

STRACHAN & RYERSON

Guardians of the Future

Douglas Owram

THE TWO CAREERS OF Egerton Ryerson, the “Pope of Methodism,” and John Strachan, first Anglican Bishop of Toronto, span much of the religious and educational history of Upper Canada in the nineteenth century. Yet the two men are probably best known for their activities in a relatively few, though tumultuous, years which preceded the 1837 rebellions. This is not surprising, for it was in this period that the most active and acrimonious debate occurred between them as to the proper relationship between the church, education, and the state. In the positions they took as this debate unfolded, they helped to crystallize some of the basic issues confronting the young colony. The controversy of these years is, however, only a part of the story. The common bases which underlay their positions and the evolution of their ideas over time must also be taken into account in order to understand the important role they played in the formation of an Upper Canadian intellectual tradition. It was a role that was both symbolic and concrete. It was symbolic in that their arguments and their agreements often mirrored the attitudes of the society around them and concrete in that for more than half a century one or both of them was directly involved in forging the educational and religious institutions which became the interpreters and guardians of that tradition.

The backgrounds of the two men and their general views as developed by the 1820's may be summarized quickly. John Strachan, the older of the two, had been born in Scotland but had come to Canada as a young man. Beginning as a tutor to the children of Kingston merchant Richard Cartwright, he soon joined the Church of England, assumed a parish in the colonial capital of York and had, by 1820, become a noted presence among the small ruling elite of Upper Canada.¹ In fact his appointment to the Executive Council in 1815 and to the Legislative Council in 1820 mark the development of that elite into the famous, or notorious, “Family Compact” in the years after the War of 1812.

Whether as churchman or as politician, Strachan did not hesitate to urge the development of the colony along conservative lines. This conservatism was probably rooted in his early Scottish education and religion but it seems to have

developed fully only after he came to Canada. Exposed to the hostile American republic or, more accurately, to Upper Canadian perceptions of that republic, Strachan quickly concluded that the luxury of dabbling in reformist ideas could not be afforded in a colony as vulnerably situated as Canada. As he put it, "I profited from my neighbourhood to democracy."² The result was a social and political conservatism reminiscent of the eighteenth-century British political philosopher Edmund Burke.

Strachan's attachment to conservative ideals seems to have been reinforced by a belief that conservatism was closely linked to loyalty. Continued attachment to Britain was, he felt, dependent on the creation of a conservative social order distinct from the United States. Loyalty and conservatism thus became almost interchangeable terms and were, together, Strachan's most basic concern. Other issues, including religious and educational ones, were thus viewed in relation to this larger question. Both the church and the school became, in Strachan's scheme of things, socializing agents to encourage adherence to traditional values. Such a relationship would develop the morality of the people and, equally important, strengthen their attachment to their government and constitution.

In order to ensure that the institutions of religion, education and the nation reinforced rather than challenged one another, Strachan believed it imperative that education be linked to the church and that the church, in turn, be "wedded to the state." As it was the church's role to encourage loyalty to the state and its values, so it was the state's role to support the church in its mission. Of course different nations would support different denominations and do so in different ways. In Upper Canada in the 1820's, however, such a position meant recognition of the Church of England as the established church and advocacy of the Clergy Reserves and a church-oriented University in order to assure it a dominant position. It was this point, with its attendant implications, that more than anything else brought John Strachan into controversy with Egerton Ryerson.

The public debate between them was triggered by a sermon of Strachan's marking the death of Bishop Jacob Mountain in 1825. The sermon itself, while a clear summary of Strachan's views, did not bring forth any new or remarkable ideas. In it he simply reiterated his long-standing contention that "a Christian nation without a religious establishment is a contradiction."³ The sermon was, nonetheless, a minor landmark in Canadian history, for when it was published the following year it caused a twenty-three-year-old Methodist, Egerton Ryerson, to publicly attack Strachan's pretensions for the Church of England. A clash of personalities and ideals thus began which would not end until Strachan's death more than forty years later.

