

The Ryersonian Influence on the Public School System of British Columbia

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How do educational ideas and practices which are current in one society come to be adopted by another society? We seem to assume often that it is through some process of intellectual osmosis. Frequently, however, historical research can unveil the individual personalities involved. An interesting case in point is the story of how the Ryersonian system of public education was transmitted from Canada West to British Columbia a century ago through the agency of British Columbia's first Provincial Superintendent of Education, John Jessop. Carlyle's theory that history is the essence of innumerable biographies can certainly be supported in this case by the record of the personal influence of this one man.

Jessop arrived in Canada West (the Ontario of to-day) in 1846 from Norwich, England as a young lad of seventeen. For a few years he worked in the woods and probably had some experience with newspapers as well. He joined the Methodist Church, then the most active Protestant denomination in Canada West. In 1853 he decided to become a teacher and entered the Normal School in Toronto, recently opened by Dr. Egerton Ryerson. Here he first came under the influence of the Ryersonian system. Stuffed with subject matter and professional training day and night for six days a week, he ingested a curriculum which, if it were not superficial, would indeed be gargantuan. It was officially described as

the Elements and Philosophy of Grammar, Orthography, Composition, Art of Reading, Rudiments of Logic, Geography (Mathematical, Physical and Political) with rudiments of the use of the globes, Elements of General History, Linear Drawing, Mulhauser's System of Writing, Rudiments of Trigonometry, with a view to Land Surveying with the Theodolite, Art of Teaching, with daily teaching in the Model School, mode of teaching the National School Books, Science and Practice of Arithmetic, including the use of the Logarithm Tables, Algebra as far as Quadratic Equations, the Progressions, and the Binomial Theorem, inclusive: Geometry, six books of Euclid; Heat, Electricity, Galvanism, and Magnetism; Mechanics, Hydrostatics, Pneumatics, Animal and Vegetable Physiology (with special reference

to the laws of health and practical observations on the Ventilation and Temperature of School Houses), Elements of Astronomy, Agricultural Chemistry and Music.¹

After leaving the Normal School Jessop taught for five years in Ontario, in Elgin County and in the Oshawa area. During this time he developed a great respect for Ryerson's system of public education. In England, where he had been educated in a private school, he had seen nothing of a state school system. There the only efforts at providing some rudimentary education for the masses were through the philanthropic efforts of the church school societies. For Ryerson himself, whom Jessop must have met, since the superintendent's office was in the Normal School building, Jessop had an admiration verging on hero worship. Between Jessop and Ryerson there was also the common bond of religion, Ryerson being the most prominent Methodist in Canada.

In 1858 news of the discovery of gold in the sandbars of the Fraser River awakened the spirit of adventure in the young Ontario teacher. He left his school and in the early spring of 1859 headed westward for the gold fields of British Columbia. His odyssey across Canada by Great Lakes paddle-steamer, Indian canoe, Red River cart and on foot is a thrilling story in itself and one which the writer has related in his biography of Jessop, *John Jessop: Goldseeker and Educator*.² Jessop was one of the very first of that hardy group known to British Columbians as the "Overlanders", but most of these men came by this same cross-Canada route some two years later. Foolsore and in rags, Jessop arrived in the little Vancouver Island capital of Victoria on New Year's Day, 1860.

In the spring, he was off to the Cariboo where gold had been found in the gravel of the streams. He tried his luck at Keithley and Harvey Creeks but fortune did not favour him and in the fall he return to the coast where he was employed for a brief time on New Westminster's first newspaper.³ When it changed hands he went to Victoria and again worked on a newspaper, *The Press*, until it failed and then returned to his profession of teaching. In August 1861 he opened a private school which he called the Central School. As he told the press, he started the

¹ Hodgins, J. G. *Documentary History of Education in Upper Canada*, Toronto, Warwick, 1894-1910, Vol. VII, p. 172, 173.

² Johnson, F. H. *John Jessop: Goldseeker and Educator*, Vancouver, Mitchell Press, 1971.

³ This was *The Times*, which was brought to New Westminster by Leonard McLure, who purchased it in Victoria in March 1860. McLure later sold out to John Robson who changed the journal's name to the *British Columbian*.

venture because "a most urgent and pressing want was felt in the community for an entirely non-sectarian and cheaper school than any that then existed."⁴

The children of the little crown colony on Vancouver Island, if they attended school at all, either patronized several private ones or went to one of the three so-called "colonial schools" which had been established by Governor Douglas in 1852 for the children of the new settlers. The colonial schools were administered by the Council of the colony and were supervised by a part-time honorary superintendent and colonial chaplain, the Reverend Edward Cridge. The Anglican Church National Society's Schools of England seem to have been the model for the little system and many people in the colony, including the fiery editor of the *British Colonist*, Amor De Cosmos, felt that the influence of the Church of England on the system was too apparent.

