

Anti-British in Every Sense of the Word? Methodist Preachers, School Libraries, and the Problem of American Books in Upper Canada, 1820-1860

SCOTT McLAREN
York University

In the spring of 1827, the Methodist preacher Anson Green sent a letter from his post in Ancaster, Upper Canada, to New York. In it, he asked Nathan Bangs, Senior Agent of the Methodist Book Concern, to send a bulk order of Sunday school books to supply enthusiastic young readers along his preaching circuit. Green explained that he was eager to follow the example of preachers working south of the border whose trumpeted successes in establishing Sunday schools and Sunday school libraries had “given a zest to the cause of Sabbath Schools on this circuit, which it never possessed before.”¹ Bangs, who had himself laboured as a Methodist preacher in the Upper Canadian backwoods some twenty years earlier, was so delighted to receive Green’s letter that he published it in the *Christian Advocate* to demonstrate to his readers that the Methodist Sunday school movement was advancing not only in the United States, but north of the border as well.² Indeed, the demand for Sunday school books in Upper Canada must have been considerable. By the end of the summer, the Methodist Sunday School Union had twenty-five book depositories operating in North America, including one in Stoney Creek, Upper Canada.³

The cause of Methodist Sunday schools in North America was boosted considerably just about the time Green was putting pen to paper with the establishment of a separate Methodist Sunday School Union designed to counter what was perceived to be the creeping Calvinism of

the officially nonsectarian American Sunday School Union.⁴ Nathan Bangs was elected to serve as the denominational Union's first corresponding secretary and immediately published a formal set of guidelines for those preachers eager to establish Sunday schools along their circuits.⁵ In the years that followed, Bangs and his successors also set about radically expanding the Methodist Book Concern's Sunday school offerings. Indeed, Abel Stevens, Bangs's biographer and one of the nineteenth century's chief historians of American Methodism, remarked that the Concern's sustained publication of "juvenile literature and periodicals" helped to transform the Sunday School Union itself into a "mighty auxiliary to the Book Concern."⁶

But what became a relatively straightforward and mutually reinforcing relationship between Methodist Sunday schools and the Book Concern in the United States yielded something rather more complicated in Upper Canada. As this paper will argue, Methodist Sunday school libraries north of the border were more than simply denominational sites where Methodists took their first systematic steps toward raising literacy levels across the colony. As ready repositories of books authored and published by Americans, they also had the potential to be interpreted by critics as contested transnational spaces with the capacity to foster subversive ideas about His Majesty's government and even, if the more strident detractors are to be believed, foment open acts of armed rebellion.⁷ Yet their growth and the growth of later nonsectarian common school and public libraries in Upper Canada were intimately related. Methodists found themselves at the heart of both movements. The broad principles that animated them in the first sphere influenced and informed their strategies in the second.

Methodists in Upper Canada had always struggled against suspicion on the part of the colony's elite that they were a politically treacherous lot. Although the Church of England clergyman John Wesley founded Methodism in Britain in the mid-eighteenth century, it had not spread to the colony through the agency of loyal British Wesleyan missionaries, but by the determined efforts of radical American Methodist preachers who first crossed the frozen St. Lawrence in the winter of 1790.⁸ That origin, especially in the shadow cast by the War of 1812, had long provided the province's elite with all the warrant they needed to discredit Methodists as anti-British and politically faithless. Everyone from Commander Isaac Brock and Lieutenant Governor Francis Gore to rank-and-file Orangemen condemned Methodists "as disloyal because of their American origin."⁹

John Strachan, a prominent Church of England clergyman and Methodism's chief detractor in the colony, added his own flourish to the swirling anti-Methodist rhetoric when he argued that Methodism's "close connections with American Conferences" caused it to be "tainted by religious dissent and republicanism."¹⁰

American schoolbooks were perhaps the only thing worse than American Methodism for the social wellbeing of the colony – at least according to a long and proud tradition maintained by the colony's Loyalists and conservative political actors since the War of 1812. Indeed, the artillery hardly had time to cool before a letter appeared in the *Kingston Gazette* and the *Montreal Herald* complaining about American books. "They teach us," the writer objected, "to hate the government that we ought, and are bound, to support; to revile the country that we are bound to love and respect; and to think that there is nothing great or good, generous or brave, anywhere to be found but in the United States."¹¹ John Carroll, who began attending a Methodist Sunday school in the colonial capital of York in 1818, recollected passionate objections on the part of his father to the use of American schoolbooks. "The eulogies on Washington and Franklin, and other American notorieties," he recalled, "used to call out vehement denunciations from father's 'Britisher' tongue."¹² John Strachan, never one to pass up an opportunity to throw a few stones when a crowd gathered, offered his own reproofs in *A Visit to the Province of Upper Canada* published under his brother's name in 1819. He singled out for particular scorn primary schoolbooks, condemning them with seductive consonance for being "pervaded with pernicious politics" and, he added, "breathing hatred to the parent state."¹³

Colonial censure of American schoolbooks of the kind Green was so anxious to put in the hands of his young congregants reached its legislative apogee in the summer of 1847 when Egerton Ryerson, the Chief Superintendent for Education in the province, submitted his *Special Report on the Operations of the Common School Act of 1846* to the Legislative Assembly to defend, in part, Section XXX of the 1846 Act banning the use of "foreign Books" – a euphemism universally understood to mean American books – from all of the colony's common schools.¹⁴ Like conservative animadversions before, Ryerson's report denounced such books "because they are, with very few exceptions, anti-British, in every sense of the word." But Ryerson went further than that – further than all but a small handful of the most outspoken conservatives. "I believe it will be found, on inquiry," the *Report* speculated ominously, "that in

precisely those parts of Upper Canada where the United States Books had been used most extensively, there the spirit of insurrection in 1837 and 1838, was most prevalent.”¹⁵ Ryerson’s intimations could not have been clearer: American books could not be tolerated in the colony’s schools for the simple reason that the reading of such books had led to nothing less than open acts of armed rebellion against the colony’s rightful government. What Ryerson’s *Report* failed to foreground, however, was the fact that it was precisely in those areas of the colony where Methodists had been the most successful in establishing Sunday school libraries that, “the United States Books had been used most extensively.”

