

## 1837 On Stage: Three Rebellions

### I

Having just published the historical drama *Danton's Death* to raise money for his revolutionary cell, Georg Büchner wrote in 1835 to his family from political exile in France,

The dramatic poet is in my eyes nothing but an historian, standing however above the latter in that he shapes for us history anew, and instead of giving an arid account places us immediately within the very period, giving us characters rather than characteristics and shapes rather than descriptions. His highest task is to come as close as possible to history as it really occurred. (Büchner 272)

Canadian theatre of the last three decades has oscillated between a similar confidence in the validity of historical drama and a suspicion of all forms of historical recreation that Büchner's own plays helped instigate. Writing for audiences perceived as unversed in national history, English Canadian dramatists assume a pedagogical posture, offering lessons in a history which they simultaneously endeavour to contest. Prominent plays inspired by the 1837 rebellion, such as Rick Salutin and Theatre Passe Muraille's *1837: The Farmer's Revolt* (1973), Michael Hollingsworth's *The Mackenzie-Papineau Rebellion* (1987), and Anne Chislett's *Yankee Notions* (1992),<sup>1</sup> all aspire to correct the historical record and, with it, to correct society; even as such plays exploit the anti-mimetic conventions of theatre to challenge historical stereotypes, they tend to resort to the stereotypes of their own ideological affiliations to urge a purportedly more faithful image of Canadian history. Leftist, feminist, and postmodern historiography inflect even the most iconoclastic of these plays with their orthodoxies.

1837 and *Yankee Notions* are concerned to establish alternative historical legacies, socialist and feminist, with which to mobilize their confederates. While 1837 reflects the cultural nationalism and cooperativist ideals of the early 1970s, *The Mackenzie-Papineau Rebellion*, appropriately for a play staged shortly after Lyotard produced for the Québec Conseil des Universités *The Postmodern Condition*, upsets genre hierarchies, contests the assumptions both of historiography and historical recreation, is anti-teleological and antihumanistic. Both 1837 and *Mackenzie-Papineau* employ pastiche, burlesque and hybrid forms, but the former retains a Leftist commitment to the didactic ideals of the Brechtian *Lehrstück*, while the latter, incorporating elements of television and cabaret, interrogates discourse and its institutions, and ridicules the genre of historical drama. Hollingsworth satirizes not only Canadian history but the patronizing moral earnestness of Canadian historical dramas like 1837, with their self-serving confidence in the political agency of theatre. *Yankee Notions* meanwhile testifies to the contradictory feminist response to postmodern theories. Chislett can scarcely subscribe to doctrines that reject the Enlightenment principles from which the emancipatory politics of feminism derives its impetus, yet like Hollingsworth she locates emancipation in part in the postmodern affront to universalist assumptions. The play unites a contemporary reconsideration of gender and a traditional view of theatre.

Scripted improvisationally by the Theatre Passe Muraille company in conjunction with Rick Salutin, 1837 is of the three dramas the most faithful to Büchner's dubious ambition "to come as close as possible to history as it really occurred." Like Büchner, however, the collaborators do not equate historical veracity with representational illusion. With its gender-blind ensemble cast generating the scenes and duplicating a wide range of historical and fictitious roles, few taking precedence (even Mackenzie appears in only six of its 23 scenes), 1837 is a fluid script altered in performance to conform to its changing audience. As in *Danton's Death* rapid and diverse scenes operate not to propel a plot but jarringly to juxtapose the elements of a dialectical conflict; story and character are subordinate to a theme of historical determinism that discredits the progressivism and romantic idealism of character drama (for example, Schiller, Shaw, Rattigan and Bolt).

Staged at a time of Leftist and Nationalist consolidation before the Waffle was expelled from the N.D.P., 1837 is an exemplary instance of cultural nationalism, dramatizing a discredited historical class uprising as a spur to directed present action. Produced collectively by a company sensitive to

issues of gender, class and race for a small subsidized theatre, it was subsequently staged in rural auction barns as well as the main stages of large cities throughout Canada before being filmed for CBC television. In the preface Rick Salutin, columnist and editor of the Leftist *This Magazine*, and formerly a labour organizer, praises the first production of the play for conveying the impulse “to throw off colonial submissiveness in all areas” (Salutin 202). The play thus represented “a political event, and not just, or even primarily, a theatrical one.” For Salutin, as for Büchner’s successor (and Brecht’s mentor) Erwin Piscator, drama operates to influence social practices.<sup>2</sup> That Brecht’s success as a playwright came largely at the expense of his ideological ambitions does not appear to have chastened Salutin and his company.

As a collective production, *1837* attempts to practice the egalitarian politics it extols. Director Paul Thompson was experienced in staging improvisational drama while Salutin’s previous play *Fanshen* had dramatized the effect of the Communist revolution on a Chinese village. Revolution on the stage occurs twice, the first involving not Upper Canadian proletariat rising against the colonial elite but Ontario actors against the tyranny of theatre hierarchy. In his published production diary Salutin identifies actors as “the real proletariat of the theatre. . . . They are the bottom rung” (187). The actors, including Clare Coulter, David Fox and Eric Peterson, joined Salutin in conducting primary research, toured relevant local historic sites and generated most of the play’s episodes in rehearsal.