Ryerson was born into a loyalist family in Charlotteville township, Upper Canada, in 1803. Besides their attachment to the monarchy, Ryerson's parents, and especially his mother, brought to British North America a deep sense of

religion. Ryerson inherited these traits and religion became for him the central focus of his life.⁴ His quest led him to abandon the Anglicanism of his father and to turn instead to the evangelical Methodists. As a man who found in Methodism a religious satisfaction that he could not find in the Church of England, it is not surprising that Ryerson found the idea of an established church abhorrent. He naturally saw his chosen denomination as a major force for spiritual good in the young colony and the proposition that it be discriminated against in favour of a church he had left thus seemed both absurd and morally dubious. Marriage of church and state, Ryerson was fond of saying, was "adultery."

If it was politics in the broadest sense that shaped Strachan's view of religion, it was religion that determined Ryerson's view of politics. Strachan objected to undirected religious enthusiasm, such as that practised by the Methodists, because of the dangers it implied for the social order and the state. Ryerson objected to the formal linkage of church and state because it degraded the true purpose of religion. "When we see the heavenly affection which she [the church] infuses into the minds of men represented as nothing more than an attachment to a particular constitution," Ryerson complained, "we are sensible that the religion of the meek Saviour is being made to bleed by a wound more fatal than those which are inflicted by the ravings of infidelity."⁵ The formalized view of religion as a social agent collided with the evangelist enthusiasm of North American Methodism.

Underlying this clash was a commonly held belief that education and religion were inextricably related to each other and to the creation of social values. Christian values developed through a sound school system were seen by both men as the bedrock of moral standards for man and governments. And as both also realized, the issues were all the more important because they were concerned not so much with the present as with the future. As Ryerson said, in the school yard "we see, in embryo, our future Legislators, Ministers, Physicians, Parents."⁶

The issues involved were so basic to the development of the colony and so controversial that the initial debate soon widened to deal with other matters. In the process Ryerson became as much identified with political matters as was Strachan. Certainly both men found themselves associated, sometimes willingly and on occasion unwillingly, with issues far beyond the realm of education and religion. This was perhaps inevitable. The questions of education and religion were fundamental expressions of developing colonial values. As a result their debate had implications not only for the questions of church establishment or school systems but for the much more general question of the direction the colony was to take in future years.

Strachan needed no justification for involvement in political matters. It was central to his own views. Ryerson, however, with his belief that religion was above politics, was always somewhat on the defensive about his political activities. Nor

was his position made easier by recurrent criticisms that he was using his post as editor of the Methodist *Christian Guardian* (Toronto) to promote his own views. Ryerson always maintained that religion and related concerns lay behind his forays into the political issues of the day and to some extent he was correct. Religious concerns first brought Ryerson into the arena of public controversy and these issues continued to dominate in his assessment of more secular concerns. Nevertheless, it must be noted that Ryerson was as much a controversialist as Strachan and once challenged on a topic, any topic, he refused to back down.

For both historical and contemporary reasons Ryerson's widening debate with Strachan tended to draw him toward the developing Reform Party in Upper Canada. Historically, Methodism was associated with reform elements in England and it would seem that many members of the church equally tended to sympathize with reform in the colony. This was reinforced by the generally hostile attitude of the Compact, and most notably Strachan, toward Methodism, and by the support found in Reform circles for the Methodist opposition to church establishment. In one sense then, Egerton Ryerson became a member of the opposition because John Strachan was a member of the government. Whatever the exact reasons, Ryerson found that in the turbulent climate of the late 1820's temporal and secular matters were inseparable. Before long he became almost as much a symbol of reform as Strachan was a symbol of conservatism.

YET TO DEAL ONLY with the personal antagonism between these two men, and their associations with political movements in the years before 1837, would be to distort their true significance. A closer examination of their positions and of the way in which these positions evolved, reveals certain cross currents. Strachan, on occasion, expressed surprisingly liberal views and Ryerson quite conservative ones. Such an examination also shows that beneath the controversy over an established church and current political topics lay a number of commonly held opinions as to the values necessary for the proper development of Upper Canada.