Scholars who have written about the American schoolbook question in Upper Canada have tended to take Ryerson at his word. There has also been an unfortunate tendency to conflate the use of textbooks intended specifically for curricular use in the classroom with schoolbooks in Common school libraries. While it is widely acknowledged that the Board of Education, established by the 1846 Common School Act under Ryerson’s direction as Chief Superintendent, urged the adoption of textbooks produced by the Irish Commissioners of National Education in the colony’s classrooms, his preference for non-American schoolbooks outside that defined curricular context is far less consistent.¹⁶ Setting aside that distinction altogether, however, scholars have been content to observe instead that Ryerson “had a dislike for the wide use of American books,” that “American books . . . offended Ryerson and those who shared his Loyalist sensibilities,” and even that Ryerson’s major objective in establishing control over the colony’s “schoolbooks” was to rid “the schools of republican, chauvinist and anti-British literature from the United States, which many teachers and superintendents believed had had a pernicious influence on the minds of young Canadians.”¹⁷ Sweeping statements of this kind have been common at least in part because they strike the reader as largely consistent with Ryerson’s privileged background. After all, he was the son of a United Empire Loyalist whose family had taken up arms to fight rebels in the Revolutionary War and to defend the colony from American invaders in 1812. Ryerson was also the product of the colony’s elite conservative grammar schools where he later found employment as a teaching assistant.¹⁸

The scholarly consensus expressed by such historians, while credible from one perspective, serves to obscure the important fact that Ryerson understood himself to be something more than a conservative bureaucrat. Ryerson was also a Methodist preacher. Indeed, after challenging John

Strachan's denunciation of Methodists for teaching "what they do not know, and which from their pride, they disdain to learn," in the mid-1820s, he went on to become Methodism's chief public advocate as founding editor of the popular *Christian Guardian* newspaper.¹⁹ During those early years, Ryerson also presided over the Methodist Book Room in the colony's capital where he worked closely with the Methodist Book Concern in New York to import large quantities of American books to stock the shelves of the colony's burgeoning Sunday school libraries.²⁰ After his appointment to Superintendent of Education in 1844, moreover, Ryerson made the deliberate and not uncontroversial decision to retain his status as a preacher despite his public responsibilities.²¹ Anson Green, meanwhile, the same preacher who had written to Nathan Bangs in the 1820s to solicit books for Sunday schools in Ancaster, found himself at the helm the Methodist Book Room and, like Ryerson before him, continued to liaise with Americans to secure ever greater discounts on Sunday school and other books published by the New York Methodist Book Concern for wholesale importation into Upper Canada.²² When Ryerson put pen to paper connecting the use of American schoolbooks with the rebellions of 1837 and 1838 in his *Special Report*, he knew only too well that Methodist Sunday school libraries all across the colony were bursting at the seams with American books that continued to flow in ever-larger quantities across the border.²³ How can this be accounted for?

It is widely acknowledged that Egerton Ryerson was an astute politician who was adept at playing a long game. When viewed in this broader context, the possibility emerges that Ryerson's objections to the use of American schoolbooks, however vociferous, may have been driven more by political exigency than principled ideology. In other words, although Loyalists certainly did object to American books, his earlier experiences, and his later choices, suggest that Ryerson did not genuinely share their anxieties. Yet by the time Ryerson's *Special Report* was tabled in the Assembly in 1847, he found himself on the cusp of implementing some major reforms to the province's educational system and he knew that he could not afford to be perceived as inattentive to the cultural and political dangers many conservatives in particular believed the United States continued to pose to the colony's future. In other words, Ryerson's decision to institute and defend a ban on the use of American schoolbooks cannot be understood without consulting the wider religious and political contexts in which that decision was taken.

The first half of the 1840s had proven to be particularly difficult

years in the life of the province. They were equally trying for Ryerson and the Methodist cause more generally. Methodist troubles began with the collapse of the precarious union between Canadian Methodists and British Wesleyans in 1840 – a collapse that the latter party blamed chiefly on Egerton Ryerson. Against the imperious wishes of the British Wesleyans, and Jabez Bunting in particular, Ryerson remained unyielding in his use of the *Christian Guardian* to press for the principle of disestablishment in Upper Canada. Things finally came to a head when Ryerson attempted to subvert the authority of the British Wesleyan leadership by directly petitioning the Governor General “to deprive the British Conference of its annual grant from the Imperial Government for the extension of missions in the province.”²⁴ In response, the Wesleyans drew up charges in which Ryerson was singled out for condemnation.²⁵ Indeed, so rancorous did the infighting become that Ryerson made contingency plans to take a pulpit in New York in the event the Wesleyans succeeded in having him expelled.²⁶ In the end, however, Canadian Methodists elected to stand by Ryerson rather than bow to Bunting’s demands. Seven years later, and just months before Ryerson tabled his *Special Report* in the Assembly, the Union was renewed. Despite the fact that Ryerson’s brother John had been instrumental in the rapprochement, and although Egerton Ryerson had resigned from active pastoral duty several years earlier, the goodwill of the Wesleyans must have seemed to him highly tentative in those early months.

