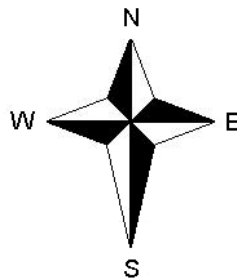


**Egerton Ryerson: Father of Education in Ontario**

**By John Williams  
Copyright 2006  
[www.blindmansees.com](http://www.blindmansees.com)**



**Three Essays**

Egerton Ryerson: Father Of Education In Ontario

Our Most Precious Treasures: The Rights Of Children

The Future: Peace Pays [Exploring The Canadian Identity]

## Egerton Ryerson: Father Of Education In Ontario

### Introduction

This essay is the first in a set and series of three, though it has been completed last. My purpose here is to briefly examine the origins of education in The Province of Ontario, and also in Canada. For Egerton Ryerson's influence was first felt in Upper Canada (Ontario). Due to the success of what was then rightly considered to be the most progressive educational paradigm available in the 1800's, it soon spread to every territory annexed by Canada in those years of formation and expansion.

Let me note here that cruel treatment of children [people] was an integral component of this 'methodology', which still haunts us today in classrooms, schoolyard and principals offices across the Nation. Though corporal punishment has mostly vanished, the 'superior' attitude of educators remains, as does the atmosphere of disrespect created by school teachers by condescending to children and their families. Children's Humanity is sacrificed for teachers' Authoritarianism. Here are the seeds of much social distress in Canada.

Children are blamed for the bullying and violence and for the disrespect that is so common in our publicly-funded schools. My thesis is that Egerton Ryerson is the one behind it all and that teachers, staff and administrators are his conduit into our time and place and schools, all justified by unjust and antiquated Law. Educational Law still embodies the 'spirit of British colonialism' as do the institutions governed by this Law – public schools. In Canada we would rather hear the sweet tones of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the harmony laden voice of The Spirit of Liberty, than the drumming of bullies, whether in schools or anywhere. Presently schools still strip children of their Civil Rights and I believe this is thanks to Mr. Ryerson and his worldview. They are not permitted to own property [it is confiscated regularly], gather, hold and express opinions, choose, decide and determine their own course in life and their lifestyle.

Ultimately my purpose in writing these essays and presenting them to the Canadian people for consideration is to help Canadians understand better who they are, why they are where they are, and to begin to define some of the choices that are available to us as we democratically address the challenges we face: a World @ War; and a daunting environmental crisis fueled by pressing energy concerns as well as political and economic realities.

I hope that my work makes your work easier and more successful and satisfying. I pray that you will find a source of Hope in these essays and use the perspective I'm offering to reach out and change the world. One of my friends keeps saying, "What the world needs now is a few good Canadians." I believe the world needs

RJW

"Don't keep the peace...pass it on."

all of us...and that we need all of them. Peace is the goal and destination towards which we press. Perhaps these tools will help make that dream a reality.

Egerton Ryerson [1803-1882] is recognized and celebrated as “the father of public education in Ontario.” His influence and the force of his considerable personality has reached “from sea to sea” in Canada, and beyond. He is still revered and respected, as is attested by his central place of dominance on The Ministry of Education website. His beliefs, values, practices, methodologies, style and his genius have deeply affected and informed our public education systems, values and methods in Ontario. His influence touches every citizen of Ontario still.

So then it seems worthwhile to explore this influential personality as we seek to understand Education in Ontario. The urgent heartbeat of Mr. Ryerson’s social action as an educator may be found in two essential biographical facts. He was an ardent United Empire Loyalist and a Methodist Circuit Rider. These central truths played out in his plans for education and for a society that could and did emerge from his educational strategies. [“Education is a paintbrush with which we create worlds and societies.”]

It seems worthwhile to investigate these central driving forces in the formation of our public education systems as we look ahead to the future of Public Education in Ontario and in Canada and to the society that will emerge as a result of our decisions. One need not dig deep to discover that “United Empire Loyalist” meant loyalty to the Monarch; plus a set of autocratic values; and also a set of social, political and military practices that were implemented worldwide, for “the sun never set [sic] on The British Empire.” It meant iron-willed domination of peoples everywhere. [Thank God for Queen Elizabeth II who has peacefully dismantled this worldwide system of oppression!] It meant the stripping of resources, the stealing of dignity, the regimentation of people into military units and divisions with martial practices and disciplines. British Imperialism was an effective set of devices, a culture that imposed order of a certain kind. It believed that some few people had more Rights, Freedoms, Dignity and Opportunities than the bulk of the population - the faceless, nameless, voiceless masses in need of orderly education in the British Style.

In Britain Methodists were central and critical to the reform of society and culture. The key figures in the founding of Methodism were John and Charles Wesley [and George Whitfield] who were Anglican clergy persons trained at Oxford University. These men ignited and conducted a social, religious and cultural revolution that is known as The Great Awakening [beginning in the 1730’s]. Reform was deep and widespread, including prison reform, education reform, sewage system reform, judicial and legislative reform, religious reform and much more. Justice and Equality and Public Health and Humanitarianism were all bolstered and strengthened in the places Methodism reached. And the reach was vast and wide thanks to Circuit Riders.