As its subtitle suggests, *1837: The Farmers’ Revolt* reflects the aspirations and devices of “peoples” history prominent in then-recent British theatre, such as John Arden and Margaretta D’Arcy’s *The Non-Stop Connolly Show*, Peter Whelan’s *Captain Swing* and David Hare’s own *Fanshen*. Since Piscator developed expressionist devices for Agitprop, documentary drama has tended to historical revisionism. *1837* provides a socialist interpretation of the conflict. “It was the working people against the Empire,” Salutin claims (194). Emphasis falls not on the urban agitation of leaders such as politician and editor William Lyon Mackenzie or attorney John Rolph or officer John Anderson, but on the rural class whom they rallied. The rebellion is thus characterized as class warfare. In early scenes good-hearted homesteaders are forced by the land-granting Lieutenant-Governor off the land they have laboriously cleared, profiteering land agents in league with the Commissioner of Crown Lands extort from peasants huge sums for “cheap” property, and a genteel English woman addresses an audience about “Roughing It In The Bush,” by which she means harassing servant, driver and a helpful

aboriginal to extricate her coach from the mud, all promptly sentimentalized in her florid diary entry. (*Yankee Notions* presents a similarly pushy *arriviste* Susanna Moodie.)

Employing a range of Brechtian techniques, from the alienation effect and third-person acting to the use of flexible sets, minimalist staging, abbreviated scenes and direct address, the creators of *1837* plot to revive a dormant inheritance of Leftist engagement. The first lines are “spoken” by the audience, which is still entering the auditorium when the first characters appear on the stage. As in ancient Athens, where the assembly and the theatre were similar and related structures (the audience voting in both), *1837* presents itself simultaneously before a theatrical audience and a political assembly. Mackenzie thus addresses both an 1833 York and a 1973 Toronto audience: “Ladies and gentlemen, this evening for your entertainment, and with the help of my charming assistant (*Enter charming assistant*) I would like to demonstrate for you a magical trick. . . . *To assistant*. We need the volunteers onstage. *To audience*. I would have got volunteers from the audience, but you’re all far too respectable for that” (215). The scene goes on to dramatize faithfully quoted passages from Mackenzie’s article “Upper Canada—A Venetian State” (see Mackenzie 405–08, Robeson 85–86, or Keilty 24–26). The vaudevillian atmosphere both echoes a popular entertainment of the period and adapts contemporary absurdist devices, including taunting the audience, here teased for its passive bourgeois decorum. Later the audience is more directly assaulted when, during a rebel drilling, a farmer armed with a pitchfork leads an advance towards the auditorium: “*Whirling and stabbing the fork directly out toward the audience. Attack!*” (243). To strengthen its vehemence the scene is cast for women.

As Salutin’s production journal makes clear (see, for example, 200), the objective of the play is self-recognition by the audience. The play attempts to achieve this effect in part through anti-mimetic staging. In a scene inspired by the handbill for an 1830s travelling show (see 191), two farmers stage a parodic act of ventriloquism at a reform rally prior to an address by Mackenzie:

FARMER: . . . a couple of folks have worked up one of their little skits to do for us. So come on up here and get it over with, so we can all get on with hearing the great man’s speech. *Two farmers come up front*. And don’t forget your lines this time. (232)

The performance ends when the “dummy” played by a lumberjack asks the putative ventriloquist “John Bull” to remove his hand from his neck so that he may at last speak in his own rather than the colonizer’s voice, with which

he immediately introduces onto the stage “the man who is giving me a voice,” namely Mackenzie (233). Even Salutin worries about so obvious a device: “It’s a perfect metaphor for colonialism—maybe too perfect,” he notes during rehearsal (191), before concluding that it can be justified as “Agitprop of ‘37” (199). Like much of the play, the scene results in the kind of ham-fisted symbolism to which dogmatic drama is susceptible.<sup>3</sup> Though the play would marshal the political agency of its spectators, its authors regard them with the condescension a doctrinal elite reserves for its subjects; Salutin’s diary presents both the play’s performers and patrons as political dupes overdue for indoctrination (see, for example, 187, 200). The play remains loyal both to Büchner’s antiquated conviction that drama approximates historical truth and to Brecht’s no less superannuated notion that drama may ideologically transform its audience.

## II

Premiered fourteen years later in the same theatre by a company under his direction, Michael Hollingsworth’s *The Mackenzie-Papineau Rebellion* manipulates many of the same conventions as *1837* to serve wholly contrary ends. Hybrid, eclectic, disjunctive, parodic and anti-representational, the third installment of the eight-part *History of the Village of the Small Huts* burlesques the premises of both traditional historiography and historical drama. The play includes much of what Fredric Jameson identifies as the “progressive features” of postmodernism: “its populism and pluralizing democratization, its commitment to the ethnic and the plebeian, and to feminism, its anti-authoritarianism, and anti-elitism, its profound anarchism” (Jameson 120). Stephen Watt observes that “postmodernism seldom connotes the national, the nurtural, or the univocal” and resists being co-opted as a “pure source of civilization and virtue” (Watt 2). These are precisely the connotations *1837* strives to generate. And whereas *1837* reflects the positive later Brecht of, for example, *Life of Galileo*, Hollingsworth seems to take his inspiration from the earlier Brecht of *Man is Man*, in which man is a cipher and idealism is ridiculed through cabaret and circus effects.