Meanwhile, the colony’s government had been racked by an ongoing struggle on the part of political reformers to make the Executive Council responsible to the Assembly and thereby curb what they held to be the arbitrary power of the Governor General. In the spring of 1844, Ryerson publicly sided with Governor General Charles Metcalfe in a series of nine tracts that argued in favour of Metcalfe’s prerogative to act against the wishes of his counselors.²⁷ By October, in part thanks to Ryerson’s intervention, the conflict reached a plateau when elections returned only a minority of candidates opposed to the Governor General.²⁸ That Metcalfe was grateful to Ryerson cannot be doubted. Indeed, it was widely believed that Ryerson’s appointment as Superintendent of Education was a reward for his service in the controversy. Although Ryerson strenuously denied it, everyone knew he had had his eye on the post for several years.²⁹ Reward or not, Ryerson had managed in the process to earn himself the resentment of the colony’s reformers, including the increasingly formidable Robert Baldwin. Later, when Ryerson was abroad on an extensive

educational tour of Europe and America, Metcalfe was forced from office by illness while Baldwin and his supporters continued to gain influence. Ryerson lost another ally when, in the midst of a massive influx of potato famine victims in 1847, typhus broke out and claimed the life of Roman Catholic Bishop Michael Power, a man Ryerson understood to be a staunch ally in his struggle for public education.³⁰ Under the circumstances, it is not difficult to imagine how doubtful the ground must have felt under Ryerson's feet. "It is quite certain," his brother John warned him in February of 1847, "that combined and powerful efforts are being made against you by certain parties, no doubt with a determination to destroy you as a public man, if they can. The feeling of the 'radical' party is most inveterate. They are determined, by hook or by crook, to turn you out of the office of Chief Superintendent of Education."³¹

With the reformers so completely disenchanted, alienating the remaining conservatives who continued to support Ryerson's appointment and his agenda must hardly have seemed an option. Conservative concern, moreover, about the widespread harm American books continued to cause across the colony had not declined. On the contrary: the Rebellions of 1837 and 1838 exacerbated the sentiment. "Every Canadian school book," thundered the conservative *Patriot* in December 1838, "ought to be *written* by a Briton, *printed* by a Briton, and *sold* by a Briton."³² Robert Baldwin Sullivan, Robert Baldwin's cousin and a turncoat reformer, reported as a member of Lieutenant Governor George Arthur's Executive Council that "The books [teachers in Upper Canada] use are all American filled with inflated accounts of American independence and the glorious wars with England." Students who read such books learn that "The British Government . . . is a chimerical monster . . . Ireland is a joyless land of bogs, pigs and catholics [*sic*], and Scotland an out of the way place in which the mountains and the men have a national and barbarous prejudice against decent covering."³³ By the 1840s, even some of the teachers had begun to grumble. One protested that the American books he found in the classroom were "decidedly anti-British," another complained that an unnamed history of the United States depicted "British soldiers in the darkest colours," while yet another objected that these foreign texts distorted history by portraying "the battle of Lundy's Lane [as] a great 'American Victory.'"³⁴ Regardless of whether or not these books were truly as dangerous as conservative critics stated, Ryerson no doubt felt an urgency to address such concerns in his official policies.

Amid the noise generated by ongoing conflicts in the colony's

political and religious affairs, affairs that loomed especially large for Ryerson at a time when his coveted post was under threat, the difficulty of gauging his sincerity in opposing the use of American schoolbooks seems clear. In order to shed some fresh light on the degree to which Ryerson's concern about American books was either truly based in his lived experiences as a preacher, bookseller, editor, and educator, or largely the rhetorical pretence of a politician calculated to assuage the anxieties of his conservative allies in government, it will be useful to consider in more detail the means by which Sunday schools libraries grew under Methodist sponsorship in Upper Canada, the extent to which books known to have filled those libraries contained sentiments that were truly prejudicial to the British government, and the policy decisions Ryerson took later in his career as Chief Superintendent when his own position was less threatened.

When Anson Green first wrote as a young preacher to solicit books for Sunday schools along his circuit, the Book Concern had only a few offerings in the form of spellers, Testaments, and American reprints of texts authored mostly by British writers. In the early 1830s, largely in response to the establishment of the Methodist Sunday School Union several years earlier, the Concern radically expanded its Sunday school offerings and began publishing books not just for instruction, but specifically for the stocking of libraries. These books, gathered together under the series name the *Sunday School and Youth Library*, were sold in bulk and at inexpensive rates. One of the first catalogues of the series appeared in 1833 and listed some fifty books carrying a total purchase price of \$9.78 – less than 20¢ per title on average.³⁵ Most of these were strictly religious in nature. A very significant number of the titles continued to be American reprints of texts authored by British writers including various catechisms, *Dr. Watt's Divine Songs for Children*, Richard Watson's *Apology for the Bible*, and Eliza Cheap's *The Guilty Tongue*. Over the next fifteen years, however, despite the fact that the pedagogical emphasis of the Sunday school curriculum shifted ever more in the direction of strictly religious instruction, the series was diversified and expanded to include more than four hundred different titles from a variety of genres such as history, biography, travel literature, and science.³⁶ As the catalogue grew, moreover, the *Sunday School and Youth Library* came to include a much higher proportion of texts authored or edited by American writers.

The titles in this series most likely to offend conservative Canadian sensibilities could be found among the *Youth Library's* histories and

biographies. By far the most egregious example was abolitionist La Roy Sunderland's polemical *History of the United States of America* published in 1834 as volume 107 in the *Library*.³⁷ It was full of the kinds of nationalistic rhetoric Upper Canadian conservatives so deplored. Had Nathan Bangs continued at the helm of the Concern during these years, it seems doubtful he would have selected a man like Sunderland to write this book. But Beverley Waugh and Thomas Mason, Bangs's successors at the Concern, had never itinerated in Upper Canada and were probably less attentive to these and other political niceties than they might have been. Indeed, Sunderland was a controversial choice even in the United States. As a strident abolitionist, he might have been expected to take this opportunity to further his antislavery agenda by writing a book that would, for different reasons, make Methodists in the south almost as uncomfortable as it did Methodists in Upper Canada. And although that is precisely what Sunderland did – dwelling at length in several passages on the indignities meted out to slaves across the sweep of American history – his abolitionism is routinely overmastered by his soaring patriotism.³⁸ “No history in the world,” he gushes, “presents so many interesting combinations of piety, wisdom, patriotism, and daring enterprise, as that of these United States, and none exhibits more striking instances of a Divine Providence in the government and direction of the affairs of men.”³⁹

