprehensive View of the Canadas and United States as adapted for Agricultural Emigration* (Edinburgh, 1835), 362-5.

stated that a sale of lands in Oxford County had been announced to take place at Hamilton and that to this sale there had come prospective purchasers from points fifty and sixty miles distant, only to find the auction postponed from day to day until they were forced to leave. Afterwards a group of half-pay officers who could afford to lounge around until the coast was clear obtained at a low rate a large portion of the lands that had been announced for sale. The same abuse happened at a sale advertised to be held at Chatham. "No class of individuals", said the *Liberal*, "profit so much by this grand humbug of 'Lands sold at public auction' as the military officers who have retired to the province on half pay. . . . The land granting system in this province has ever been a subject of loud complaint; it is well-known to have hitherto been one of the strongest holds of corruption and to have developed more fully the operations, extent and objects of government favoritism than perhaps any other of the very many prolific sources of partial, illiberal legislation."

Grievances, whether of the land or of whatever origin, would have contributed less to unrest had there not been the widespread feeling of frustration which is reflected so often in the comment of the times. Mackenzie and his friends felt that they were opposed by an entrenched enemy when they criticized the Family Compact. But there were miniature Family Compacts, or shall we say, branches of the Family Compact in communities quite other than the provincial capital. The *St. Thomas Liberal*, already quoted from, said in 1833:

The county of Middlesex, from its first settlement up to this moment, has been controlled by two distinguished individuals, as absolutely and despotically as is the petty sovereignty of a German despot. This they have been enabled to do through the immense influence their high official stations give them. Magistrates, officers of the excise, surveyors, militia officers, commissioners to carry the appropriations of public money into effect, all are appointed through the recommendations and influence of these sages of the District—thus forming a host of worthies who are ever at the beck of their Patrons. We assert without fear of contradiction, that the Hon. Colonel Talbot rules with a more absolute sway, and his power is infinitely more to be dreaded than that of the King of Great Britain. . . . It is the fear of this Iron rule that has controlled our former elections—except at the elections of Messrs. Rolph and Matthews, then the people aroused from their lethargy and braved the power that had so long oppressed them.¹⁸

Frustration may easily become the prelude to violence, which is excellently illustrated by the fact that in 1836 the Talbot Settlement was a hotbed of unrest and one of the most seriously disturbed portions of the province in the time of the uprising. Encumbered with the débris of worn-out institutions, the people of Upper Canada were restricted in the actual practice of citizenship. We hear much in these days of education for citizenship, but the only real and effective education for citizenship lies in its actual practice. One of the early fruits of the Reform Bill of 1832 was the remodelling of the ancient corporations by the Municipal

¹⁸St. Thomas *Liberal*, July 25, 1833.

Reform Act, whereby in place of the old governing bodies, based on very narrow franchises, town councils were established, elected by all the rate-payers. In Upper Canada one of the greatest of Sydenham's reforms was the establishment of local self-government, though this was opposed by the reactionary Tories of the day as a dangerous concession to "republican principles". The new district councils took over many powers and functions of the old courts of quarter sessions, which since the beginning of the province had been both legal and municipal agencies. At once opportunity was given for training men in local administration, and through that schooling they received preparation for political activities in larger fields. But this was after the rebellion was over. Prior to the rebellion the courts of quarter sessions, appointed by the government and therefore in general sympathetic to government policies, formed little strongholds of Toryism that held back the rising tide of democratic feeling. This lack of opportunity for actual participation in local government meant a lack of opportunity for that orderly clash of opinion and eventual compromise which distinguishes English-speaking communities in general to-day. There was lack of opportunity for coming into the open and uttering what the old Greeks called the "word said into the middle"; what Milton meant when he said:

That is true liberty, when free-born men
Having to advise the public may speak free.¹⁹

In place of open expression of opinion, there developed the practice of violence in dealing with political opponents, an evil practice which brought dire results in the Canadas as late as 1849. In the election of 1836 it was conspicuous, though it might properly be claimed that no wilder demagogue appeared in that election than the representative of the crown, Sir Francis Bond Head. His appeals to prejudice, suspicion, and fear were of the boldest character. He openly spread the idea that an enemy was about to attack the province. "In the name of every regiment of militia in Upper Canada I publicly promulgate—Let them come if they dare."²⁰ A writer of this period has aptly said: "The method of Sir Francis Head, that of appealing to the people, was itself a great tribute to the power of democracy and a presage of its victory."²¹

The turbulence of the election of 1836 may be illustrated by the events in the village of London, of which there remains a fairly extensive record. The disorder at London may not have been typical of the province at large, but it serves to illustrate the bitterness which had developed in this particular community and for which there were probably counterparts elsewhere. We have this picturesque description of the election preserved for us in a contemporary journal:

The magistrates ceased to do their duty and a general riot ensued every day that the polls were open. I attended the election on Saturday, the last day. . . . A procession headed by a Negro with

¹⁹See Ernest Barker, "Education for Citizenship" (University of London, Institute of Education, *Studies and Reports*, X, London, 1936, 12-3).