“It is an historical epic for an audience raised on rock music and TV,” Hollingsworth explains in his preface to the published version of his *History*. “In the age of electronic information, sixty scenes an hour sets a proper pace. It is the goons of history in their very own ‘Goon Show’” (Hollingsworth viii). The plays are staged within the adaptable confines of a “black box” set; scenes appear and are extinguished in a comic void with the speed of a

television remote controller: *Mackenzie-Papineau* contains one hundred scenes. Reinforced by the exaggerated visual style of the performers, wearing outrageous wigs and mime make-up, dressed in bright oversized costumes and frequently grasping flat magnified props, the series both panders to and interrogates the viewing patterns of its audience, generating novel alienation effects. In contrast to Brecht's intentions and the ambitions of *1837*, such devices disable the political mobilization to which the Upper and Lower Canadian rebellions testify. The velocity of the action staged within the breathtakingly choreographed neutrality of the black box deprives the stage of the temporal and spatial coordinates necessary to gain for its action historical purchase. The mobilizing pretensions of the theatre, and indeed of history itself, is the target of Hollingsworth's eight-part travesty. All is politics, and thus no one form of political intervention may claim legitimacy.

Hollingsworth treats the rebel parties in Upper and Lower Canada with scarcely less satiric indignation than did the conservative colonial oligarchs of the Family Compact and the Château Clique. Mackenzie is the raving monomaniac from whom the creators of *1837* strive to rescue him (reinforced by Salutin's partisan history of the rebellion, which accompanies the printed text of the play). Hollingsworth depicts the leader of the Upper Canadian rebels as a pro-labour agitator who exploits his own labourers. Meanwhile the leader of the Lower Canadian *patriotes* observes no contradiction between his republican campaign and his patrician contempt for the proles:

PAPINEAU: When I proclaimed the rights of man, I meant to say with special rights for the seigneurs and clergy. . . . We will be masters in our own house.

PIERRE: And I will be a servant.

PAPINEAU: You are a servant. Pick up my bags. (Hollingsworth 146)

In a rebellion its leader promptly flees, the agrarian ranks will perish to promote not republican ideals but clerical and landed interests. Though Mackenzie, unlike Papineau, remains to face certain defeat in the battle at Montgomery's Tavern, he becomes again the mad mercurial renegade of Tory history, provoking by his erratic and incendiary behaviour the contempt of his recruits, deprived even of his one recognized asset of eloquence.

Linda Hutcheon argues that postmodern literature contests yet retains the distinction between fact and fiction: "The present and the past, the fictive and the factual: the boundaries may frequently be transgressed in postmodern fiction, but there is never any resolution of the ensuing contradictions. In other words, the boundaries remain, even if they are

challenged” (Hutcheon 72). Where in *Mackenzie-Papineau* are the boundaries? How may an audience recognize them? What are the implications for postmodern historical drama if they cannot do so?

Scrutiny of an historically documented episode of the rebellion should clarify the concern, for both 1837 and *Mackenzie-Papineau* stage versions of the autumn 1837 meeting of the Toronto Reformers at the brewery of radical city councillor John Doel, at which Mackenzie proposed that a brief concatenation of tactical advantages be exploited by an immediate guerilla assault on the government, a proposal met by censure and quickly rejected.<sup>4</sup> Historians have long debated the feasibility of this stratagem, the only detailed testimony of which is Mackenzie’s, documented without commentary in his son-in-law Charles Lindsey’s comprehensive but partisan history of the rebellion, published a quarter-century after its events (see Lindsey vol. 2, 54-56). A dismissive assessment was offered by William Dawson LeSueur, whose revisionist biography led the rebel’s grandson William Lyon Mackenzie King, then Deputy Minister of Labour in the Laurier government, to seek—and obtain—an Ontario court injunction against its publication in 1912 (the book was not published until six years after the premiere of 1837): “The scheme for the immediate seizing of the governor appeared a little too Nicaraguan even to the resolute souls to whom it was proposed,” LeSueur notes (LeSueur 291). Despite his unfavourable depiction of his subject as a messianic, self-destructive fanatic, Mackenzie’s third biographer William Kilbourn approves of this “one clear chance to achieve the goal” (Kilbourn 156). Agreeing with Mackenzie, who lamented “the indecision or hesitancy of those who longed for change but disliked risking anything on such issues” (quoted in Lindsey vol. 2, 56), Kilbourn concludes: “It was not the practical men who were capable of the practical now, but the unstable irresponsible visionary” (Kilbourn 157).

The final act of the two act 1837 begins with this caucus. The only scene drafted by Salutin alone rather than generated by the collective in rehearsal (see preface 195), it champions Mackenzie’s impulse (as does Salutin’s accompanying history; see 122-26). To reinforce the bold acumen of Mackenzie’s tactic, Mackenzie is made to direct not only the caucus but the scene itself. “*Mackenzie sets the scene*,” the stage direction announces. He introduces the characters and establishes the action:

**MACKENZIE:** November 11, 1837. Doel’s Brewery, at the corner of Bay and Adelaide Streets, Toronto. I’ve called an emergency meeting of the leading Reformers of this city. . . . (240)

The speech which follows condenses and sparingly modifies Mackenzie's own account of his proposal, reserving invention for the debate that follows (Salutin condenses two meetings: Rolph attended only the second). Mackenzie inspires complete loyalty in the labourer in attendance but while "*the worker starts determinedly towards the stand of muskets,*" their leaders balk:

ROLPH: Mackenzie—We have pledged ourselves to Reform—not Revolution.

MACKENZIE: It doesn't matter what you call it Rolph. The question is, what are you going to do about it?