Indeed, although Sunderland presents a narrative that is chiefly political rather than religious – he passes over Wesley's missionary trip to Georgia in just a few lines and omits George Whitefield's revivals from his text entirely – he takes pains to stress that ultimately it was God who inspired America's political actors.⁴⁰ “Let no American youth ever forget,” he warns, “the worthy example of those illustrious patriots. They were men who feared God, they constantly acknowledged him, in the great enterprises which engaged their attention, and he, according to his promise, ‘directed their steps.’”⁴¹ Although Sunderland writes nothing derogatory about Upper Canada directly, he recounts the individual battles of the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 in detail, repeatedly contrasting the rapaciousness and barbarity of the British soldiers with the extraordinary restraint and evenhandedness of volunteers in the American militia, who were simply “defending themselves from the cruel encroachments of a powerful foe . . . a superior and vindictive enemy.”⁴² In fact, these passages occupy almost half of the book. Here, then, is the rare example of a Sunday school book that lived up to all the infamy Upper Canadian conservatives heaped on American schoolbooks more generally.

Importantly, Sunderland's book did not remain a part of the *Library* for very long. By 1839, three years after his controversial *The Testimony of God Against Slavery* was published by the American Anti-Slavery Society, Sunderland's book was quietly pulled from the series and replaced with another title, *The House of the Thief*, by the prolific Eliza Cheap.⁴³ In 1840, La Roy Sunderland was tried and defrocked by the Methodist Episcopal Church for the stridency of his antislavery writings. That same year he, along with fellow abolitionists, threw his support behind the new Wesleyan Methodist Church.⁴⁴ Events unfolding north of the border, meanwhile, may have spared Canadian Methodists the trouble and embarrassment of Sunderland's book altogether. By chance, Sunderland's book appeared in the autumn of 1834, almost midway through a time when, between October 1833 and July 1836, British Wesleyans gained control over the Toronto Book Room, and momentarily ceased importing books from the New York Book Concern.⁴⁵ By the time that commercial relationship was revived under the direction of John Ryerson in the summer of 1836, Sunderland's book was no longer available and thus probably never found its way into the hands of Canadian readers.

There were a small number of other books of this kind published by the Concern over the years, perhaps most notably Daniel Kidder's 1849 *The Waldos, or, Incidents of the American Revolution*. Kidder was an important figure in the development of the *Sunday School and Youth's Library*, becoming the corresponding secretary of the Methodist Sunday School Union and editor of Sunday school publications and tracts in 1844. Despite his official role, however, Kidder did not often write for the series and, when he did, he did not generally write books like *The Waldos*. Although Kidder could not resist blaming Britain for the Revolutionary War in this book, he did so in a far more muted and passing manner, simply remarking that it was "on the part of the colonists . . . a *defensive* war."⁴⁶ And while Kidder reserved the highest praise for his fellow Americans, suggesting that the prowess of the patriots compared favourably with "Grecian glory . . . and Roman victories," he refrained from heaping abuse on the British forces.⁴⁷ Instead, Kidder leaves the political canvas largely blank to concentrate on the personal triumphs and tragedies of the characters in his narrative. He begins with a protracted and emotional description of the conversion of the patriarch of the family to Methodism.⁴⁸ He dwells at length on the difficult and emotional struggle that Waldo's two sons underwent before leaving their mother and sister

behind to enlist in the militia.⁴⁹ He even devotes a substantial part of the concluding pages of the book to stories about the family dog.⁵⁰

Unlike Sunderland's book, *The Waldos* was published at a time when the relationship between the Toronto Book Room and the Methodist Book Concern was particularly close. Indeed, the Canadian Book Steward Anson Green even advertised this very title when he published an exhaustive list of *Library* volumes available for purchase in Toronto.⁵¹ Although there is no way to know if Green was familiar with the contents of this particular book, it seems highly doubtful that he would have lost much sleep worrying that its saccharine narrative, leavened by the occasional patriotic digression, would somehow spark an insurrection against the British authorities in Upper Canada.

Setting Sunderland's and Kidder's histories to one side, a reader would have been obliged to look long and hard through the Concern's remaining offerings to find even a passing mention of American superiority. One of the few rewards of such an undertaking would have been realized in a single title among Daniel Smith's popular biographies. Smith, a prolific American Methodist author and preacher, penned some fifty books during his lifetime including fifteen "scripture biographies" for the *Sunday School and Youth's Library* published between 1839 and his death in 1852. These short books, printed with accompanying illustrations, included titles on Moses, Daniel, Solomon, Esther, Jonah, Abraham, Samson, Ezra, Nehemiah, Elijah, Elisha, David, John the Baptist, and the apostles John, Peter, and Paul. As one might expect, most of the biographies contain no mention of contemporary events. The one exception can be found in Smith's 1840 *Life of Jonah* where the author includes a brief but extraordinary digression comparing the tyrannical rule of Nimrod with the excellences of government in New England. "I suppose most of my young readers know," he observes, "that few people in the world enjoy greater blessings than the citizen in New-England. Only think of our schools, colleges, Bibles, and churches; of our neat villages and farm-houses scattered over the whole face of the country. Perhaps there is no place where there is more industry, enterprise, intelligence, good morals, and religion."⁵² Generally speaking, however, the political commentary one finds in Smith's biographies is much more subtle. In his 1839 *Life of Moses*, for example, Smith's young readers in the United States might have discerned faint echoes of British oppression in his description of the Egyptian captivity: "Their liberty had been wrested from them by the strong arm of oppression; government, which was designed for protecting

the rights of the weak against the strong, and defending the injured against the oppressor, had now become the giant instrument of tyranny.”⁵³ Comments of this kind, however, were framed in terms so general that it is hard to imagine even the staunchest conservative in Upper Canada taking much offense. After all, who doesn’t oppose tyranny on paper?

