

Upper Canadian Public Opinion and Common School Improvement in the 1830's

by R. D. GIDNEY *

One of the most remarkable aspects of the creation of the Ontario school system in the mid-nineteenth century was the speed with which it was done. In 1840 the system could hardly be said to exist. By 1850 its most characteristic features were already established. In one decade the government more than doubled the size of the grant-in-aid to common schools, introduced a property tax to replace the traditional voluntary means of school finance, and created a strong central authority with broad powers to regulate and supervise the selection of textbooks, the qualifications of teachers, and the general conduct of the schools. The first two measures placed the schools on a sound financial basis; the third created an effective bureaucracy that would determine the nature of public education in the province. The school legislation of the decade added substantially to the power of the state and to the amount of public revenue spent on education. Yet the school bills were always passed by substantial majorities in the assembly. They were generally welcomed by the press. And what opposition did exist had largely disappeared by the early fifties.

Why was this transformation so rapid and so easy? It was not the result of any sudden recognition that the rising generation lacked the means of education: even a quick survey of the school reports of the late thirties will show that schools were common in every settled township, though attendance was far from universal. Nor was it due to the inspired leadership of any one individual. Egerton Ryerson played his part, but men like Hincks, Draper, Sherwood, and Baldwin, their backbenchers, and the newspaper editors who supported their school legislation, were not mere ciphers. Indeed, much of the system — property taxation, the enlarged school grant, the inspectorate, and the Education Office itself — was established before Ryerson was appointed assistant superintendent in 1844. The transformation was due, rather, to the growth during the 1830's and early forties of a consensus among public men about the importance of mass education to society — to the growing conviction that it was in the national interest to ensure that all children received some schooling.

Popular education, as Richard Johnson put it recently, was “one of the strongest of early Victorian obsessions”.¹ The newspapers and journals of Britain and the United States endlessly explored the implications of the “march of intellect”. In America there was hardly a paper anywhere in

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¹ “Educational Policy and Social Control in Early Victorian England”, *Past and Present*, No. 49 (Nov. 1970), 96.

the northeastern states that did not advocate its extension and publicize its benefits. In Britain it was the subject of repeated Parliamentary debates and investigations, and a constant topic of discussion in influential journals like the *Edinburgh*, *Westminster*, and *Quarterly* reviews. By the late 1830's, on both sides of the Atlantic, popular education had become one of the great themes of the age.²

The enthusiasm with which Upper Canadians followed the important debates in Britain and elsewhere has often been noted by Canadian historians.³ The reform of Parliament, the attack on the English Church, Ireland, the threat of social revolution in Britain and Europe: issues like these formed the warp and woof of Upper Canada's intellectual life. The "education mania" was followed equally closely. From the mid-twenties, Upper Canadian newspapers reprinted increasingly large amounts of material from British and American newspapers on the progress of popular education — on the new school acts of the northern states, on the attempt to create school systems in Ireland and England, on the achievements of the Prussian system, on the success of teacher-training experiments in Scotland and Holland, on infant schools, mechanics institutes, and the pedagogical innovations of men like de Fellenberg and Pestalozzi.⁴ Foreign educational ideas were discussed in editorials, letters to the editor, and in assembly debates, while proposals for improving the local schools were increasingly judged against the standards set in Scotland, or New York, or Germany.⁵

In another age this influx of ideas from abroad might have been of peripheral interest, the preserve of a few teachers or school administrators. But in the 1830's education issues attracted a large degree of lay interest because the debate about education was not merely a debate about schools; rather it was about fundamental political, religious, economic, and social issues. To the widest variety of writers in the early nineteenth century, the spread of education was but one aspect of the larger question of the political and social stability of the state. To the conservative Englishman, popular education would maintain due subordination to traditional authority. To conservative Americans it was a bulwark against the excesses of King Numbers. To political economists it was a means of integrating a new

² For the United States, see S. L. JACKSON, *America's Struggle for Free Schools, 1827-42* (Washington, 1940), which is primarily a study of newspaper opinion. For Britain, see Brian SIMON, *Studies in the History of Education, 1780-1870* (London, 1960), chaps. II and III.

