

Rebellions of Upper and Lower Canada: 1837-1838



C.W. Jefferys, *The March of the Rebels upon Toronto in December, 1837*, c. 1921 (b/w photograph)
 Government of Ontario Art Collection, Toronto
 Thomas Moore Photography, Toronto

The Rebellions of 1837 and 1838 in Upper and Lower Canada are remarkable episodes in Canadian history. During these years, hundreds of armed citizens rose up against the government, protesting the injustices of the ruling elite, and demanding changes in the politics and economics of Imperial rule in British North America. In Lower Canada, disagreements between the British ruling elite and the ordinary residents took on an ethnic form. Francophone merchants and habitants, led by the rebel *Patriotes*, sought more control over their economy and culture. When their concerns were not heard, they fought to overthrow a government that did not have the support of the people. Both Upper and Lower Canadians joined with sympathetic Americans to launch military invasions hoping to free the colony from British rule. A number of people were killed in the insurrections, hundreds were arrested and, as a result of the Rebellions, British North Americans lost civil rights and broad democratic control of their lives. While the Rebellions had little direct impact on Aboriginal peoples in Upper and Lower Canada, the Rebellions reflected the emerging dominance of European political and economic concerns in the 'new' world.

Overview of the decade: 1835-1845

Economic developments

Continuity and gradual evolution, not revolutionary change, defined most aspects of life in British North America during this decade, and the economy was no exception. Agricultural lands continued to expand, as settlers slowly turned forest into farmland, building both an agricultural and a timber industry. The economy of Aboriginal peoples was affected as they came increasingly in contact with the Europeans, and while trading goods became more common, conflict around land increased as their land gradually disappeared under the tide of immigration. Despite its expanding base, the economy of the colonies, based on the export of staples like wheat, timber, furs and fish to Britain, faltered in these years as it did so often throughout the nineteenth century, resulting in particular economic hardship to merchants and businessmen.

Although wheat production and export of wheat had expanded from 1815 onward, poor crop yields, particularly in 1836, meant that many farmers did not have enough wheat to pay their debts, buy supplies, tools or seed for the next year's crop.



Sugar making, from Canniff Haight, Country Life in Canada Fifty Years Ago: (Early Canadian Online, Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions, #13133)

<http://www.canadiana.org/cgi-bin/ECO/mtq?id=a48694e787&display=13133+0064>

In Lower Canada, the agricultural crisis was severe. Poor farming practices, particularly the failure to rotate crops (a form of soil management where different crops are planted each year to protect the quality of the soil), lead to lower crop yields, and a vulnerability to disease and pests. French Canadian habitants, unlike most other farmers in British North America, did not own the land that they worked, and most of their surplus money and wheat was paid to seigneurial lords and to the church. The habitants were caught in a vicious circle: since they did not earn much money from selling excess wheat, they had little money to buy manufactured goods, and so the manufacturing sector did not develop. This meant few jobs were available outside of farming and thus the habitants were kept on the land farming for the seigneurial lords. Their seasonal work in the fur trade may have brought in some extra income, but it took men away from their fields when their work was needed on the land.

Social developments

The biggest changes to the colonies were likely created by the stream of immigrants pouring in from Britain. Increasing immigration, the growth of commercial farming, and the slow increase of trade and industry were accompanied by the growth of cities. While most British North American cities were tiny by our standards, the clustering together of so many people presented problems of poverty, overcrowding, poor sanitation and crime—problems that were particularly bad in the winters, when less work was available. Many immigrants arrived without the support of friends and family in these years, and the towns and cities had few facilities to help those without support. British North American cities began to replace a loose system of voluntary emergency assistance with more formal responses to the poor, sick and destitute. By the early 1840s, street lighting, sewers and piped water were appearing in cities like Toronto, Halifax and Kingston, making life more comfortable and safe for urban residents. Economic dislocation for Aboriginal peoples was accompanied by cultural changes, many of which were associated with increasing violence and alcoholism. Most significant, however, were the epidemics of smallpox, measles and influenza that killed thousands of Native peoples across British North America, contributing to the assault that Europeans made, intentionally or not, on Aboriginal life.