Smith’s other “scripture biographies” would have required a similarly close parsing of the text to extract anything that might have been said to speak even remotely to America’s political past or present. Instead these books, like the vast majority of titles that appeared in the *Sunday School and Youth’s Library*, were all but exclusively religious in character and ambiguous on questions of politics. Indeed, it is not difficult to find instances where American authors passed up obvious opportunities to dilate on the greatness of the United States. Daniel Kidder’s revised *Life of Martin Luther* published in 1840, for example, links the Reformation with subsequent increases in political freedom, but without mentioning the United States.⁵⁴ William Norris, another popular American Methodist author, says nothing at all about politics in his biography of American missionary David Brainerd published in 1839.⁵⁵ In yet another biography of an American missionary, Cyrus Shepard, author Zachariah Mudge is perfectly silent on matters of politics apart from a passing reference to the fact that Shepard’s father was “a soldier of the American Revolution [who] died on the morning of the anniversary of our national independence.”⁵⁶ Kidder, in his revised history of the Waldenses published in 1846, freely criticizes Charles II for stealing money from the persecuted religious minority, but is equally generous in his praise for William and Mary for subsequently coming to the sect’s financial aid.⁵⁷ Indeed, American Methodists even forwent the opportunity to commission their own biography of Columbus, electing instead to publish one authored by British Wesleyan George Cubitt.⁵⁸

So while the titles making up the *Sunday School and Youth’s Library* were a mixed bag, and while an increasingly large proportion of them were written by American writers and from an American perspective, the vast majority of the titles could not have been described as “anti-British” in every, or even any, sense of the word. This is a fact that any Canadian Methodist involved in the Sunday school movement would have understood well. Leaders of that movement, including Anson Green, the Ryersons, and other prominent preachers, including some British Wesleyans, would have gained a familiarity with these books and in the process become persuaded that, with one or two exceptions, this literature

posed no threat to the political peace and stability of Upper Canada. Seen in this broader context, Ryerson's objections to the use of American schoolbooks in the colony's Common schools take on a rather different complexion from the one generally ascribed by historians of education. While Ryerson was no doubt sincere in his desire to achieve uniformity across the curriculum by strongly encouraging the adoption of the Irish National Series textbooks, it seems probable that his opposition to American schoolbooks more generally was adopted as a strategy shore up conservative support and thereby prevent the tide of reform resentment from depriving him of his post. At the same time, Ryerson would have understood that he could not maintain a legal ban on American books in the province's Common schools forever without leaving himself and his coreligionists open to the charge of hypocrisy. Thus it is not difficult to understand why Ryerson began to back away almost immediately from the unqualified condemnation of American schoolbooks advanced in his 1847 *Special Report*. Having successfully adopted the role of chief critic, he subsequently found himself uniquely placed to soften that resolve, and by extension the resolve of his conservative supporters, by stages. And that is precisely what he did.

By early 1848, Ryerson was striking a markedly different tone. In his 1847 *Annual Report of Normal, Model, and Common Schools in Upper Canada*, Ryerson tellingly suggests that his earlier efforts to procure textbooks from the National Board of Education Dublin were not undertaken chiefly to displace American schoolbooks, but to encourage standardization across classrooms.⁵⁹ At the same time, Ryerson provides a far more nuanced critique of American schoolbooks by quietly narrowing the focus of his censure to geography schoolbooks, and American Jesse Olney's popular geographies in particular, describing them as "almost exclusively American [and] particularly hostile against everything British."⁶⁰ In the next breath, however, Ryerson recommends American Jedidiah Morse's "new Geography" as the "most impartial, the best constructed, the cheapest and best adapted geography for Canada with which I have yet met." After describing its many maps and woodcuts, Ryerson notes that the quality of the text prompted him to contact the publishers directly – Methodist publishers Harpers in New York – to arrange for a Canadian edition of the work. "The enterprising publishers have intimated," Ryerson enthuses, "that if I would prepare an additional quarto page or two on the statistics, commerce, &c., of Canada, they would insert it and publish an edition of their geography expressly for

Canada.”⁶¹ Morse’s geographies were just the beginning. In the months and years ahead, Ryerson continued to soften his stance against American schoolbooks in a subtle but remarkably consistent fashion.

As founding editor of the *Christian Guardian*, Ryerson knew how effective a periodical could be in shifting public opinion. No doubt with his broader educational agenda in mind, Ryerson established the *Journal of Education for Upper Canada* in January 1848. In the June issue later that year, Ryerson reprinted a review of his 1846 *Report on a System of Public Elementary Instruction for Upper Canada* and his subsequent *Special Report on the Operation of the Common School Act of 1846* that appeared in the *Official Monthly District School Journal for the State of New York*. The reviewer, while praising Ryerson’s initiatives more generally, takes strong exception to the prohibition of American schoolbooks from schools in Upper Canada. “The intercourse between the contiguous portions of this State and the Canadas,” he writes, “occasions considerable dissatisfaction among the masses on account of this provision . . . On this subject there will be increasing public sentiment in favour of using the *best books*, and employing the *best Teachers*, whether of British or American origin. We hope, ere long, to see this restrictive feeling give place to a more generous and liberal policy.”⁶² There is nothing particularly surprising about the sentiments expressed by this writer. After all, one would expect an American to object to a ban on American schoolbooks. It is striking, however, that that Ryerson chose to use his new *Journal* to disseminate the views of this American to readers in Upper Canada. It seems not improbable that Ryerson’s choice was calculated at that moment to create a strategic opportunity for him to reflect further on the ban and to speculate on how his own policies might evolve in the future. Thus in his printed response to the review, Ryerson offers a defence of the prohibition so brief that it amounts to little more than a preface, before hinting that broad changes may be in the offing, especially with respect to the establishment of school libraries. “When we advance a step further in our School System,” he writes, “by providing for the establishment of Common School Libraries in Upper Canada, we doubt not but our Board of Education will readily adopt and recommend perhaps nineteenth-twentieths of the admirable and cheap publications which constitute the Common School Libraries of the States of Massachusetts and New-York.”⁶³ Here we find a truly remarkable shift in rhetoric. Indeed, a straightforward juxtaposition of the soaring anti-Americanism found in Ryerson’s 1847 *Special Report* with the conciliatory sentiments expressed