Soon after opening his school Jessop sent off a letter to Dr. Ryerson:

Having, at the solicitation of many citizens of Victoria, commenced a school and believing that a good opening presents itself for introducing the system of which you are the Honored Head, and under which I received my training during two sessions at the Provincial Normal School and more than five years as a common school teacher in different parts of Canada West, I am desirous of making it as efficient as possible and for that reason I have taken the opportunity of applying to you, through an old friend, D. Ormiston, B.A., for a supply of maps, charts, apparatus, &c, &c, for use of the school and for the benefit of the city of Victoria.

Our common school here is very inefficient, while two others, one under the control of Bishop Hills of the Established Church, and another for Young Ladies in charge of the Sisters of Mercy have so much of the sectarian element in their government as to make them distasteful to non-conformists of all denominations. A school, therefore, started and conducted exclusively on non-sectarian problems, as the one under my charge is and will be, and moreover carried on according to the admirable system of Canada West, cannot fail of soon becoming popular and flourishing. My object is to establish its reputation, and when the city is incorporated, to fall in with the common school system that will then be adopted, and place myself at the head of the common schools of Victoria and Vancouver Island.

I believe I am the only person in the Island or in British Columbia that holds a first class Provincial certificate or indeed one of any description from the Normal School. I have therefore a good opportunity in my present position to do a good deal toward placing the common school system here on a satisfactory basis . . .⁵

⁴ *British Colonist*, January 10, 1863, p. 3.

⁵ Quoted in Spragge, G. W., "An Early Letter from Victoria, V.I., *Canadian Historical Review*, 1948, Vol. 29, p. 54-56.

In the campaign to reform the little public school system of the Island colony into a free and non-sectarian one Jessop took an active part. With the achievement of this goal (in the Free School Act of 1865) his Central School became a unit of the Island system and Jessop was retained as its principal, on the government pay roll.

A year later, when a mining recession struck both the Island and the Mainland, the Imperial government, assuming that "misery loves company," united the two crown colonies into one, i.e. "British Columbia." Three months prior to the union the Vancouver Island government had informed its teachers that it could no longer pay their salaries, and the governor of the united colony, not being sympathetic to the cause of free education, refused to assist them on the grounds that there had been no free system on the mainland.

When in 1869 the first school legislation was passed applying to all of British Columbia it retained the non-sectarian character of the schools but did not provide free schooling. The government's grant of \$500 per teacher required the school board to match the sum by a local tax levy. When the Victoria board made no effort to do this and the government grant to its teachers was therefore withheld, Jessop led the first teachers' strike in Canadian history.

Jessop's next step was from the classroom to the political arena. He supported whole-heartedly the cause of confederation with Canada. In the election for what was to be the last colonial Council of British Columbia he ran in the remote constituency of Kootenay where he failed to defeat the local candidate, largely because that gentleman's free whiskey was more potent with the miners than Jessop's oratory. When the Council approved the terms of union with the Dominion, Jessop once more threw his hat in the ring and ran as a candidate in the first federal election. His Vancouver Island riding rejected him. He returned to Victoria and reopened his Central School as a private institution.

One of the most urgent measures forced by public opinion on the new province's first provincial legislature was legislation to provide a good school system. In framing this bill, the new Provincial Secretary, Locke Robertson, sought the advice and assistance of John Jessop.⁶

The resulting "Public School Act of 1872" was obviously modelled on Ryerson's school legislation of 1846 to 1871 in Ontario.⁷ The latest

⁶ *The Canadian Album, Men of Canada*, Vol. IV, Brantford, Bradley, Garretson & Co., 1895, p. 87. Also Kerr, J. B., *Biographical Dictionary of Well-Known British Columbians*, Vancouver, Kerr & Begg, 1895, p. 208.

⁷ Kerr, J. B. *op. cit.* p. 208.