³ See, for example, G. M. CRAIG, *Upper Canada: The Formative Years* (Toronto, 1963), pp. 197-200.

⁴ For some typical examples, see the *British Colonial Argus* (St. Catharines), 21 Sept. 1833; *Colonial Advocate*, 13 and 20 Sept. 1832; *Hallowell Free Press*, 16 Sept. 1833 and 24 Feb. 1834; *Christian Guardian*, 15 Jan. 1834; *Brockville Recorder*, 1 Jan. 1836; *British Colonist*, 4 Mar. 1840; *Examiner*, 1 Apr. 1840.

⁵ See, for example, *Christian Guardian*, 6 Mar. 1830 and 14 Nov. 1832; *Niagara Gleaner*, 24 Nov. 1832; *Canadian Christian Examiner*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Mar. 1838); *Kingston Chronicle*, 14 and 28 Apr. 1841; J. G. HODGINS, ed., *Documentary History of Education in Upper Canada* (Toronto, 1893-1904), III, 279-83.

industrial class into a new kind of society. To liberals and radicals it was a weapon against oppression. To others it was a means of improving farming, liberating trade, eliminating crime, or spreading the gospel. Conservatives and liberals, high churchmen and low dissenters, Malthusians and utopian socialists all might disagree on what a better society would be; but they were almost unanimous in their conviction that popular education was one sure means of bringing it about. For Horace Mann in Massachusetts it was "the great balance-wheel of the social machinery", and for the *Economist* in England it was "the steam-engine of the moral world". In both Britain and America, it was one of the great panaceas of the age of improvement.⁶

Though its problems were often different in degree and in kind, Upper Canada in the 1830's, no less than England or the United States, was confronted by the strains of a changing society. And Upper Canadians found it both easy and natural to absorb ideas propounded elsewhere and incorporate them into the search for solutions to their own problems. If the schoolmaster was abroad in Britain, if he could meet the political and economic difficulties of England or Massachusetts, why should he not be equally effective in Upper Canada? In ever-increasing numbers throughout the thirties, Upper Canadians reached the conclusion that he could.

When for example *Blackwood's* or the *Quarterly Review* emphasized the relationship between a sound education and political stability, they merely reinforced an important element in Upper Canadian conservative thought. In Upper Canada most men were enfranchised; at the same time the country lacked what J. B. Robinson described as the

counteracting influence of an ancient Aristocracy, of a great landed interest or even of a wealthy agricultural class; there is in short but the presumed good sense and good feeling of an uneducated multitude... to stand between almost universal suffrage and those institutions which proudly and happily distinguish Britons from the subjects of other Monarchies, and no less so, from the citizens of that Great Republic [the United States].⁷

Because the "uneducated multitude" had a large share of political power, there had never been any tory opposition in the colony to popular education: it was simply accepted as necessary if the constitution and the British connection were to be preserved. Successive governors had encouraged the legislature to provide for the education of the community, and in some

⁶ For a sampling of the variety of opinion on this point see the *Edinburgh Review*, Vol. 34, No. LXVII (Aug. 1820), 214-54; Vol. 46, No. XCI (June 1827), 107-31; *Blackwood's*, Vol. 7 (July 1820), 419-27; Vol. 35 (Feb. 1834), 228-48; *North American Review*, Vol. 27, No. 78 (Jan., 1833), 73-99; Vol. 38, No. 1100 (Oct. 1838), 273-318. See also the last chapter of Harold SILVER, *The Concept of Popular Education* (London, 1965), and Elie HALÉVY, *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism* (Boston, 1966), especially pp. 282-96. For the emergence of the education mania in Lower Canada see Marcel LAJEUNESSE, "Espoirs et illusions d'une réforme scolaire au Québec du XIX^e siècle", *Culture*, XXXI, 2 (juin 1970), 149-59.

⁷ C. R. SANDERSON, ed., *The Arthur Papers* (Toronto, 1943-57), II, 62.

cases had actively attempted to promote it themselves; and leading colonial conservatives like Strachan or Burwell were prominent in efforts to improve Upper Canadian schooling.