in this later piece would make it difficult to credit that they were even the product of the same pen. And yet here we find a promise that, not only was the ban on American schoolbooks undertaken as a strictly temporary measure, but also that as Upper Canadian libraries begin to take shape, the province will effectively become an open market to American publishers. Ryerson moved with surprising speed to put that promise in effect.

The 1850 Common School Act appointed trustees for the first time “to take such steps as they may judge expedient, and as may be authorized according to law, for the establishment, safe keeping, and proper management of a School Library” and even provided a grant of up to £3,000 “for the establishment and support” of such libraries.⁶⁴ Ryerson consciously measured the success of these libraries against their Sunday school counterparts in both size and ubiquity. Catching up would not be easy. The late 1840s were a time of pronounced growth in denominational Sunday schools across the province and in the libraries that typically accompanied their establishment. Beginning with his *Annual Report* for 1848, Ryerson included statistics for the number of volumes in the province’s Sunday school and Common school libraries. That year he reported 46,926 volumes in Sunday school libraries and only 1,579 volumes in Common school libraries.⁶⁵ By 1850, the figures stood at 73,662 volumes in Sunday school libraries and just 4,752 volumes in Common school libraries.⁶⁶ Sunday school libraries were funded largely by private donation and they were not subject to the provisions or restrictions outlined in the Common School Act. Thus denominational actors were and would remain free to continue filling the shelves of their burgeoning libraries with the cheapest and most readily available books from the United States. Ryerson seems to have understood that, even with government monies at his disposal, the only practicable way to close the gap between Sunday and Common school libraries would be to liberalize his own policies governing the importation of American books.

Ryerson claimed to open a “new epoch in the intellectual and social history of Upper Canada” in 1853 when he issued for the first time a general catalogue of books for public school libraries.⁶⁷ Here Ryerson set aside without reservation his earlier policies against the use of American schoolbooks. “It will be seen,” he wrote, “that the books selected, embrace nearly the whole field of human knowledge – at least so far as it is embraced in the works of popular reading – including the best works of the kind that issue from both the English and American press.”⁶⁸ Ryerson distributed his catalogues to school trustees with instructions to select titles

that would be underwritten by the legislative grant provided in the Common School Act of 1850. The only books to be excluded were those “hostile to the christian [*sic*] religion” and “controversial works on theology.”⁶⁹ Such catalogues were also used to begin stocking the shelves of free public libraries. Although Ryerson did not always approve of the selections local trustees made as a whole, suggesting that libraries were rendered “less useful and attractive than they would have been had a more varied and popular selection of books been made,” the overall project was a success. By 1856, the number of volumes in Sunday school libraries had risen to 227,295. Common school libraries, by contrast, now contained more than half that number or 130,961 volumes.⁷⁰ Growth of this kind would have been impossible had Ryerson proven unable to persuade his conservative supporters, one small shift at a time, to relax their concern about the widespread use of less expensive editions of books offered by American publishers. In the preface to the 1857 catalogue, Ryerson explained that its purpose was to “render accessible in the remotest municipality of the country, and at the lowest prices, the best books for popular reading that are published either in Great Britain or in the United States.”⁷¹ The American reviewer of his earlier *Special Report* would have approved. Just ten years earlier such a statement would have been unimaginable. In the end, it seems clear that the experiences and convictions Ryerson brought to the table as a preacher and denominational bookseller, not as a Loyalist or a conservative bureaucrat, are what informed these broader strategies.

Although historians have generally argued that Methodism throughout the first half of the nineteenth century was obliged to accommodate itself to the demands of the colony’s wider political life by shedding its American connections in order to achieve social respectability, we find here a striking example of one case where the current of influence seems to have flowed in the opposite direction. Here Methodism’s most prominent preacher, using a platform afforded to him by the colonial administration, prepared the way for the mainstream acceptance of American schoolbooks – books that he knew from his own experience running the denominational Book Room two decades earlier, were not only inexpensive and readily available, but with few exceptions politically benign. No more would men like John Carroll’s father complain about the haphazard use of American books in the colony’s schools. After all, every one of the books to be found on the shelves of the new Common school and public libraries would have been personally approved by no less a

figure than the Chief Superintendent of Education. The fact that he happened also to be a Methodist preacher, and that a large proportion of the books making up the catalogue were American in both authorship and imprint, no longer seemed to matter.

