



1837
REBELLION
REMEMBERED



1837 Rebellion Remembered

Papers Presented at the
1837 Rebellion Remembered Conference
of
The Ontario Historical Society
at
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28 September to 3 October, 1987

The Ontario Historical Society



FROM THE PAST
1888~1988
FOR THE FUTURE

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Introduction

When The Ontario Historical Society organised a week-long 150th anniversary celebration of the 1837 Upper Canadian Rebellion in 1987, it quickly found itself hosting one of the most popular historical conferences ever presented in Ontario. Speakers enthusiastically agreed to be included in the programme. The number of registrants made it necessary to rent larger halls for it was feared that people would be turned away for lack of room. Unquestionably, the 1837-1838 rebellion in Upper Canada maintains a hold on the imagination of Ontario inhabitants and historians in a way that few other incidents in the history of the province have done.

Apart from the stirring nature of the events of the rebellion itself, the continuing fascination of the rebellion for Ontarians lies in the strong division of opinion over whether or not it was justified. Put simply, people continue to care about the issues that prompted the rebellion. There continues to be sharp disagreement over whether or not the rebellion was beneficial, and over whether it advanced or retarded the coming of responsible government in Upper Canada, as reflected by historians using different terms such as "rebels" or "patriots" to describe the followers of Mackenzie.

A number of recent books, particularly those by Colin Read and Ronald Stagg provide meticulous appraisals of the events leading up to the rebellion, the rebellion itself and the consequences for Canadian society. This collection of papers, based on some of the presentations given at the 1837 Rebellion Remembered celebration, is produced in response to the great demand expressed for transcripts during the conference and in the following months. The opening section features papers providing a sense of the texture of daily life for Upper Canadians during the late 1830s. The essays in the second section cover the main events of Mackenzie's rebellion, events in western Upper Canada, and links with Lower Canadian rebels and government authorities. The third section offers the recollections of a descendent of the Toronto aristocracy at the time of the rebellion, three Orange poems reflect the counterrevolutionary response of Irish Upper Canadians to the rebellion, and a list of the troops called out to combat the insurgents. The fourth section provides the stories of four individuals caught up in the rebellion. The fifth section summarises the incidents and border raids that followed in the wake of the rebellion, and concludes with a paper suggesting sources for genealogical information on rebel ancestors.

Thanks to generous support from the Ontario Ministry of Culture and Communications, the Honourable Lily Oddie Munro, Minister, publishing the conference papers in the form of this booklet has been made possible. We are grateful to the ministry for its financial support, as well as to those conference speakers who agreed to submit their papers for publication. As a result the 1837 Rebellion continues to live in our memories.

Dorothy Duncan
Glenn J Lockwood

Life In The Rebellion Era

Daily Life in the Home District in 1837

Joyce C. Lewis

In order to provide a manageable discussion of such a broad topic and because the bulk of the population was rural, this paper will concentrate on the life of a well-settled, or second generation family living within reach of Toronto. It will be a family of some education, but socially a degree below the life of the Traills, O'Briens or McGraths.

Their first log house would have been improved by some additions by 1837, or given up for a new frame or stucco house nearby. The forest would have been cleared for fenced fields, and there would be other settlers about, as well as perhaps a mill, blacksmith shop, small general store and a church or chapel. This family would have come from the United Kingdom, possibly via the United States. Of course, there were well-established groups with other backgrounds here who shared the same experiences, and they must not be forgotten for a complete picture.

One of the traps of looking back is a tendency to take a sentimental view of the past. Nostalgia makes people forget that the average life expectancy around 1837 was 35 years, and that the contents of chamber pots under beds commonly froze on winter nights.

It also is necessary to consider the legend of the self-sufficient settlers who, with one cow, one sheep, one pig, one garden etc. grew all their own food, spun and wove all the cloth they needed for blankets and clothes, made their own candles, ground their own flour and forged their own tools. Certainly the first settlers in any area lived in great isolation for a period, and relied on their own efforts, but as settlement increased and they began to have goods or cash to exchange for services, they began to use them. It is a great deal easier to buy hard soap than to make it, for instance. Working hours were from dawn to dusk in Summer (5 to 9 as we say) and from dawn to six in Winter, and the tasks needing to be done took more hours than were available.

The centre of commerce was Toronto, which many of the Home District settlers would visit once a year at least to

take produce to market, transact business or shop. John Moyle, who was there in August 1837, described what he saw in a ramble about the town, in an unpublished diary now in the hands of his descendants. He found that as the seat of government, the town had a style and air which it otherwise would not possess. The streets were macadamized, laid out at right angles, and were wide and airy. There were some wooden sidewalks, but otherwise walking was difficult because of uneven, stony paths.

The shops were very handsome, many of them exceeding the architectural splendour of those in Moyle's native Southampton in England. He also liked the display of goods which was plentiful and tasteful, with the exception of the linen shops. The market was larger than that of a comparable English town, with as good meat (beef excepted) and a plentiful display of vegetables and fruit. Moyle was told that as the season progressed, apples, pears, and nectarines would be shipped to it from Niagara, 35 miles across the lake.

Two other aspects of the town impressed Moyle. One was the continual noise of ringing bells. They rang in the streets to announce an auction and they rang in his hotel to announce meal-times. From the harbour steamships about to leave would ring their bells for an hour beforehand, as well as snorting and blowing off steam while their officers serenaded the town with airs on a bugle like "Home Sweet Home" and "Yankee Doodle".

At night-time the harbour was particularly impressive. Those same steamships gave off sparks through their chimneys, while fishing smacks with lights blazing from tar barrels hung out of the boat to attract the finny tribe, dotted the water and made a beautiful sight. That was a Saturday. By next Wednesday, Moyle was less enchanted. His parents were ill because his hotel was taking its drinking water directly from the bay "just opposite where all the drains & gutters run in", and where someone had seen a dead horse thrown in. He had been over-charged by a watch-maker, the hotel keeper's daughter was wearing silk stockings when she ought to have been mending the carpet, and altogether Toronto was "a dirty little hole".

Away from the bright lights, the established settlers were concentrating on keeping fed, warm, and to some extent clean. Generally their diet was monotonous -- heavy, frugal, greasy and sustaining. Pork salted, smoked, or occasionally fresh, was the principal meat, as pigs were easy to keep and could be left to forage for roots and vegetables, nuts or even small animals. Food was completely seasonal. With supermarkets now selling asparagus in January, we forget the excitement and pleasure of new Spring greens -- lamb's quarters or cow parsley; the first strawberries of Summer and