In the first place, according to the conservative view, popular education was necessary because the functioning of the constitution demanded it. As an anonymous writer in the *Kingston Gazette* put it in 1810,

one branch of our government, like that of the mother country is democratic, depending upon popular elections, justice also, according to our admirable form of jurisprudence, frequently calls men in the common walks of life, to act as jurors. They likewise fill various subordinate offices requiring information and intelligence. Hence arises an additional motive to train up the rising generation in such a manner as to fit them for the performance of civil duties and the enjoyment of civil rights.⁸

It was not only a matter of voting and filling the subordinate offices of government. For conservatives, popular education was also a talisman against the restlessness of the age. How could the growth of political dissent in Upper Canada be explained? It was a country, John Macaulay argued in 1832, where men were both prosperous and free. Economic security was easily come by. Justice and religious freedom were available to all. Yet there were "delusions" abroad in the province, fostered by demagogues, that were creating ill-informed demands for change. "A writer of no mean authority", Macaulay continued, had once observed: "he that goeth about to persuade a multitude that they are not so well governed as they ought to be will never want for attentive and favourable hearers . . ." It was in this way that the delusions were to be accounted for; "but we may indulge a hope that they will gradually be dispelled, if not wholly, at least in part, by the diffusion of correct information". "On the education of the people", Macaulay concluded, "will depend the future prospects of this Province."⁹ Other conservatives agreed. In a speech condemning Hume's "baneful domination" letter, Thomas Rolph urged his listeners to attend to the educational needs of the province:

As the Public will is the operative spring of all public action, it should be our duty to make and keep the public enlightened. There will always be some error to dispel . . . We should provide by the most careful selection of public teachers in public schools, for the diffusion among the people of that general information without which they cannot be protected from the machinations of the deceivers.¹⁰

"Men must be taught their duties", wrote "Phospher" in the ferociously tory *Brockville Gazette*. "The first policy of the Jewish Government was, to enable every subject, by timely, by *early* instruction, to know everything connected with his religion and his duty. 'Thou shalt teach it diligently to

⁸ *Kingston Gazette*, 25 Sept. 1810.

⁹ Quoted in the *Kingston Chronicle*, 5 May 1832.

¹⁰ Quoted in the *Upper Canada Herald* (Kingston), 2 July 1834.

thy children!' And surely this is quite as imperative on Christian governments — if for no higher object, for a sober and orderly commonwealth."¹¹

If ignorance was a threat to peace, order, and good government in Upper Canada, Americanization posed even greater dangers. Since the second decade of the century, John Strachan had repeatedly advocated the establishment of an organized system of elementary education, under the control of church and state, as a counterweight to the democratic and republican tendencies he feared were infecting the country. Properly supervised, popular education was, for Strachan, a powerful instrument for "inculcating the purest principles of religion and loyalty"¹²

From the late twenties, Strachan's argument became common coinage among conservative editors. The schools, they agreed, were filled with American textbooks and teachers, spreading the "poison of disaffection". Banning American teachers may be considered by some Upper Canadians to be illiberal, the editor of the *Canadian Emigrant* remarked, but the matter of loyalty in a teacher is no less important than his moral character.

It too frequently happens that foreign teachers are anything but friendly to our Government, and if they do not, from prudence, openly decry it, they are zealous in praise of their own. They introduce such books as tend to give their pupils an exalted idea of the resources, power and perfection of our neighbouring Republic, and thus imperceptibly lay the foundation of disloyalty and discontent. Indeed, some of them openly avow their hostility to our Government.¹³

The rebellion only proved the point. The Grand Jury of the Gore District, meeting in the spring of 1838, reviewed the course of "the late melancholy insurrection" and attributed it

very mainly to the want of a more general and better system of public instruction They consider it of the most essential moment to the future welfare of the Country, that the all important subject of education should attract a greater proportion of public attention. When they consider how much the character is formed by education, it does appear to them of the most vital consequence that the present defective system of Instruction carried on in this Province in the Common Schools should be once and forever abandoned.¹⁴

The Grand Jury's comments were lauded in the conservative press. "Improve the popular *mind*", wrote the editor of a Niagara paper, "and the popular *will* will be less refractory":

Every new school that is established on a proper basis, is a new pillar of support to the fabric of social order and constitutional law Give

¹¹ *Brockville Gazette*, 31 May 1832.