Endnotes

1. Anson Green, *Christian Advocate*, 13 July 1827, 178.
2. *The Christian Advocate* first appeared under Nathan Bangs's editorship in September 1826. It was an immediate success on both sides of the border. Bangs later noted in his *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church* that within just one year it had attracted some 30,000 subscribers, a figure that "far exceeded every other paper, religious or secular, published in the United States." See Nathan Bangs, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1838-1841), 3:323. Anson Green, like his fellow preachers in the United States, sold subscriptions along his own preaching circuits. "I read portions of it in my congregations," he observed, "and obtained quite a number of subscribers . . . It is an excellent paper and much needed." See Anson Green, *Life and Times of the Rev. Anson Green D.D.* (Toronto: Methodist Book Room, 1877), 90-1. For more on the spread of American Methodist periodicals in Upper Canada see Scott McLaren, "Before the *Christian Guardian*: American Methodist Periodicals in the Upper Canadian backwoods, 1818-1829," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada* 49, no. 2 (2011): 143-65.
3. "List of Sunday School Depositories" *Christian Advocate*, 3 August 1827, 190.
4. Bangs, *History*, 3:344-346; Addie Grace Wardle, *History of the Sunday School Movement in the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1918), 61-77; and Stan Ingersoll, "Education," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Methodism* ed. Jason Vickers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 261ff.
5. See *Hints on the Establishment and Regulation of Sunday Schools* (New York: Nathan Bangs, 1827). In addition to advice, *Hints* also contained a catalogue of seventeen juvenile titles such as primers, catechisms, and hymnbooks – all priced by the dozen. A revised and expanded edition of Bangs's pamphlet was published by the Concern in 1833.
6. Abel Stevens, *Life and Times of Nathan Bangs, DD* (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1863), 261-2. See also Bangs, *History*, 3:338-45.
7. These accusations will be cited and discussed in due course.

8. George Playter and John Carroll were among the first to tell the story in print of how the “never-to-be-forgotten” Methodist preacher William Losee first arrived in the colony in the winter of 1790. See George Playter, *History of Methodism in Canada*, (Toronto: Anson Green, 1862), 20-5, and John Carroll, *Case and His Cotemporaries* (Toronto: Methodist Conference Office, 1867), 1:7ff.
9. See Neil Semple, *The Lord’s Dominion: The History of Canadian Methodism*, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996), 42; John Webster Grant, *A Profusion of Spires: Religion in Nineteenth-Century Ontario*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 63-4; and Elizabeth Jane Errington, *The Lion, the Eagle, and Upper Canada: A Developing Colonial Ideology*, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1987).
10. See David Mills, *The Idea of Loyalty in Upper Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1988), 52, and William Westfall, *Two Worlds: The Protestant Culture of Nineteenth-Century Ontario*, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1989), 21-8.
11. Quoted in George Parker, *The Beginning of the Book Trade in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 24. See also Michael Peterman, “Literary Cultures and Popular Reading in Upper Canada” in *The History of the Book in Canada*, eds. Patricia Fleming, Gilles Gallichan, and Yvan Lamond (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 1:396.
12. John Carroll, *My Boy Life* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1882), 99.
13. James Strachan, *A Visit to the Province of Upper Canada in 1819* (Aberdeen: D. Chalmers & Co., 1820), 131.
14. Legislative Assembly, “An Act for the Better Establishment and Maintenance of Common Schools in Upper Canada,” in *Documentary History of Education in Upper Canada*, ed. J. George Hodgins (Toronto: Warwick Bro’s & Rutter, 1899), 6:67. See also Susan E. Houston and Alison Prentice, *Schooling and Scholars in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 237.
15. Egerton Ryerson, *Special Report on the Operations of the Common School Act of 1846* in *Documentary History of Education in Upper Canada*, ed. J. George Hodgins (Toronto: L.K. Cameron, 1900), 7:110.
16. Patrick Walsh, “Education and the ‘Universalist’ Idiom of Empire: Irish National School Books in Ireland and Ontario,” *History of Education* 37 (2008): 648-9. See also Bruce Curtis, “Schoolbooks and the Myth of Curricular Republicanism: The State and the Curriculum in Canada West,

1820-1850,” *Social History* 16 (1983): 306. Curtis is one of the few historians to suggest Ryerson’s motives were more complex on this question but does so without reference to his identity as a Methodist preacher or against the backdrop of the wider denominational Sunday school movement.

17. Viola Elizabeth Parvin, *Authorization of Textbooks for the Schools of Ontario, 1846-1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 29; Paul Axelrod, *The Promise of Schooling: Education in Canada, 1800-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 39; and Alison Prentice, *The School Promoters: Education and Social Class in Mid-Nineteenth Century Upper Canada* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 1999), 523.
18. Egerton Ryerson, *The Story of My Life*, ed. J. George Hodgins (Toronto: William Briggs, 1883), 24-7.
19. J. L. H. Henderson, ed., *John Strachan: Documents and Opinions*. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969), 92; Ryerson, *Story of My Life*, 93-4.
20. Although Methodists in Upper Canada did not formally establish a Book Room until 1833, Ryerson began selling books through the offices of the *Christian Guardian* shortly after his election as that newspaper’s founding editor. See Green, *Life*, 134; Ryerson, *Story of My Life*, 93-4. Ryerson’s first published advertisement for books appeared in the *Christian Guardian* on 11 September 1830. See also Scott McLaren, “Books for the Instruction of the Nations: Shared Methodist print culture in Upper Canada and the mid-Atlantic States, 1789-1851” (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2011), 203ff.
21. In response to a hostile piece published in the *Globe and Mail* in the 1840s suggesting that his identity as a preacher constrained his practice as a bureaucrat, Ryerson replied with some warmth, “My office [as Chief Superintendent of Education] has ever been considered as perfectly compatible with the clerical as that of President or Professor in any University or College, and I have held it with the sanction of the Conference.” See C. B. Sissons, *Egerton Ryerson: His Life and Letters* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Company, 1947), 2:168-9.
22. Bangs, *History*, 4:236-9; Methodist Episcopal Church, *Journals of the General Conference*, (New York: Carlton and Phillips, 1855), 1:461-3.
23. McLaren, “Books,” 317-20.
24. Ryerson, *Story of My Life*, 271.
25. Todd Webb, “How the Canadian Methodists Became British: Unity, Schism, and Transatlantic Identity, 1827-54,” in *Transatlantic Subjects: Ideas, Institutions, and Social Experience in Post-revolutionary British North*