DOEL: Well, if it's force we want, I move we bring down our friends from the country.

MACKENZIE: That's the way is it, Doel? Bring down the farmers to do your dirty work?

PARSONS: Well alright then—four weeks. That makes it what? —December seventh.

DOEL: Yes. Agreed. December seventh.

ROLPH: December seventh.

DOEL: Mackenzie?

MACKENZIE: *With a helpless look at the worker, and a gesture of disgust toward his colleagues.* Alright—December seventh!

BLACK. (241-42)

In this documentary scene of working class agitation, Mackenzie emerges as a charismatic and astute proto-socialist leader subverted by the timidity and myopia of his middle-class allies. The rebellion is fatally postponed to December (when Rolph then rashly advanced the date of the assault by three days), thus squandering almost every tactical advantage.

In contrast to *1837*, with its revisionist depiction of an oppressed colonial people, its protagonists thwarted principally by external factors, the legitimacy of the dominant social order assailed, *Mackenzie-Papineau* does not stage oppositional history. Though his adaptation of video techniques and elements of farce, such as anachronism, as well as stylized acting, help to juxtapose history and contemporaneity, Hollingsworth does not encourage notions of individual political agency, as his version of the meeting at Doel's Brewery reflects. Like *1837*, the last scene of the first of the two acts merges two meetings. The scene, however, is now compressed to a twenty-second monologue:

MACKENZIE: We have the names of fifteen hundred men in this book.

Volunteers all, who will rise up on the appointed day if armed. The time to strike is now. Fort Henry is empty, and all troops are in Lower Canada. Four thousand rifles stand guarded by one soldier. We would not have a better chance than now. One short hour can deliver us. Gentlemen, we must whisper our alarms and prepare for December seventh. The day of reckoning. (149)



The monologue combines not simply two historical events but two contradictory intentions. The “day of reckoning” for Mackenzie was of course *not* December the seventh but a month earlier, when the speech here truncated and decontextualized was delivered. Neither the audacity of the guerilla proposal nor the conflict with the moderate reform leadership is presented. Mackenzie here persuades the caucus of his plan when he was forced to concede to their own, and though his tactic was not adopted a subsequent scene implies that it was followed with catastrophic repercussions. Staged in a temporal and spatial void (when, and to whom, is Mackenzie speaking?), the scene travesties Mackenzie’s position to convey the confused tempo of events which Mackenzie, like every other leader in the play, deludedly imagines himself able to direct. Thus historical accuracy is sacrificed to a velocity which in this play represents the aleatory, unhuman and burlesque force of history.

While *1837* acknowledges the contrived material conditions of its own theatrical representation of history, *Mackenzie-Papineau* all but annihilates its historical occasion in its postmodern assault on representation. Where then are the “boundaries” between past and present, fictive and factual, which according to Hutcheon postmodernism respects? Unless schooled in pre-Confederation history, how is an audience equipped to orient itself around a boundary which the play blurs? “In this country we are all victims of the maxim ‘God can not change the past, but historians can,’” Hollingsworth remarks in his preface (viii), as though to repudiate historiography in favour of the truth claims of drama. Does the play “problematize” the past and simply “de-naturalize that temporal relationship” between the past and its historical representation, as Hutcheon suggests (71), or does it rather extirpate any confidence in our capacity to retrieve even a provisional image of the past? Without the audience’s familiarity with archival evidence, how can the necessary boundary be established, given Hollingsworth’s capricious fabrications?

Such questions may not even apply to *Mackenzie-Papineau*, which concerns itself less with history than with the positivist illusions of historical representation. The boundary exists here perhaps as does the path of the electron in quantum mechanics, beyond apprehension yet generating predictable patterns. The opposition between illusion and reality is annulled, since all constructs of reality are regarded as ludic models offering criteria only for the play of contingencies. As in the later Wittgenstein, reality exists as a function of the discourse that articulates it; thus neither historiography nor literature can claim to represent the structure of reality. Like Hayden

White and Michel Foucault, Hollingsworth views historiography as the product of the cultural power of the tradition that legitimizes it (see Palmer 163). He presents history as a species of imaginary discourse with rhetorical force.

The ideological consequences are not calculated to inspire confidence. While *1837* stages a scene of ventriloquism both as an echo of contemporary colonial entertainments and as a metaphor for the political awakening of a colonized people, *Mackenzie-Papineau* throughout adopts the conventions of the equally popular contemporary spectacle of the Punch and Judy Show. Crudely anti-naturalistic and violent, this art form determines the ambience, morality and aesthetic of Hollingsworth's play. "The analogy of the players to puppets is unavoidable," Michèle White writes in her introduction to *The History*. "The actors perform within the box like marionettes, a visual device which emphasizes the political machinations behind the scenes. This, like many other devices Hollingsworth employs, signals the artifice and illusion of theatre and history simultaneously" (xi). Combined with the velocity of the *mise-en-scène*, the staging as puppet-show undercuts the sense of purposive action more than White acknowledges, for who in this play holds the strings? Colborne, first Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada and later Military Governor of Lower Canada, plots behind the scenes to provoke a premature uprising and then to extirpate its supporters, but like all such "political machinations" in the play it is a backfiring pyrrhic victory. Puppets are here manipulated by puppets woefully ignorant of the impersonal origins and primitive nature of their impulses and convictions. With little political clout the fence-sitting lawyers Baldwin and La Fontaine emerge as the inadvertent beneficiaries of the civil strife. All are puppets because all are, in Baudrillard's influential formulation (in a text translated into English four years prior to the play's premiere), mere simulacra of a power which is now diffuse, impersonal, ubiquitous. Like Baudrillard's contemporary American presidents, Hollingsworth's leaders are "nothing other than mannequins of power" (Baudrillard 37). Baudrillard encapsulates the predicament that Hollingsworth, with great theatrical verve, stages: "There is no more fiction that life could possibly confront, even victoriously—it is reality itself that disappears utterly in the game of reality—radical disenchantment, the cool and cybernetic phase following the hot stage of fantasy" (148).