¹² Public Archives of Canada [PAC], RG5, A1, Vol. 69, Strachan to Hillier [1824].

¹³ *Canadian Emigrant* (Sandwich), 2 May 1835. Similarly see *Brockville Gazette*, 17 July 1829; *Patriot*, 20 Dec. 1836; PAC, RG5, B11, Vol. 3, A. N. Bethune to Hillier, 6 Oct. 1827.

¹⁴ *Patriot*, 13 Apr. 1838.

the people education enough to convince them that they must be perfectly wise . . . and they will repose quietly under . . . the balanced constitution framed for them by the wisdom of their forefathers . . . instead of pursuing the illusory phantom of unattainable happiness through the intricacies of the captivating but fanciful theory of republicanism¹⁵

In letters to the editor, in editorials, and in private correspondence, these themes were hammered home in the years following the rebellion. Education, conservatives agreed, could create loyalty and order. It must be encouraged and properly supervised. The immediate answer to Yankee subversion, as the *Patriot* said time and time again, was that "schools — British schools — must be everywhere established — everywhere encouraged — everywhere supported — supplied by British teachers — inspected by British members of the various boards of education — be instructed from British schoolbooks printed in Great Britain — the vernacular idiom must be British as contra-distinguished from American!"¹⁶

Conservatives, however, were not the only Upper Canadians who increasingly emphasized the relationship between education and good government; radicals and reformers were no less enthusiastic. Their arguments, moreover, were remarkably similar to those of the conservatives, though the ends they had in view were quite different. For Mackenzie and his supporters, toryism was a vast conspiracy to keep the people in darkness, a means to perpetuate the enslavement of mankind. "In countries cursed with an intolerant and bigoted state religion", he told his readers, those in possession of knowledge used it to keep the people "in profound ignorance" in order to preserve "their rotten systems of priest and king-craft".¹⁷ To spend large amounts of money on a college in Toronto for "the sons of official persons" while spending so little on common schools was, according to the reformers of Bayham township, "a means of keeping our country forever in ignorance so that we may the more easily be fleeced by a corrupt Executive".¹⁸ No useful school legislation could be expected from the present government, the editor of the *British Colonial Argus* maintained, for popular education would "certainly open the floodgates of liberal principle, and sweep away every vestige of intolerant bigotry and aristocratical domination".¹⁹

But if education was a lever for reforming the abuses of "priest and king-craft", it was also a defence against popular revolution. Most Upper

¹⁵ Quoted in *Western Herald* (Sandwich), 31 July 1838. Similarly see *The Church*, 5 May 1838.

¹⁶ *Patriot*, 21 Dec. 1838. Similarly see the *Patriot*, 7 Dec. 1838, 22 Jan., 22 Feb., 5 Apr. and 17 May 1839; *Western Herald*, 25 Dec. 1838; *Kingston Chronicle*, 21 Dec. 1839; *The Church*, 26 Dec. 1840; SANDERSON, ed., *Arthur Papers*, I, 151-52; PAC. RG5, B11, Vol. 5, R. C. Horne to John Macaulay, 6 Apr. 1839; *Journals of the Legislative Assembly of Upper Canada [JLA]*, 1839, Appendix, Vol. II, School Reports, Report of the London District School Trustees (John Harris, B. Cronyn, and M. Burwell).

¹⁷ *Colonial Advocate*, 5 Nov. 1829.

¹⁸ Quoted in the *Brockville Recorder*, 19 Oct. 1837.

¹⁹ *British Colonial Argus*, 6 Aug. 1833.

Canadian reformers wanted neither Strachan nor Robespierre, neither the Family Compact nor the *sans culottes*. For moderate men — men with a stake in the community and the model of British liberalism before them — education provided the *via media* between the twin evils of aristocratical domination and popular tyranny. As Hiram Leavenworth, the editor of the *St. Catharines Journal*, put it, education was

the *safety-valve* of that mighty engine whose moral power can set the kingdoms of the earth in a blaze.... To attempt to *reform* the abuses of any Government, without intelligence among the people, is as impossible as it would be to *prevent* that reform where intelligence really existed. Revolutions are sometimes produced by long continued oppression of a patient and forbearing people. Just as often are they the result of some sudden and indefinable impulse given to the passions of an ignorant rabble. Timely and efficient *reform* is the antidote to the one — the dissemination of *useful knowledge* among the people, that of the other; and it betokens little wisdom in any Government, in this enlightened age of the world, that would refuse the former or wilfully neglect the latter.²⁰