Ontario Act (1871) had provided free schooling through compulsory local taxation. The British Columbia act provided free schooling by implication, i.e. through provincial grants to the school boards to cover the necessary costs of education. The funds were to come from the general revenues of the province rather than from local property taxes. While Ryerson's school legislation in Ontario accepted the fact of separate schools for the religious minority (although against Ryerson's personal preference for a non-sectarian system), the British Columbia Act of 1872 retained what was already a tradition in the Pacific province, non-denominational schools.

The most notable parallels between the Ryerson system and the new British Columbia legislation were that both provided for locally elected school boards and an over-all Provincial Board of Education, chaired by a Superintendent of Education. The Board members and the Superintendent were appointed by the Lieutenant Governor. The provisions for "a uniform series of textbooks," annual reports from the Department of Education, public examinations, public lectures on education by the superintendents, school "visitors" and the stated duties of teachers were obvious similarities. Ryerson's legislation of 1871 had used the term "high school" for the first time to designate the change from the semi-independent district grammar schools to the new type of secondary school which was now an integral part of Ontario's public school system. The British Columbia bill used the new term in authorizing the establishment of "high schools."

When the act passed the provincial legislature the man appointed to the office of superintendent to operate the school system was John Jessop. In both Ontario and British Columbia the superintendent appointed by the Lieutenant-Governor administered his Department of Education with the advice of the Board of Education. He was responsible to the Legislature through the Provincial Secretary. There was initially no Minister of Education to function as the education policy-maker. The Superintendent assumed broad powers and responsibilities as both policy-maker and administrator. The rationale behind this variation on the usual Ministerial-Departmental organization, when first conceived in Canada West, was to remove education as far as possible from party politics. It is interesting to note that as soon as Ryerson retired in Ontario and Jessop resigned in British Columbia this system was scrapped and the Superintendent's rôle was reduced to that of a senior civil servant directly under a Minister who had the usual cabinet responsibility for his Department.

During his period of office (1872-1878) Jessop set the new school system on a course which, with certain modifications to conform to geographic and demographic conditions in the new province, followed fairly consistently the Ryersonian model in Ontario. He made no claim to originality, freely admitting that the source of his inspiration was "that admirable school system (of Ontario) upon which ours is founded."⁸

His intent to follow the Ontario model was evident from the moment he assumed office in 1872. Straightway he wrote to Dr. J. George Hodgins, Ryerson's deputy, for "copies of the Chief Superintendent's Reports, The Journal of Education, the new School Act and other Departmental papers which from time to time are issued from your office."⁹ Jessop secured the authorization of his General Board to purchase the textbooks used in Ontario from the Toronto publishing firm. He managed to get them at Eastern retail prices and re-sell them to the school children of British Columbia. Following Ryerson's practice, Jessop established a central book depository in 1873 under the Department to receive and re-sell school books and equipment. By 1877 he found he could close down his Depository as such books etc. could "now be procured through the ordinary trade channels as cheaply as through the Education depository." He added (a lesson which Ryerson had already learned to his sorrow) that "further continuance might be considered as uncalled-for competition with the Provincial booksellers."¹⁰

Through the medium of the textbooks used in Ontario the British Columbia Schools followed much the same curriculum. In those days the text books were the curriculum. When the province's first high school was opened in Victoria in 1876, Jessop, again following Ryerson's practice, established Departmental "entrance examinations" for admission to high school.

It is interesting to note also how one of Ryerson's favourite pedagogical principles was copied and applied by Jessop in British Columbia. As a Methodist minister and a humanitarian, Ryerson sought to abolish in his schools the excessive use of corporal punishment so common in his era. He proposed to secure the willing cooperation of the pupils through the positive means of competition and rewards rather than negatively through punishment. To do this he introduced a system of printed "merit cards"

⁸ Sixth Annual Report of the Superintendent of Education of British Columbia, 1876-7, p. 12.

⁹ Jessop to Hodgins, Victoria, April 27, 1872. B.C. Archives.

¹⁰ Sixth Annual Report of the Superintendent of Education, 1876-77, p. 12.

which were supplied to the schools by the Department of Education. They were given by the teachers to pupils in recognition of diligence, proficiency, punctuality and good conduct. Children could accumulate them in the fashion of today's supermarket trading stamps and with sufficient such evidence of merit, cash them in for "prize books." These were also supplied by the Department of Education at a small charge to school boards. The Ontario system required its teachers to maintain an elaborate bookkeeping record of each child's sins of omission and commission. Lacking the total dedication of St. Peter, many teachers found this system a bureaucratic nuisance but it survived for some time as part of the folk lore of the pioneer schools.