Terry Eagleton assails postmodernism for "its cultural relativism and moral conventionalism, its scepticism, pragmatism and localism, its distaste

for ideas of solidarity and disciplined organization, its lack of any adequate theory of political agency” (Eagleton 134). How may postmodernism legitimate the kinds of politics, such as the anti-universalist feminism of *Yankee Notions*, which postmodernism’s oppositional attitudes inspire? The loss of reference in *Mackenzie-Papineau* makes a travesty of any politically motivated promotion of presence. The play demonstrates how the cathartic interrogation of power may confound the impetus for historical redress. Like British dramatists Edward Bond (for example in *Early Morning*) and Howard Barker (for example in *The Europeans* and *The Bite of the Night*), Hollingsworth challenges all confidence in a retrievable historical referent. The play conveys outrage over the punitive excesses of Colborne’s military in Québec, but its pessimism and historical licence travesty impartially both the vicious cupidity of the imperial oppressor and the easily manipulated naiveté of its victims. The pacing, costumes, montage and stage properties level ruler and ruled alike. The arrangements of power blur the moral distinctions on which oppositional history rests. Oscillating restlessly between historical burlesque and a commitment to the necessity for historical consciousness, *Mackenzie-Papineau*, like *The History* of which it is a part, undermines belief in the feasibility and utility of politically motivated action. Substituting the British imperialists with their American counterparts, Hollingsworth concludes his preface to the series with the claim that Canadians may be sure only that “the new boss will be the same as the old boss. What is going to happen has already happened” (viii). The audience’s complicity in its colonial domination, rather than its potential agency in altering this condition, governs the treatment of history in the play, the recognition of which insight does nothing to mitigate a state where reality can no longer be distinguished from its historiographical and theatrical simulacra.<sup>5</sup>

### III

Depending on the archive, the authors of both *1837* and *Mackenzie-Papineau* are confronted with the dearth of documentary traces of women. Both plays introduce minor female characters, including in Hollingsworth the contrarian voices of Mackenzie and Papineau’s mothers (performed by men). The one woman in Hollingsworth’s original twelve-member cast played not only Sarah Lount, wife of the martyred rebel Samuel, but the triumphant political moderate Robert Baldwin, who at one point recites the verse, “Can man be free if women be a slave” (145). Underlying gender biases are thus exposed. Sarah Lount is not the self-effacing wife of a brave revolutionary,

but the harried, disaffected wife of a negligent husband, whose death she accurately foresees. Their Punch and Judy exchange reveals gender inequalities that rebellion will not soon correct. “When I’m slopping the hogs I’ll think about you,” she quips as her husband departs for another reform meeting. “Don’t worry about it Sam Lount” (140).

The gender anachronisms of 1837 are unobtrusive compromises that call attention to a belated social and political restitution. In his production diary Salutin concludes, “We’ve failed to find a centrality for women in 1837 terms. But we are *doing* the play in *our* terms—with an equal cast, fair distribution of parts, etc. It is an attempt to portray an oppressive reality in a liberated way” (199).

Anne Chislett finds “a centrality for women in 1837 terms” by finding it in 1838, when in the rebellion’s aftermath women petitioned on behalf of their incarcerated male relations for government pardons. The most traditionally staged, structured and performed of these three plays, *Yankee Notions* attempts to retrieve an unacknowledged history in which women are freed from essentializing stereotypes to exercise some influence on political events. Political equality generates gender equality.

While the two other plays dramatize the ideological and military conflicts of the rebellions, *Yankee Notions* depicts a minor jurisdictional conflict between colonial representatives in Upper and Lower Canada. Chislett’s primary source is an obscure personal account of rebellion agitation, *The Wait Letters*, published in 1842 by Benjamin and Maria Wait. Wait had joined Mackenzie on Navy Island near Niagara Falls after the battle of Montgomery’s Tavern to help organize a second insurgency, and was arrested after a failed border raid. Through his wife’s intervention his death sentence was commuted to transportation, and while she campaigned for an amnesty, he escaped from van Diemensland in 1842. The family settled in the U.S., where the Waits published two books on the rebellion (see Read and Stagg 404). Chislett offers a conjectural history in which Maria Wait inspires some of the reforms proposed in the Durham Report.

Like other feminist history plays, *Yankee Notions* integrates issues of class, gender and sexual ideology to document an episode in the history of emancipatory politics (see Wandor 71). It subverts the “great man” concept of history, violates sexual taboos, and validates female solidarity. Maria Wait and the daughter of a convicted rebel scheme to obtain pardons, but are impeded not simply by despotic colonial officials but by their own class attitudes, for while Maria is the politically engaged and proud daughter of a

deceased reformer, Sarah Chandler is an apolitical member of polite society. A dialectic rapidly emerges, for Maria advocates rebellion (she had urged participation on her equivocating husband), while Sarah assumes her father's innocence and is vexed to learn of his revolutionary sympathies (these are exaggerated in the play, for Chandler had simply colluded in Mackenzie's escape to the United States). While Maria wants to murder Chief Justice John Robinson and says so to his face (Chislett 66), Sarah vainly tries to pacify this respected social connection. The sentence-reducing recantation that Maria successfully urges her husband to defy, Sarah all but blackmails her father into signing. (Maria's impulses are vindicated: Robinson has no intention to meet the terms he has set.)