Indeed, some reformers, though beginning from different premises, reached the same conclusions about the cause of the rebellion as did conservatives: money intended for the education of all, the Durham Constitutional Club of Niagara stated at its founding meeting, had been sequestered by the wealthy; ignorance among the people was the result, and, in consequence, “many have been made the dupes of the designing and the victims of the wicked...”²¹ Give the youth of Upper Canada a sound English education, Hiram Leavenworth added, and in twenty years, “we would be willing to guarantee with our necks for all the treason that could be found among them”.²²

For different reasons, then, both conservatives and reformers increasingly agreed that the education of the people was essential to good government, and that it could no longer be left to the accidents of circumstance and the whims of local people. But during the 1830's there were, as well, other reasons for promoting education — reasons that had nothing to do with politics.

Farming employed most of the people of Upper Canada and agriculture was crucial to the colony's prosperity. Yet as early as the 1830's there existed the perennial North American problem of keeping the able and ambitious on the land. The newspapers extolled the virtues of the agricultural life: farming was “a sure road to competent independence and comfort”;²³ when agriculture flourished, “commerce and the arts flourish; and civil and religious liberty all seem to abound in proportion to the

²⁰ *St. Catharines Journal*, 15 Oct. 1835. Similarly see *Christian Guardian*, 3 Sept. 1831; *Brockville Recorder*, 2 Feb. 1837.

²¹ Quoted in the *British Colonist*, 19 June 1839.

²² *Brockville Recorder*, 7 Dec. 1837 (quoting the *St. Catharines Journal*). Similarly see *British Colonist*, 6 Mar. 1839 and *St. Catharines Journal*, 26 Jan. 1839.

²³ *Western Herald*, 17 Apr. 1838.

intelligence and industry which distinguish the agricultural population".²⁴ But despite these truths, the editor of the *Upper Canada Herald* complained, the towns were becoming overcrowded with lawyers, doctors, merchants, and tradesmen:

There are hundreds who prefer dragging on a miserable dependent life in some petty ill-paid business in a Town, rather than throw themselves with all their health and vigour into the country, to work out a rich and honourable independence

It is time the evils of this system were pointed out, and that parents were put on their guard against preparing certain disappointment and misery for their children, by crowding them into the already overstocked professions and trades. Agriculture can never be overstocked with us²⁵

Part of the problem, the papers admitted, was that too many people were ashamed to work with their hands; but the reason for the low status of farming could also be laid at the door of the farmer himself. Knowledge, the *Western Herald* asserted, was rapidly becoming the "standard of worth" in the society. Yet farmers had not given it the attention it deserved, and thus had not been placed among those groups "which have approximated more to the standard of worth. Education has been too much neglected by our common farmers, and so long as this continues . . . farmers must not be surprised that they are no more elevated in society, however important and necessary their avocation."²⁶ If farming was to be respectable, intelligence had to be added to the older virtues of planning and prudence: "newspapers, books, schools, and the religious institutions of society should be at command and enjoyed; for indolence and inaction are as fatal to the mind as to the body" ²⁷

There was another, more urgent reason for encouraging education among the agricultural class. The pioneer's ruthless practice of "soil-mining" to produce crop after crop of wheat had paid dividends in the early years of settlement, but in the older parts of the province it had also drained the land of its fertility. By the 1830's, agricultural publicists were beginning to argue that both the welfare of the individual farmer and of the colony as a whole demanded more efficient farming — crop rotation, manures, better seed, and better breeding techniques for livestock. The obstacle to progress, however, was the notorious conservatism of the farmer:

Prejudices, that are so perfectly normal, and that are entertained by farmers in a greater degree than any other class of men all over the world, are not easily eradicated, nor new practices introduced, particularly where farmers are little in the habit of reading the practices or results of Agriculture in other countries²⁸

²⁴ *Upper Canada Herald*, 20 Feb. 1833.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 12 Sept. 1837.