The liberal side of the conservative Strachan may be shown by two examples. First, as is well known, his proposed University for Upper Canada as set out in the 1827 charter was much more open than were the English universities of the time. It would, it was true, be associated with the Church of England and its divinity school open only to students of that faith. In all other areas, however, students of any denomination were free to attend. Second, Strachan's attitude toward elementary education was very similar to Ryerson's. Drawing from his Scottish heritage he rejected the class-oriented English system in favour of an open, tax-supported school system that would allow the poor as well as the

wealthy access to education.⁷ Intelligence, he believed, should be allowed an opportunity to develop whatever the social class from which it originated. It was a position that seemed rather strongly to favour the encouragement of social mobility for someone committed to a conservative society, but then it must be remembered that Strachan was the product of a working class family. He was well aware that one did not have to come from the elite to develop the conservative values which he considered both so important and so proper.

That Ryerson was not quite as radical as either his opponents or some of his supporters may have thought began to become apparent in 1833. As Upper Canadian politics became increasingly polarized, Ryerson found it increasingly uncomfortable to be associated, even casually, with radicals like William Lyon Mackenzie. His visit to England that year, the attempt of Canadian Methodism to work with English Wesleyanism, and English radical Joseph Hume's comments on the desirability of "independence" for Canada all served to emphasize to Ryerson his fundamental attachment to the monarchy and British constitutional practice. Ryerson soon found himself engaged in a controversy with Mackenzie that was, in some ways, more bitter than his long standing debate with Strachan. In the ensuing months he made it clear to his readers that he had completely dissociated himself from radical reform. Subsequent events reinforced this aversion to Radicalism. By the time he returned to the editorship of the *Guardian* in 1838, after a four year absence, many of his editorials revealed strong conservative tendencies.

The common ground between Ryerson and Strachan continued to increase through the 1840's. Ryerson, it is true, was more amenable to the union of Upper and Lower Canada. Also, while Strachan's influence in government circles decreased with the collapse of the Family Compact, Ryerson's grew sharply with his appointment as Superintendent of Education in 1844. Nevertheless, while differences remained in positions and policies, the decade's tensions tended to emphasize their common ground and common opponents. Neither man felt comfortable with the political tendencies of these years nor with their most powerful expression, the Reform Party of Robert Baldwin and Louis Lafontaine. "Partyism," patronage, secularism, and radicalism often seemed to be the real meaning of the Reform version of responsible government. This was as true for Ryerson as for Strachan and it simply reinforced his conservatism. His involvement in government in these years came, after all, in defence of the conservative administration of William Henry Draper. Values of "loyalty, order, stability" — conservative values — seemed threatened by challenges from the left and both men were led increasingly to similar views as they grew older.

Nothing better illustrates this trend than the way in which their involvement in the tortuous University question developed. Strachan's original charter, however liberal by English standards, had been vehemently opposed by all those,

including Ryerson, who saw it as an attempt to establish the Church of England in Upper Canada. That opposition had effectively prevented any action on the charter for years. Successive administrations had altered the original concept of the University until, by 1849, Robert Baldwin established a largely secular University of Toronto to act as the centre of higher education in Canada West.

The defeat of Strachan's intentions may have given Ryerson satisfaction but the new University of Toronto certainly did not. Ryerson's opposition to a University dominated by the Church of England had never implied support for a secular university. Religion and higher education, he felt, were best tied together and this included the presence of denominational colleges. Consistent with this attitude was his involvement in the creation of the Methodist Upper Canada Academy (later Victoria College) and his willingness to seek government funds for that institution. In his acceptance of government support, often to the dismay of other Methodists, and in his support for denominational universities, Ryerson's views were not that different from those of Strachan. The only basic disagreement was whether the Church of England should have exclusive or dominant support from the government for its particular institution.