The contrast extends to sexual attitudes, for while Maria is racy and frank, Sarah is a hypocritical prude, outraged to learn of a friend's illegitimate child, yet eventually pregnant with the offspring of the Chief Justice's son Lukin, to whom she had prostituted herself in exchange for a pardon not subsequently issued. Misplaced reverence for the Family Compact even leads her to betray the treasonous contents of Maria's correspondence with her incarcerated husband. While Maria is tactlessly confrontational but honest, Sarah is decorous yet duplicitous.

Most importantly, Maria rejects the distinction between the personal and the political in which Sarah foolishly seeks refuge. En route to Quebec the two argue over how best to appeal to Lord Durham:

SARAH: All I intend to do is beg for mercy.

MARIA: Well, I intend to demand justice, Miss Chandler. And a parliament responsible to the people. (105)

Maria perceives Sarah's complicity in the very Compact that exploits her: "It's people like you who make those bastards as powerful as they are" (127).

Despite her trenchant republican rhetoric, jejune political idealism and lack of decorum, Maria obtains the ear of Lord Durham, who, terminally ill and on the eve of his resignation over the jurisdictional conflict with Lieutenant-Governor Arthur, signs an appeal for clemency. Durham is inspired by Maria's example of perseverance and faith to complete the report he had abandoned. Maria and Sarah have meanwhile exchanged political conceptions, the former extolling family and the latter rebellion, while husband and father respectively are being transported to van Diemenland. In a scene that echoes the ventriloquism episode of *1837*, a letter from him arrives and, reciting its contents to Maria, Sarah speaks in Durham's voice:

Tyranny and greed travel as far as we go, yet from this day on, as far as I go, your common sense will travel with me. So shall my notes for the report I was commissioned to write. (*as MARIA takes the letter from SARAH*) I shall try to keep working long enough to stop The Family Compact from gobbling up your dreams. (140)

In reciting his words Maria recovers her voice, acquires her power, and at once resolves to petition Queen Victoria directly. A girlfriend agrees to subsidize the trip and to raise Maria's infant daughter during her absence, while Maria, conceding the efficacy of gentility, asks Sarah "to teach me how to curtsy" (141). Sexual taboos overcome and female solidarity realized, the protagonists overturn the view that only great men make history. As women they cannot write Durham's Report, but they can influence his proposals.

*Yankee Notions* observes core theatrical conventions, including self-consistent psychological characterization, mimetic action, a dialectical plot involving confrontations, reversals and recognition, and a temporally transparent progression. Direct audience address, a fluid set, juxtaposition and overlapping disturb but do not disrupt the representational illusion. The disadvantaged female point of view, focus on the marginalized subjects of social history, refusal to segregate the domestic from the public sphere, flouting of sexual convention, and interest both in women's application of patriarchal force against other women and in their cooperation, prevail here as in much of feminist historical drama (see Palmer 157-59), including the influential work of Caryl Churchill.<sup>6</sup>

Though such plays reflect the influence of postmodern dramaturgy, *Yankee Notions*, whose first productions were mounted in and around Toronto while the concluding parts of Hollingsworth's *History* were receiving accolades from full houses, national media attention and drama awards, betrays scant engagement with its methods and rejects its mode of characterization. Though both plays present Chief Justice John Robinson as a scoundrel, he is not the same scoundrel. John Strachan's acolyte and successor as leader of the Family Compact,<sup>7</sup> Robinson is an irresistible target. The final scene of *1837* offers a condemned rebel's apostrophe on the futility of the Chief Justice's vindictive efforts to annihilate liberal reform (264). In *Mackenzie-Papineau* sadism and cupidity exclusively direct Robinson's Punch and Judy character. Reversing a jury's verdict, he convicts of murder Mackenzie's apprentice Charles French, who in self-defence had killed an assailant hired by Robinson himself (a malicious travesty of the French case, in which Robinson was not implicated [see Kilbourn 70-72]). Later Hollingsworth transfers to Robinson the historical role played by Alderman

John Powell to underscore Robinson's mendaciousness. Taken prisoner by Mackenzie and the rebels' military commander Captain John Anderson while attempting to spy on the assembling rebels, Powell had falsely sworn himself unarmed, and Mackenzie, as a man of honour, took him at his word. Powell soon after shot Captain Anderson, depriving the rebels of their respected military commander, and but for a flash in the pan would have shot Mackenzie point-blank (Kilbourn 167-69). In Hollingsworth's play Mackenzie is a fool, Anderson realizes as much, and Robinson, substituting for Powell, is a villain.<sup>8</sup>