²⁰Reply to the address of the electors of the home district.

²¹Aileen Dunham, *Political Unrest in Upper Canada 1815-1836* (London, 1927), 188.

a national standard waving it, and at the same time shouting an offer of five pounds for any Liberal heads. This procession turned out to be an Orange mob who commenced beating a number of Liberals who were taken up for dead. Two hours before the polls closed Member Parke had to be rescued by a guard and marched to a place of safety and Member Moore had to make his escape out of town for home. The Liberal poll was secured by two clerks who made their escape into the jail for protection and were locked up.²²

Statements similar to the above are contained in Doctor Charles Duncombe's petition to the British house of commons. He declared that at the 1836 election he went to London on the last day and that a mile and a half from the village he met Mr. Moore, the former Reform member, escaping from the Orangemen, who, he claimed, had threatened his life. He told Doctor Duncombe that the Orangemen were driving the Reformers from the polls with clubs and beating them wherever they found them, and that the officers of the government "with Mr. Cronyn, a clergyman of the Church of England who had been recently inducted into the rectory of that place, were constantly hurraing and cheering on the Orangemen who were seen running through the streets, intoxicated, with clubs, threatening the Reformers with instant death if they shouted Reform". Doctor Duncombe stated further that in the earlier part of the election, when the rioting commenced, Edward Allen Talbot and John Scatcherd, magistrates, swore in twenty special constables to keep the peace, but Mr. Wilson, returning officer, forbade the magistrates from interfering with the rioters during the election, and when Mr. Talbot insisted on his rights as a magistrate to keep the peace, at any place not immediately about the hustings, the returning officer threatened to commit him to prison.²³

When the Duncombe charges were referred to a select committee of the assembly, the Rev. Benjamin Cronyn appeared on December 21, 1836. He denied that he had been hurraing on the Orangemen and said that he had often seen more fighting on a training day than during the whole election. In his evidence he stated that the "loyal party", as he termed them, numbering several hundred, advanced upon the hustings after the Reformers had occupied it for several hours, and made an entrance for themselves through the Reformers. He charged that a Radical had torn the Union Jack from the staff (presumably the Orangemen's flag) and had dragged it through the mud at the tail of a wagon, then torn it into pieces and thrown it into the river. The Rev. William Proudfoot made this brief comment upon the election: "July 2, 1836. Went into the village . . . to see the election which was a scene." A week earlier he had written: "Everybody wholly occupied with the approaching elections, party spirit runs high. Parson Cronyn has been all over the township electioneering."

All this hubbub concerned the casting of sixty-four votes, Mahlon Burwell, the Tory candidate receiving thirty-seven while his Reform opponent, John Scatcherd, received twenty-seven. Shortly after the

²²MSS. of Elijah Woodman. Thomas Parke and Elias Moore were the members from Middlesex between 1834 and 1836.

²³Appendix to *Journals of the House of Assembly of Upper Canada*, session 1836-7, no. 5, 3-4.

election both John Scatcherd and Edward Allen Talbot were dropped from the list of magistrates.

One other reference to the disorder prevailing in 1836 may be cited. Recalling the election of that year, W. H. Merritt said: "The election occurred on the 1st of July 1836 and the author, who was present, has for remembrance a gathering which, for riot and drunkenness, though his own village could get up no mean display, exceeded everything he had ever seen before, and challenges the world to beat the Grand River roarsers in their peculiar line."²⁴

The rowdyism and violence that was present in the election of 1836 found a larger stage in 1837 and in the name of loyalty and patriotism there was abundant opportunity for paying off old grudges. The descent of Colonel MacNab's force upon the Quaker settlement at Norwich after the collapse of Duncombe's abortive enterprise was purely revengeful. There had been unrest and agitation in this community, but few Quaker families were concerned in it. The inhabitants of Norwich district, however, were of American origin and the Quakers had taken their traditional attitude toward military service. MacNab's force was quartered upon the community for three days, "for the purpose of scowering the very hot bed of treason", it was stated. The "march through Norwich" was not forgotten for many a day. Writing in the *Oxford Star* a decade later, "An old settler" said: "When that part of the late rebellion which was more intimately connected with our county comes to be written and well understood, the name of Duncombe himself will lie under lighter and less general execration than some who early made themselves hoarse with cursing the rebels and crying 'God save the Queen', who swore and swaggered in front of raw recruits and led raids into Norwich in which some scores of Quakers' farmyards were reduced, as many pig pens carried by storm, and bleaching yards sacked and rased."