²⁶ *Western Herald*, 12 June 1838.

²⁷ *Upper Canada Herald*, 3 July 1838. Similarly see *British American Journal*, 19 Mar. 1835; *St. Catharines Journal*, 22 Dec. 1836 and 29 Aug. 1839; *Christian Guardian*, 26 Feb. 1839.

²⁸ *Upper Canada Herald*, 22 Aug. 1835, quoting William EVANS, *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Agriculture . . . in Canada* (Montreal, 1835).

The farmer might fear "book farming" but it was the key to progress. "Book-knowledge then is power", said the *Patriot*, quoting an English farm magazine, "and other things being equal, the farmer who obtains information from books or other printed works, and has strength of mind . . . sufficient to make proper use of it, has the advantage over his unlettered neighbour . . ." ²⁹

Agricultural columns echoed this theme for at least two decades. "The improvement and profits of agriculture", said the *Western Herald*, "and the consequent prosperity of a state, are in ratio of the measure of intelligence which guides its labour." ³⁰ "A man of uncultivated mind", the *Upper Canada Herald* intoned, "may hold a plough, or drive a harrow in a sufficient manner; but he will seldom introduce an improvement or be the means of effecting any change in the system of rural economy." ³¹

Thus both the farmer's status in the community and the progress of agriculture in the colony were thought to be dependent upon the improvement of education. The *Canadian Quarterly Agricultural Magazine*, the first journal of its kind in the Canadas, put the matter baldly: "The general and judicious education of the Canadian people and particularly the agricultural class, will, in a few years hence, produce more beneficial results than any other measure that can be introduced." ³²

Education, indeed, was a pillar of all forms of individual and national prosperity. It was both practical and profitable — the "young man's capital", the *Chronicle* called it, "the best assurance of further competency and happiness". ³³ There were still some people in the province, the editor of the *Canadian Christian Examiner* remarked, who believed that national wealth was mainly the product of "bone and muscle". But there was no better proof of the futility of that theory than to compare

the condition of a Scottish agriculturalist or artizan with the wandering hunter of the forest. Scotland is like a field that the Lord has blessed; the boundless plains of Canada, overgrown with forest, demonstrate that ignorance is the parent of poverty . . . The truth is, there is no basis on which to rest national industry saving on the continuous prosecution of national education. Abandon education and industry languishes, the very fields experience the blight . . . ³⁴

But intellectual improvement was more than a source of material prosperity; it was also a powerful moral agent. The papers reprinted the ideas of British writers on the connection between crime, intemperance, poverty, and ignorance — Brougham's speeches, for example, and reviews

²⁹ *Patriot*, 28 Jan. 1830.

³⁰ *Western Herald*, 3 Jan. 1838.

³¹ *Upper Canada Herald*, 21 Aug. 1838.

³² Quoted in the *Western Herald*, 11 Sept. 1838.

³³ *Kingston Chronicle*, 5 Mar. 1842.

³⁴ *Canadian Christian Examiner*, Nov. 1839, p. 346.

of James Kay's *Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes*.³⁵ And they applied these principles to local conditions. The editor of a Belleville paper noted that a nearby township had twenty schools: "Of course this leads to the natural consequence, that there is but little intoxication, and of course but poor encouragement for taverns."³⁶ The *Kingston Chronicle* avowed that the man who had access to information and "rational amusement" would be preserved "from a demoralizing attendance on taverns . . ."³⁷ Give men books, an advocate of village libraries proclaimed, "that they may reject the bottle".³⁸ "People who are terrified at the mention of a system of assessment for the support of schools", the *Patriot* reminded its readers, "should remember that it is better to contribute moderately for education than afterwards to be taxed enormously for ignorance."³⁹

Upper Canada was not a secular community, and it is difficult to find anyone who considered education a substitute for religion in providing the foundation for personal and public morality; the province lacked, in effect, a voice equivalent to the English Philosophic Radicals who were particularly vociferous contributors to the "education mania" in Britain. What Upper Canada did have, however, was a group of religious leaders who saw no conflict between the extension of education and the extension of Christianity, who, indeed, saw education and religion as partners in the reformation of society. Upper Canadians did not need to read the secular press to find arguments for improving the schools; a plentiful supply was at hand in their religious journals. Robert McGill, John Strachan, and Egerton Ryerson might agree that a merely intellectual education, divorced from religion, was not enough; but neither was religion engulfed in ignorance. As a correspondent to the *Christian Guardian* put it, the aphorism "ignorance is the mother of devotion" was wrong — the truth was that "learning is the handmaid of piety".⁴⁰ Education without religion, the editor of *The Church* remarked, was worse than no religion at all.