Circuit Riders were modeled upon John Wesley who was a tireless traveling preacher, writer, activist, reader and reformer working in the tradition of Martin Luther and John Calvin and others at the beginning of The Reformation some two hundred years earlier. They represented a shift from the autocratic church governments of England and Rome to more proletarian values, practices and “methods”.

Rev. John Wesley [1703-1791] is reported to have traveled over half a million (500,000) miles on horseback in his career as he crisscrossed England preaching The Gospel to throngs, usually outdoors as “the churches” would neither tolerate nor house this revival. He had a special “riding desk” built so he could read and write as he traveled, and he was a prolific in both pursuits. He was gifted, had huge administrative and creative abilities and almost single-handedly built a worldwide system of churches that have had a profound effect upon world culture and affairs. Wesley was passionately charismatic as he preached to spontaneous congregations in the tens of thousands in the green fields of England.

John Wesley is known for his Reformation Theology, for his Journals, and many other written materials. He also wrote popular singable hymns that signaled the real beginning of hymn singing in churches and in the plain Meeting Houses that became the residences of the Methodist movement. In fact hymn singing was a central and integral part of Wesleyan Methodism. While John wrote a few hymns, some of which are still sung in churches today, Charles Wesley (his brother) [1707-1788] wrote unimaginable numbers of hymns. Estimates of his productivity in this area range from 3000 to over 5000. Many of these hymns still form the backbone of modern hymnals in all Christian denominations.

As The Great Awakening spilled across the Atlantic Ocean [1740’s] and onto the shores of “The New World” in the American Colonies, Circuit Riders followed to attend to the spiritual needs of the newly saved children of the revivalist movement. The Wesleys and their governing Board set standards of faith, conduct, education and character for the new breed of simple, plainspoken preachers. These strident limitations meant that precious few could qualify to wear the matching black cape and broad-brimmed hat of the Methodist minister and leader.

But the Movement had a living model in John Wesley of how one person could minister to many far-flung congregations. Thus Methodist Circuit Riders came to travel through the rough terrain of the North American wilderness for about 150 years. The early Circuit Rider generally exhibited and embodied a dual set of loyalties: to King and crown; and to Christ, which is to say to John Wesley and the Methodist Home Board in London.

Clearly for some loyalty to the sovereign took precedence over

commitment to a local authority. So when The American Revolution occurred subsequent to The American Declaration of Independence in 1776, many Methodists migrated North into Canada. Egerton Ryerson's was one such migrant family, for his mother was a Methodist.

Though the Methodist Movement was ignited by passionate and inspired preaching, the administrative underpinnings of the Organization were characterized by poverty self-restraint, self-denial, and lacked the robust celebration of faith that characterized large public meetings where many were "led to freedom" by Wesley, Whitfield, Jonathon Edwards (a Presbyterian minister in New England who became an early President of Princeton University), and many others caught up in The Revival.

The administrative style of Methodism was autocratic and modeled in large part upon Britannic culture. Where the red-coated soldiers of Britain went, the black clad Methodist preachers and pastors often followed in an atmosphere of obvious compatibility, and often co-operation. Army, emissaries, preachers and others actively transplanted and implanted British culture in those ways with great success.

Many Methodist Circuit Riders serving in early Upper Canada [Ontario] served between seven and twelve or more "points" in their predetermined circuit and were authorized by The Methodist Missions Board to do so. In all weather, seasons and conditions, and without the benefit of Roman Roads as in England, they made their way from village to town to hamlet; preaching, teaching, helping guiding and modeling British Methodism in all of its wondrous austerity.

When John and Charles Wesley were students at Oxford University, (one of the twin towers of British education, along with Cambridge) they started The Holy Club. Along with two compatriots they set out a Charter for the club that delineated a code or "method" of conduct that sought lofty moral conduct and intellectual discipline. Self-denial and Legalism characterized this "charter".

These two cultural strands, Methodism and British Colonialism, formed the Values Base of Egerton Ryerson's educational purposes, philosophy, and praxis. Sadly, he remains a model for education and educators in Ontario and across Canada.

At this point our social, political, and educational Values have evolved to a point where better theory, philosophy and practice is both needed and available. We require a New Paradigm to replace Egerton Ryerson. See the second essay in this three-part series for an examination of the consequences of Ryerson's methods and values. Our Most Precious Treasures: The Rights Of Children presents an alternative educational model for consideration by Canadians.

I must ask whether Mr. Ryerson's Values and Practices are compatible with our

modern multicultural and inclusive hi-tech Democratic Society. My first and only answer is, "No!" This is not intended to vilify Rev. Ryerson. He has served us well. Now let him retire in peace. We can now consider, evaluate, and implement more appropriate public education theory that is more respectful of people (including children and their Rights) and tailored to the real needs of Canadians in The 21<sup>st</sup> Century.