Even that difference disappeared with the creation of the University of Toronto. Strachan had lost his original charter and was reduced to following in the footsteps of the Methodists by setting up a denominational college. In fact his pleas for support pointed to the precedents set by Victoria College and the Presbyterian Queen's University, asking simply for "those privileges that have been granted to others."⁸ Both men were by this time in an identical position on the question of higher education. They supported the principle of government-aided denominational colleges and they were united in their hostility to the "Godless University" that had been established at Toronto. The similarity could not help but be noticed by contemporaries. As early as 1846 a supporter of non-denominational universities, smarting under the combined criticism of two of the most powerful churchmen in Canada, complained of "two cheaply made Doctors, till very lately the most implacable enemies," now working in alliance to prevent the creation of the new University.⁹

The common views that Ryerson and Strachan held on educational and other matters thus indicates that they cannot be used as some sort of thesis and antithesis within early Upper Canadian society. For in spite of the often acrimonious clashes their positions on various issues and on the basic relationship of church, education, and society had many similarities. Moreover, these similarities were, in many ways, quite conservative ones. Many of the positions taken by Ryerson as much as by Strachan would seem to support the contention that there existed within Upper Canada a strong conservative tradition.¹⁰ It is a minor, but interesting, point that Ryerson, on his trip to England in 1834, found his own beliefs reflected among that group which he termed the "moderate

Tories," and that his opposition to the Family Compact was never expressed as opposition to conservatism in itself.¹¹ John Strachan may have been somewhat more liberal than his opponents thought but Egerton Ryerson was certainly more conservative than the more radical reformers had hoped in those early years.

If it is not possible to use Strachan and Ryerson as examples of two dramatically alternative ideological streams, neither is it possible to use them to prove that there was in fact an incipient underlying consensus within Upper Canadian thought.¹² To do so would be to ignore two things. First, for all their agreements there remained serious and profound disagreements. Second, and more important, there was a third element present through these years. This element, most obviously represented by William Lyon Mackenzie's supporters in the 1830's and the Clear Grits in the later 1840's and 1850's, had a different, and more radical view of the proper course for Canada. In those areas of most interest to Strachan and Ryerson, education and religion, the Radicals viewed with suspicion any association between church and state. With the support of other reform elements, including powerful individuals like George Brown, this group often forced Strachan and Ryerson to take a common stand. The basic and profound differences that existed were what made issues such as the Clergy Reserves and the problem of the Universities so difficult to resolve.

Yet the issues eventually were resolved and it might be tempting therefore to argue that whatever clash had existed in the 1830's and 1840's a consensus was emerging, at least in these basic areas, by the 1850's. Even a conclusion such as this would, however, be premature. These issues were resolved not because an ideal solution was found which could appeal to all but because an acceptable one, sometimes barely tolerable, was discovered. The final solution of the Clergy Reserves Question or Universities question did not completely satisfy Ryerson, Strachan, nor for that matter the Clear Grits. They were at best compromise solutions wrung from often reluctant alliances of various groups within Canadian society.

It is in this process of compromise that the relationship between Ryerson and Strachan and their influence on the development of Upper Canadian traditions becomes meaningful. Where common beliefs were challenged they worked together or, more accurately, worked separately toward the same goals. Thus Ryerson and Strachan's influence was brought to bear jointly to ensure that religion would not be removed from the educational process and to preserve denominational universities. Conversely, Ryerson often worked with Reform elements to defeat Strachan's policies on church establishment. Many of the basic issues confronting Ryerson and Strachan were resolved through such compromises because compromise was the only way to gain the necessary support from shifting coalitions of conservatives, moderates, and radicals. Answers were eventually

found after years of deadlock, only because it became increasingly apparent to those involved that they would never achieve their ideal solution.

The growing recognition of the necessity for compromise was what put Ryerson into an increasingly powerful position as time went on. His moderate conservatism put him in the middle of widely ranged views. It was an uncomfortable position, open to attack from both extremes, but it was also an ideal place from which to form alliances in the face of more dreaded alternatives. This is why, in part, the outsider of the 1820's became the voice of the government in the 1840's on questions of education and remained in that position until he retired from the post of Superintendent of Education in 1876. Whatever arguments Ryerson had with various administrations (and there were many of them), he survived for the reason that his positions remained close to the compromise solutions acceptable to the majority.