MacNab, in his zeal to arrest the fugitives from Duncombe's army, made use of the Six Nation Indians who, with painted faces, were sent into the woods to cut off escape. When Lord Glenelg heard of this he expressed his deep repugnance to such action. "It is scarcely possible", he wrote, "to conceive any necessity which would justify it and nothing would in my opinion tend more to alienate the inhabitants of Upper Canada and to irritate the people of the United States than the attempt to let loose on the assailants of the government the horrors of savage warfare."²⁵

It would be unfair to blame the administration at York for all the petty persecutions that followed. The miniature Family Compacts, formerly subjects of criticism and attack by the radicals of their community, now had the satisfaction of clapping their critics into jail and subjecting them to lengthy examination. The Rev. Mr. Proudfoot records in his

²⁴J. P. Merritt, *Biography of the Hon. W. H. Merritt*, 161.

²⁵Public Archives of Canada, *Series Q*, 425A, 52 and 109. The Rev. Richard Flood, who was the Church of England missionary at Delaware, wrote on December 27, 1837: "Our Indians have been mercifully spared, amidst the late revolutionary movements . . . from being called out by the Lieutenant-Governor to aid the loyalists—as under these circumstances they would have been entirely thrown back—and would probably have resorted to all those horrid barbarities of scalping and burning which they practiced (mild as they are) in the revolutionary war of old, when fighting against the enemies of Great Britain" (W. J. D. Waddilove, *The Stewart Missions*, London, 1838, 182).

diary on December 17, 1837: "Preached . . . to about forty persons. The whole town taken up with catching the Radicals so that nobody had time to attend meeting for the worship of God. Such a scene I never witnessed."

Looking back at the events of a century ago, we can see that all possibility of a rebellion succeeding was doomed when Head in 1836 raised the "devastating factor" of anti-American prejudice. "I publicly promulgate—Let them come if they dare" was a challenge addressed to some hostile force or influence that was threatening the province, and with the War of 1812 less than a quarter of a century in the background popular imagination pictured but one enemy. The echoes of Head's challenge drew many men to his side who were little in sympathy with his actions in office.

A rumour which spread at the very time of the uprising, and which had visible effect, is mentioned by Egerton Ryerson in a letter to Sir James Stephen, written after the rebellion: "I was in Cobourg, Newcastle District, when the volunteers rallied from all parts and the report was there that Rolph and Bidwell were under arms in defence of the city against Mackenzie. You may judge of the effect of this report throughout the province—it doubled the number of volunteers in defence of the government."²⁶

The business of history is to get at the thoughts, passions, endeavours, and failures of mankind and of individual men and women in the past. That is the definition of a great English historian, George Macaulay Trevelyan. But true history, as Croce teaches, must be contemporary history, contemporary in the sense that, however remote in time, it lives in the historian's mind with the urgency of the present. It is this present interest that moves him to attack it. Narratives and memorials apparently dead thus become living documents, and one problem of the past after another is drawn out of sleep and into the second life of history.

It is more than the mere observance of a centenary that prompts our interest in the events of 1837. A new democracy was being born a hundred years ago; democracy to-day is concerned with the problem of its continued survival. What part did the common man have in the struggles of the earlier period; what part does he have in the struggles of to-day? If there are leaders there must be followers, and leaders, then and now, must adapt the length of their steps to the capacities of those who will follow them. There is much yet to be learned about the thoughts and the passions, the endeavours and the failures of the common folk of 1837. Not until we know more intimately the nature of conditions and events in many communities of that era will we have right understanding of the rebellion. There is here the argument for wider study of local history. It was not one rebellion but many rebellions, and to generalize may be an acknowledgement of insufficient evidence. Ulrich B. Phillips has put it this way:

A cartographer "generalizes" a river course if its meanders are not known in detail or if they are too small to be shown in his reduction. A merchant generalizes his customers when he prints an

²⁶C. B. Sissons, *Egerton Ryerson, his Life and Letters* (Toronto, 1937), I, 427.

advertisement, and a physician when classing his patients as cases of pneumonia, measles or smallpox. The practice is not merely convenient but necessary. On the other hand a lover generalizes his lady, to be startled by her individualism after marriage. . . . The past, however, may remind us on occasion that its people were not lay figures but men, women and children of flesh and blood, thought and feeling, habits and eccentricities, in the grip of circumstance and struggling more or less to break it. Traditions are simple, conditions were complex; and to get into the records is to get away from the stereotypes.²⁷

²⁷Ulrich B. Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston, 1929), preface, viii.