While Hollingsworth's Robinson is the feudal tenant's stereotype of arbitrary power, a crude mobile token of blood-lust and greed propelled by impersonal forces, Chislett's is the calculating hypocrite of Victorian fiction, like the industrialist Bounderby in *Hard Times*, whose author Robinson hosted when Charles Dickens visited Toronto in 1842 (Brode 269). He violates the terms of a commuted sentence, scorns his son and unconscionably abuses his influence. However, despite his foolish patrician pretensions and unscrupulous methods, Robinson possesses ideological convictions that motivate his conduct no less than avarice and a will to power. Such conviction is underscored by the play's analogies to Sophocles' *Antigone*, whereby this colonial Creon tells his wayward and manipulable son Lukin, "The rule of law is the foundation on which I've built this colony. The foundation on which you will build this nation!" (40).<sup>9</sup> Robinson remains faithful to the ideals of the Duke of Wellington, with whom he celebrated Christmas 1839 at Strathfield Saye (Brode 223); reiterating a Burkean *idée reçue*, Robinson ably defends his Tory principles directly before the audience:

I am accused of corruption because I would never allow hare-brained radicals to prevail over those who, by intellect, education and experience, are most fit to guide this colony to its destiny. I am accused of tyranny because I quelled an uprising that would have imposed mob rule. (52)

The only political figure championed in any of these plays is Chislett's Lord Durham. Despite his genteel condescension, frailty (he was in the terminal stage of consumption) and worldly political pessimism, Durham's traditional status as an architect of Confederation who promoted both the union of the Canadas and responsible government is reinforced. The stage direction introduces him as "like Byron, a Romantic aristocrat of feverish extremes" (34). Inspired by Maria's provocations he attempts to obtain a pardon for the rebels and commits his dwindling energy to rescuing the Canadas from institutional Toryism by urging that the nonelected Executive

be made subject to the will of the popular Assembly. To French Canadians, of course, Durham is no such redeemer but rather the author of a report arguing the isolation, racial inferiority, economic limitations and lack of civilization of the French (“They are a people with no history, and no literature” [Durham 212]); it recommends a graduated but implacable programme of assimilation similar to proposals made to the Colonial Office by Robinson himself: “it must henceforth be the first and steady purpose of the British Government to establish an English population, with English laws and language, in this Province, and to trust its government to none but a decidedly English Legislature” (212).

Despite its title, *1837* scarcely mentions the corresponding and much more incendiary Lower Canada rebellion, while *Yankee Notions*, despite the prominence of Durham, never alludes to it. At the cost of a dispersal of its theatrical energies, *Mackenzie-Papineau* is structured to acknowledge the interrelations between French and English Canada. Though respecting the moderate position of “Radical Jack,” Hollingsworth cheerfully dispels happy English Canadian illusions about Durham’s sympathies. Durham addresses the audience: “When I came here I expected to find a dispute between the people and the executive. Instead I found two nations warring in the bosom of a single state. The struggle is a racial one. The national feud. The French must be assimilated. As an amoeba eats bacteria, the English must eat the French” (164). *Yankee Notions* never presents this motive for political union, depicting Durham instead as a Liberal political pragmatist who hopes to persuade his niece Queen Victoria “to try the simple but novel experiment of governing them [the colonies] well” (140).

Chislett’s play, the only one of the three to include children, concludes with Maria’s infant daughters being passed among the innkeeper’s illegitimate daughter, Maria and Sarah:

SARAH: Maybe by the time our children grow up, there’ll be a new world for them.

ANNIE: Girl, I doubt that there’s more to it than this.

MARIA: There will be, Annie! There has to be. *Blackout* (141)

Female solidarity is reinforced by a shared maternal identity that renders urgent the task of political reform. Historical hindsight fulfills for the audience Sarah’s hopes and vindicates Maria’s confidence, for Durham eventually achieves the political ends the play honours. Because Samuel Chandler and Benjamin Wait were not freed but escaped from Van Diemensland while on parole in 1842, two years prior to an amnesty, the play ends by affirming not the limited personal aims of the women but their larger public purposes.



Here *Yankee Notions* invites its audience to celebrate their success.

1837 too exploits historical hindsight to vindicate the rebellion, but the play implies that the revolutionary energies released await maturation. On the gallows Lount tries to assure his disillusioned comrade that “there will be others coming down that road” of revolution:

MATTHEWS: Sam, we lost—

LOUNT: No! We haven't won yet.

*The trap falls. They dangle by the ropes.*

BLACK. (264)

With the clumsy didacticism that mars the entire play, 1837 thus admonishes its audience to resuscitate the republican idealism for which these men were martyred.

For all its cynicism, *Mackenzie-Papineau* ends even more encouragingly. The play ends with the declaration of the Act of Union (10 February 1841), La Fontaine and Baldwin both entering with copies of the Durham Report that had proposed it. Though La Fontaine bristles at the imperialist, racist provisions (the Act included many provisions prejudicial to the maintenance of French society), he agrees with Baldwin that “this changes everything”:

LA FONTAINE: We will rule our rulers.

BALDWIN: Together.

*(LA FONTAINE and BALDWIN turn toward each other. The lights fade. The end.)*  
(165)

The two reformist lawyers who had balked at rebellion are its mutual political beneficiaries. However, since the play has discredited the rebel leadership, their restraint appears far less niggardly than astute, especially given that they at once seize the potential for moderate liberal reform.<sup>10</sup> Canada remains, as throughout the *History*, “state-of-the-art colonialism,” as Hollingsworth characterizes it in his preface (viii), but the preconditions for a functioning liberal democratic state balancing English and French interests have been met. One of the paradoxes of postmodernism is that *Mackenzie-Papineau's* antihumanist historical fatalism culminates in the affirmation of a pragmatic moderate micropolitics.