In contrast John Strachan found himself with increasingly less influence on successive administrations. In the 1850's, at a time when John A. Macdonald forged a new moderate conservatism while George Brown worked to absorb the radicalism of the Clear Grits, Strachan found that his extreme positions found little support. Like William Lyon Mackenzie, Strachan found that the polarization of the 1830's was not acceptable a generation later. There is perhaps a certain irony in Strachan's warning to his clergy that the Church of England should settle the Clergy Reserves on a basis that would leave it independent of the government. "Till such separation take place," he warned, "it is clear from past experience that we can have no peace."¹³ In the quest for the marriage of church and state, it would seem, even the more ardent suitor finally realized the match was impossible.

Strachan's failure to achieve his goals does not mean that he is without long term significance in Canadian history. Indeed, his legacy is in many ways as important as that of Ryerson. First, in practical terms, in his work on the 1816 Common School Act and its subsequent amendments he developed much of the framework for education in Upper Canada. It was a structure which Ryerson would complete years later. Second, and more important, Strachan provided a counterweight to more radical views. His extreme positions were not popular enough to determine the direction of religion and education in Upper Canada. As has been argued, however, many of his positions appealed to those with more moderate views, including Ryerson. It is perhaps an indication of the power of such a combination that these two men between them so dominated the formation of educational and religious institutions in Upper Canada.

Through the clashes and compromises of a half century the basic institutions of the colony were established. Consensus did eventually emerge out of compromise as those schools and universities became accepted as the interpreters of social values. It was a consensus achieved not at the time of their establishment but as

new generations went through them. This was perhaps fitting, for both Ryerson and Strachan had always known that it was the future generation which would determine the nature of Canada.

NOTES

- ¹ For a biography of Strachan see J. L. H. Henderson, *John Strachan 1778-1867* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1969).
- ² Strachan to Dr. James Brown (Oct. 21, 1809). Cited in J. L. H. Henderson, *John Strachan: Documents and Opinions* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1969), 26.
- ³ John Strachan, *A Sermon Preached at York, Upper Canada, Third of July 1825, on the Death of the Late Bishop of Quebec* (Kingston: n.p., 1826).
- ⁴ For a biography of Ryerson see C. B. Sissons, *Egerton Ryerson His Life and Letters*, 2 vols. (Toronto, 1937, 1947). See also Neil McDonald and Alf Chaiton, eds., *Egerton Ryerson and His Times* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1978).
- ⁵ Sissons, vol. 1, 24-25.
- ⁶ *Christian Guardian* (Jan. 16, 1830).
- ⁷ J. D. Purdy, "John Strachan's Educational Policies, 1815-1841," *Ontario History*, 64, No. 1 (March 1972), 45-64.
- ⁸ Strachan to Governor General Lord Elgin (Jan. 20, 1851). Cited in Arthur Doughty, ed., *The Elgin-Grey Papers*, vol. 2 (Ottawa: Public Archives of Canada, 1937), 802.
- ⁹ *Toronto Examiner* (Feb. 18, 1846). Cited in Sissons, vol. 2, 106.
- ¹⁰ On the conservative tradition in Upper Canada see S. F. Wise, "Upper Canada and the Conservative Tradition," Edith Firth, ed., *Profiles of a Province* (Toronto: Ontario Historical Society, 1967), 20-33.
- ¹¹ *Christian Guardian* (Oct. 30, 1833).
- ¹² See on this question of consensus and conflict, S. F. Wise, "Liberal Consensus or Ideological Battleground," Canadian Historical Association, *Historical Papers*, 1974, 1-14.
- ¹³ *John Strachan: Documents and Opinions*, 226.

BISHOP TO KING

David Solway

Sir, the kingdom is all in turmoil.
The knights refuse to bring you tribute
and converse only with their grooms;

the rooks are unprepared for war
and covet the center of the board;
and as for the queen, I must report