- America*, ed. Nancy Christie (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), 168-9.
26. Ryerson, *Story of My Life*, 269-70; see also Sissons, *Egerton Ryerson*, 1:543-4.
 27. Egerton Ryerson, *Sir Charles Metcalfe Defended Against the Attacks of his Late Counsellors* (Toronto: British Colonist Office, 1844).
 28. Ryerson, *Story of My Life*, 328ff.
 29. J. George Hodgins admits as much in his defence of Ryerson when he notes that Ryerson's interest in the post extended back at least as far as 1841. See Ryerson, *Story of My Life*, 342ff. Ryerson also made frequent use of the *Christian Guardian* throughout the 1830s to expound his views on education in the province. See Anthony Di Mascio, *Idea of Popular Schooling in Upper Canada: Print Culture, Public Discourse, and the Demand for Education* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012), 142ff.
 30. Mark McGowan, *Michael Power: The Struggle to Build the Catholic Church on the Canadian Frontier* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 213-16.
 31. Ryerson, *Story of My Life*, 413.
 32. Quoted in James Love, "Cultural Survival and Social Control: The Development of a Curriculum for Upper Canada's Common Schools in 1846," *Social History* 15 (November 1982): 360.
 33. Charles R. Sanderson, ed., *The Arthur Papers* (Toronto: Toronto Public Libraries and University of Toronto Press, 1957), 1:151-2.
 34. Hodgins, *Documentary History*, 5:276-7, 6:309.
 35. *Hints to Aid in Forming and Conducting Sunday Schools: Collected, Amended, and Arranged, by the Editors*, (New York: Published by B. Waugh and T. Mason for the Sunday School Union of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1833), 5-6.
 36. In the summer of 1849, Anson Green published a complete catalogue of the series, numbering 419 titles, in the monthly *Sunday School Guardian*. See "Catalogue of Sunday School Books," *Sunday School Guardian for the Province of Canada*, June 1849, 2, 31-2.
 37. La Roy Sunderland, *History of the United States of America: From the Discovery of the Continent in 1492, to the Fiftieth Years of Their Independence* (New York: B. Waugh and T. Mason for the Sunday School Union of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1834).

38. Sunderland, *History*, 20, 31, 60.
39. Sunderland, *History*, 6.
40. Sunderland, *History*, 65.
41. Sunderland, *History*, 185.
42. Sunderland, *History*, 177-8.
43. La Roy Sunderland, *The Testimony of God Against Slavery: A Collection of Passages from the Bible, which Show the Sin of Holding and Treating the Human Species as Property* (New York: The American Anti-Slavery Society, 1836). There appears to be no extant copy of the Concern's edition of Cheap's book.
44. Estrelida Alexander, *Black Fire: One Hundred Years of African American Pentecostalism* (Westmont: Intervarsity Press, 2011), 72.
45. McLaren, "Books," 248ff, 300ff.
46. Daniel Kidder, *The Waldos, or, Incidents of the American Revolution* (New York: Lane & Scott for the Sunday School Union of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1849), 27-8.
47. Kidder, *Waldos*, 30.
48. Kidder, *Waldos*, 9-16.
49. Kidder, *Waldos*, 36-44.
50. Kidder, *Waldos*, 98-105.
51. "Catalogue of Sunday School Books," *Sunday School Guardian for the Province of Canada*, June 1849, n.p.
52. Daniel Smith, *Life of Jonah* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane for the Sunday School Union of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1840), 10.
53. Daniel Smith, *Life of Moses* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane for the Sunday School Union of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1839), 18.
54. Daniel Kidder, ed. *The Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Published by George Lane for the Sunday School Union of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1840), 5.
55. William Norris, *The Life of the Rev. David Brainerd* (New York: Published by T. Mason and G. Lane for the Sunday School Union of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1839), passim.

56. Zachariah Mudge, *The Missionary Teacher: A Memoir of Cyrus Shepard* (New York: Lane & Tippet for the Sunday-School Union of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1848), 12.
57. Daniel Kidder, ed., *Sketches of the Waldenses* (New York: Lane & Tippet for the Sunday School Union of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1846), 176, 211.
58. George Cubitt, *Columbus, or, the Discovery of America* (New York: Lane & Scott for the Sunday School Union of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1849).
59. Egerton Ryerson, *Annual Report of Normal, Model, and Common Schools in Upper Canada, for the Year 1847* (Montreal: Lovell and Gibson, 1849), 7-11.
60. Olney's *A Practical System of Modern Geography* was first published in 1828. It and related volumes went through almost one hundred editions in the following decades. See Caryn Hannan, ed., *Connecticut Biographical Dictionary* (Hamburg, MI: State History Publications, 2008), 423.
61. Ryerson, *Annual Report 1847*, 14.
62. *Journal of Education for Upper Canada* 6 (June 1848): 175.
63. *Journal of Education for Upper Canada* 6 (June 1848): 190.
64. Hodgins, *Documentary History*, 9:35, 48.
65. Egerton Ryerson, *Annual Report of the Normal, Model and Common Schools in Upper Canada for the Year 1848* (Toronto: Rollo Campbell, 1849), 30.
66. Egerton Ryerson, *Annual Report of the Normal, Model and Common Schools in Upper Canada for the Year 1850* (Toronto: Lovell and Gibson, 1851), 152.
67. Egerton Ryerson, *Annual Report of the Normal, Model and Common Schools in Upper Canada for the Year 1853* (Toronto: King's Printer, 1854), 133.
68. Egerton Ryerson, *1853 Annual Report*, 145.
69. Egerton Ryerson, *1853 Annual Report*, 189.
70. Egerton Ryerson, *Annual Report of the Normal, Model, Grammar, and Common Schools, in Upper Canada, for the Year 1856* (Toronto: John Lovell, 1857), 81.
71. *General Catalogue of Books in Every Department of Literature for Public School Libraries in Upper Canada* (Toronto: Printed for the Department of Public Instruction for Upper Canada, 1857), iv.