But as an ally, grafted upon and inseparably connected with religion, education is invaluable and indispensable. So that while every township at least is furnished with its religious pastor, qualified to instruct its population in the great principles of Christian truth, let every township too possess those important co-adjutors to the ministers of Christ, — well-informed, loyal and pious school masters.⁴¹

³⁵ See, for example, the *Patriot*, 31 July 1835; *Upper Canada Herald*, 13 June 1832; *Kingston Chronicle*, 5 Sept. 1835.

³⁶ Quoted in the *Upper Canada Herald*, 9 May 1837.

³⁷ *Kingston Chronicle*, 1 May 1834.

³⁸ *Upper Canada Herald*, 16 June 1830.

³⁹ *Patriot*, 7 Mar. 1843. Similarly see the *Colonial Advocate*, 1 Nov. 1827; *Brockville Recorder*, 2 Nov. 1830.

⁴⁰ *Christian Guardian*, 1 Apr. 1835. Similarly, see 7 May 1834, 28 Jan. 1835, 19 June 1839, 15 Apr. 1840. It should be noted that there were some differences in emphasis on the relative weight of education and religion between Ryerson and the other editors of the *Guardian* during the thirties and early forties.

⁴¹ *The Church*, 5 May 1838. Similarly see 10 Aug. 1839 and 18 Jan. 1840.

Education and religion together were essential to public and private morality. According to Robert McGill, editor of the *Canadian Christian Examiner*, "the intelligence and religious habits of a people are better safe-guards, by far, of social order, and infinitely more economical than prisons and standing armies".⁴² In the religious journals, the gospel of education was second only to the gospel of Christ.

Even "mental science" in its embryonic state was demonstrating the value of education to the community. Confronted by phrenology, the modern reader may sympathize with the acerbic comment of a correspondent to the *Kingston Chronicle*: he has never doubted, he writes, "that the seat of thought was in the head. The mass of mankind seem like a sieve of marbles. When anything *novel* is placed on one side, it weighs it down and all the marbles roll thither, until something more *novel* is placed on the opposite side and then all the marbles run back again."⁴³ Nonetheless, in the late thirties and early forties, phrenology began to enjoy a considerable vogue in Upper Canada. Books and journals on the subject were available in the bookstores, and articles explaining its doctrines were reprinted by the press.⁴⁴ There were a large number of lectures on the subject by British and American visitors, and occasionally by local people as well.⁴⁵ Many of these lectures were well attended, and several newspapers treated the subject seriously. The editor of the *Chronicle*, for example, admitted that there were "obscurities that still exist in the science" but hoped that visiting lecturers "will meet with proper encouragement from an enlightened community".⁴⁶ Hugh Scobie of the *British Colonist* was more sanguine. After a particularly interesting set of lectures, during which such worthies as Thomas Rolph, R. B. Sullivan, and John Ewart had had their characters delineated with "extraordinary correctness", Scobie recommended the lectures to his readers in the hope that they would take the opportunity to familiarize themselves with "the principles of a science which, in the opinion of many, will yet be taken as the guide for the instruction of youth, and for preparing them for their different avocations in life".⁴⁷

Scobie's comment points to the significance of phrenology. It was important because it offered easy solutions to difficult problems, and because,

⁴² *Canadian Christian Examiner*, Jan. 1839, pp. 7-8. Similarly see Aug. 1839, p. 252. and Nov. 1839, pp. 346-47.

⁴³ *Kingston Chronicle*, 9 Aug. 1837.