Like much partisan drama, 1837 is far too sanguine about the propaedeutic potential of theatre, and too earnestly programmatic in attempting to realize this potential. Though its characters may charge the lethargic theatre patrons with pitchforks, an audience is less likely than a theatre company to confuse a stage property with a weapon. (A naive stage direction notes: “*It is quite ominous. That is a real pitchfork up there onstage*” [242].) In aspiring to

reform its audience, the play only condescends to it. Since *Yankee Notions* celebrates the benefits of incremental, non-violent agitation, the play demands less of its audience. Our distance in time from the injustices it recounts, as well as its reassuring outcome, invites complacency. An ideological commitment to moderate feminism dictates the moral uplift of its contrived ending, an unconvincing *tableau vivant* of embryonic female solidarity. Chislett does not wish to affront her audience, only to instruct it with an entertaining chapter recovered from the prehistory of Canadian feminism. *Mackenzie-Papineau* is more dazzling and less programmatic theatre than either of these plays, but its chief impetus is, oddly, political inertia. Despite dramatizing a heritage of reform, the play's satirical tempo suggests the futility of attempting to identify and dramatize consequential historical events. The past is comic, crude, indecipherable. Hollingsworth thus arrives at Büchner's mature view, when in French exile he was writing the proto-postmodern comedy *Leonce and Lena*. On New Year's Day 1836, just as Mackenzie was returning from the Quebec visit to Papineau which established cooperation between the Upper and Lower Canadian rebels, Büchner, wrote in a letter:

Only a complete misapprehension of our societal relations could make the people believe that through contemporary literature a complete transformation of our religious and societal ideas could be made possible. . . . I go my own way and stay in the field of drama, which has nothing to do with all these controversies. (Büchner 279)

#### NOTES

- 1 1837: *The Farmers' Revolt*, written collectively by Theatre Passe Muraille with Rick Salutin, premiered in Toronto in 1973 before being staged across the country, and received the Chalmers Outstanding Play Award. Directed by the author, Hollingsworth, and produced by his company VideoCabaret, *The Mackenzie-Papineau Rebellion*, the third in the eight part series *The History of the Village of the Small Huts*, was staged in 1987 at Theatre Passe Muraille. Originally commissioned by John Hirsch for the Stratford Festival, Anne Chislett's *Yankee Notions* was first produced by the Ryerson Theatre School in Toronto, then staged professionally in 1992 at the Blyth Festival, where in 1981 she had premiered *Quiet in the Land*, which won a Chalmers Award for best Canadian play and the Governor General's Award for drama.
- 2 In Brecht's formula, "the alterable and altering person" is both dramatized on the stage and seated in the auditorium; as social existence precedes essence, the detached and mutable observer is supposed to be placed in critical contraposition to the action and compelled to come to conclusions not simply about the drama but regarding its political implications (see Brecht 19-20).

- 3 In another burlesque, Lieutenant-Governor Sir Francis Head's minatory "bread and butter speech," made while intervening against reformers in the 1836 Lower Assembly election, is delivered by four actors comprising his head: "Two of their heads are his eyes, two arms are his arching eyebrows, two other arms his nose. So on for his mouth, dimple, etc" (224). The scene yokes to the flaunted artifice of its staging the documentary realism of its text. The dramaturgical disjunction preserves the archival record in the formaldehyde of bombastic satire.
- 4 Lt. Gov. Head had dispatched both the Toronto and Kingston garrisons to quell the Lower Canadian rebellion, leaving the military arsenal unguarded and himself protected by only a single sentinel. Mackenzie proposed to rouse local supporters, seize Head and the 4,000 stand of arms, proclaim a provisional government, and, in the event of Head's certain non-compliance with demands for responsible government, pursue independence. See Lindsey II, 54-56.
- 5 For discussion of these issues see also Thiher, chapter 7, Bertens, chapter 9, and McGowan 28.
- 6 Churchill's 1976 play *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* similarly places the oppression of women among various elements, such as class and religion, to dramatize an alternative social history of the English Civil War. Revolutionary aspirations toward democracy, economic and sexual freedom are suppressed by the war's Puritan victors under Cromwell, who establishes an authoritarian Parliament, invades Ireland and promotes capitalism (see Churchill's introduction to the play, 183).
- 7 For the closeness of Robinson's ties to Family Compact pillar Bishop Strachan, who had been his teacher, priest, military companion during the War of 1812 and lifelong political associate see, among others, Flint, esp. 151-52.
- 8 Robinson soon alienates commander FitzGibbon by delighting to threaten rebel prisoners with violence to their family if they do not betray confederates (160). No such rift in fact occurred, and after the rebellion Robinson wrote laudatory letters to the Colonial Office urging FitzGibbon's preferment. (See McKenzie 155-56.)
- 9 A debauched Haimon, Lukin offers to assist Sarah in exchange for sex. Though initially he serves his father by deceiving her, Lukin soon falls in love with Sarah. Recognizing the implacability of his father's law, Lukin ineffectually attempts to defy him. While Sarah achieves something of Antigone's purity of purpose, Lukin like Haimon fails to negotiate a space between lover and father.
- 10 As leaders of the united Reform party, Baldwin and LaFontaine were soon able to repeal many of the Act's anti-French clauses (for example, the abolishment of French as an official language) and moderate many of its constitutional provisions.

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