Jessop tried, not very successfully, to introduce the system to British Columbia. Because of the General Board's objections to the expense, he tried to persuade local school boards and teachers to purchase the merit cards and prize books. In his annual report he supported the system, quoting Ryerson that the principle behind it was that "on which Divine Government itself is based namely, *rewarding every one according to his works*" . . . "The prize book system and especially in connection with that of *merit cards* has a most salutary influence upon the school discipline, upon both teachers and pupils, besides diffusing a large amount of entertaining and useful reading."¹¹

Another feature of Ontario education which Jessop admired and tried to transplant in British Columbia was the public library system which he had known in Ontario.¹² This Ryerson had introduced in the 1840's when reading matter in rural Canada West was largely confined to the newspaper. Ryerson bought library books in quantity through his Book Depository, and then assisted the school boards to provide small local libraries, usually in the village schools. From bibliographical lists compiled by Ryerson these libraries were stocked with books which would appeal to the Victorian taste and a Methodist morality. The books were usually serious tomes for a solemn age. Self-improvement, rather than entertainment seemed to be the pervading purpose of Ryerson's library service. By 1870, however, Ontario could boast some 1146 such libraries.¹³ These were free to pupils, teachers and the general public. This achievement had won the admiration of Governor-General Lord Elgin who praised the

¹¹ Fourth Annual Report of the Superintendent of Education, 1874-5, p. 83, 84.

¹² See Stubbs, Gordon T., *The Role of Egerton Ryerson in the Development of Public Library Service in Ontario*, Canadian Library Association, April 1966.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 25.

library system as “the Crown and Glory of the Institutions of the Province.”¹⁴

In his Sixth Annual Report Jessop proposed the adoption of this system in British Columbia. “Nearly twenty-five years experience in Ontario has fully proved that school libraries have exercised, and are still exercising, a most beneficial influence upon the minds of the young. They have contributed largely to the high standard of intelligence and moral rectitude for which the present generation in that favoured province are justly celebrated . . . No better investment of a few hundred dollars of the Provincial revenue could be made than that of supplementing, as in Ontario, to the extent of about fifty percent, whatever sums might be contributed by school districts for such a purpose.”¹⁵

Jessop’s plea, however, fell upon ears that could only hear the word “economy.” The government balked at the expense and the trustees showed little interest. The proposal does, however, illustrate Jessop’s devotion to the Ontario model.

There are other instances of the Ryerson influence on British Columbia in these formative years of the new province’s school system. Jessop tried with limited success to import Ontario teachers to British Columbia through advertisements in the *Toronto Globe*. He gave his untrained teachers some small measure of in-service education through annual teachers’ institutes (long established in Ontario). These Jessop convened each summer in the Legislative chamber. He proposed the establishment of a Normal School on the Ontario model when the population could support such an institution. He was also the first person to propose that “a Provincial University also will speedily become a necessity if British Columbia youth are to be fully prepared for the various avocations of life, without going to other provinces and countries for the purpose of graduating in arts, law and medicine.”¹⁶

Jessop retired from the superintendency after only seven years in office, a victim of political machinations, but the Ryersonian influence he had introduced to the British Columbia schools was slow to fade. When, in

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁵ Sixth Annual Report, 1876-77, p. 12.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26. Actually Dr. Helmcken, one of the British Columbia delegation to discuss the terms of confederation, had proposed in 1870 that the Dominion government build a Marine Hospital in Victoria and that a “Medical and Surgical School” be established in connection with it. (See Ireland, W. E., “Helmcken’s Diary of the Confederation Negotiations, 1870,” *B.C. Historical Quarterly*, vol. IV, No. 2, p. 123.) In a limited sense one could consider this as the first recorded proposal for a university in British Columbia.

1925, the province appointed its first commission to examine and report on the educational system, one of its two commissioners was Dr. J. Harold Putman, an Ontario inspector of schools and a biographer of Ryerson.¹⁷ The Putman-Weir Report which, for the next quarter century set the province on the path of educational progressivism, represented much of the advanced thinking of Ontario educators, as well as the newer American influence.¹⁸ It continued, in a sense, some of the tradition of the Ontario model in British Columbia educational thought.

¹⁷ Putman, J. H., *Egerton Ryerson & Education in Upper Canada*, Toronto, Wm. Briggs, 1912.

¹⁸ Putman, J. H. & Weir, G. M., *Survey of the School System*, Victoria, King's Printer, 1925.