⁴⁴ See for example *St. Catharines Journal*, 30 Apr. 1840; *Brockville Recorder*, 1 Feb. 1838; *Kingston Chronicle*, 8 June 1842. Combe's work on the subject was the best known in the period and turns up in several lists of private libraries, including that of John Macaulay — see Public Archives of Ontario, Macaulay Papers, Inventory of Books . . . 1832.

⁴⁵ Including Thomas Rolph (*Patriot*, 6 Feb. 1835) and Thomas MacQueen, sometime editor of the *Bathurst Courier* and the *Huron Signal* (*Brockville Recorder*, 13 Mar. 1845).

⁴⁶ *Kingston Chronicle*, 14 Jan. and 13 Mar. 1837.

⁴⁷ *British Colonist*, 30 Sept. 1840. See also the *Patriot*, 6 Feb. 1835, 15 Jan. 1836, 1 Sept. 1837, 17 Nov. 1840; *Kingston Chronicle*, 18 Jan., 22 July, 5 Aug. 1837; *St. Catharines Journal*, 16 Sept. 1841 and 15 Dec. 1842; *Brockville Recorder*, 13 Mar. 1845 and 22 Oct. 1846.

in its popularized form at least, it was easy to understand. The propensities of the child could be read in the shape of the skull. Once those propensities were known, corrective action could be taken. If the theory were true, it had revolutionary implications for the role of education, or so, at least, its proponents believed. Given the new tools of understanding that phrenology offered, parents and teachers could become the "great FORMERS of human character" by "giving due exercise to Benevolence, Justice, and to all the Moral Sentiments, and by watchfully keeping inactive all the animal propensities, until they shall become daily enfeebled and perfectly subjected to the control of the Moral Sentiments and Intellectual Faculties".⁴⁸ The new interest in phrenology coincided with the growing interest in the connection between education and the public welfare. For those who believed, it gave additional impetus to the enthusiasm for improving the schools.

Throughout the 1830's, then, a growing number of arguments were marshalled to justify educational reform. Education could solve — or at least contribute to solving — many of the problems that confronted the colony. It could aid in the diminution of crime and intemperance. It could increase national prosperity, especially the prosperity of the agricultural class. It could, above all, contribute to a stable and healthy social order. Few men would have accepted all the arguments. But the remarkable fact is that whatever their different hopes for society, Upper Canadians at the end of the decade were unanimous, or nearly so, in their faith in the efficacy of education to contribute to the accomplishment of those hopes. It was during the thirties that Upper Canada joined in the "education mania" of the age.

Though the growing interest in popular education was cumulative, it was the rebellion that was critical in convincing people that something had to be done. Before 1837, the debate on the political importance of the school seems to have lacked a certain passion, except on the point, which always animated conservatives, of ridding the schools of American texts and teachers. After the rebellion, there was a new sense of urgency among a broader spectrum of public opinion: people were convinced, in a way they had not been before, that ignorance was the fuel for treason and anarchy. It is significant that a proposal to introduce property taxation for schools passed in the assembly for the first time — it had been proposed before and always rejected by both conservative and reform assemblies — in 1838;⁴⁹ property taxation, as John Strachan had contended for a decade, was the first step in improving the schools of Upper Canada.

⁴⁸ *Kingston Chronicle*, 20 June 1840, quoting the (London) *Morning Courier*.

⁴⁹ See *JLA*, 12 Feb. 1838. It was approved in principle by the Legislative Council but rejected on the grounds that the country was temporarily in extreme financial difficulty. *JLA*, 26 Feb. 1838, Report of a Committee sent to confer with the Council. Property taxation for schools was introduced permanently in Upper Canada in 1841.

The first fruits of the consensus established in the thirties were to be found in the legislation of the forties. In the ten years between 1841 and 1850, four major school acts were passed, creating the essential characteristics of the Ontario school system. But there is a second point about the consensus that is no less important. It established the terms of debate about public education for the following century and a half. In essence, it consisted of two ideas: first, that schooling was a particularly appropriate way of dealing with the problems that the society faced, and second, that what was important about education was its "public" purposes — its political, economic, and social functions. Neither idea is necessarily sound. But although the public school consensus has been progressively applied to institutions above the level of the elementary school, and has increasingly absorbed ever larger amounts of our public wealth, it remains today substantially unchallenged, if a little tattered from the buffeting received in the last few years.