Families remained central to the society and culture of the new society. Although they did not always immigrate at the same time, other family members would generally follow the first immigrant in a pattern that historians call “chain migration.” This pattern helped to establish the clustering of people of similar ethnic and religious backgrounds into particular areas of a city or rural community. People brought with them patterns of behaviour, as well as British goods, laws and religious beliefs, and all of these continued to influence life in the new location. Communities were important centres of co-operation and mutual assistance in both English- and French-speaking areas of British North America. Most present-

day Canadians might find the type of moral and social regulation of behaviour that accompanied such close community ties very confining. Religious observances were essentially obligatory for most respectable residents of a community. While the British system of law formally managed serious breaches of the peace in courts of law, communities would enforce particular standards through a variety of informal responses. Public humiliation of people who married an “unsuitable” partner (i.e., a marriage where differences in age, or religion, or wealth were pronounced) was a common form of community control.

The goal of most immigrants was to establish themselves on the land, and it was this element of colonial development that proved so devastating to Aboriginal peoples as populations increased in this decade. Only in the vast area of the Northwest did Aboriginal peoples continue their traditional social, economic and cultural ways. The Hudson’s Bay Company, with its monopoly on trade in the region, depended on the Aboriginal peoples to provide furs that they would then sell to the fashion houses of Europe. The Company had, therefore, no reason to disrupt Aboriginal life, and actively discouraged European settlement as they feared it would interfere with trapping and trade. Western expansion was some years in the future.

Political developments

By 1791, the British government had responded to American Loyalists’ desire for British rule with the Constitution Act, which separated “Quebec” into two colonies, English Upper Canada to the west and French Lower Canada to the east. Upper Canada was governed by a Lieutenant Governor, who answered to the Governor General in Quebec City, who was in turn answerable to the British Crown. The Governor appointed executive and legislative councillors, who ran and made laws for the two colonies. A Legislative Assembly was elected by a relatively broad male electorate, but this Assembly had very limited powers. The British Crown deliberately restricted the Assembly’s power because it was this kind of democratically elected body that had initiated the revolt of the thirteen colonies, a revolt that had turned into the American Revolution.

By the mid-1820s, a number of groups were impatient with their limited political and economic power. Both colonies were pre-industrial, agricultural economies that were heavily dependent on land. In both Upper and Lower Canada, however, huge tracts of land were in the hands of the small British elite who had been granted political office. The British government had hoped that this elite group would promote immigration to the colonies by attracting buyers for their lands. However, in the 1830s these tracts of lands were largely unsettled because the price they demanded for them was too high. Most of this land was owned by absentee landlords (owners who were absent from or did not live in the area) with little interest in developing the local roads, businesses or communities. In Upper Canada, clergy reserves—one seventh of all lands that the Crown gave to the Church of England – were cause for further complaints. These land reserves slowed the process of settlement and put more wealth into the hands of the established church and elite families of the colony. Business and professional people wanted more political power and economic advancement.

By 1827, the people of Lower Canada were experiencing similar grievances. The *Parti Canadien* (the reformers opposed to British Tory rule that later changed its name to the *Parti Patriote*) had won 90% of the seats in the House of Assembly, but French Canadians had little control of the economy and society of Lower Canada. In both colonies the wealthy elite, comprised mainly of British officials, business people and landowners, asked to be protected from the influences and the disorder that had caused revolution in the United States. They argued that a hierarchical society with strong ties to the British Crown provided the security needed for economic growth and social stability. Increasingly, however, the people objected to the unequal social structure guaranteed by the church and state, one where the middle and working classes had little control and little opportunity for advancement. Although protests in Upper Canada were not as clearly defined or united as they were in Lower Canada at this time, united protest began to appear by the early years of the decade. By 1834, two poles of the political spectrum could be identified in both colonies. On the one side, defending the Family Compact and the “Chateau Clique” were office-holding Tories who supported a system based on British economic and political rule. On the other side were William Lyon MacKenzie’s Reform Party and Louis-Joseph Papineau’s *Parti Patriote*.

1837 and 1838: Rebellions in the Canadas

Lead-up to the rebellions

By 1836, the legislature of Lower Canada had just about ceased to function, as the elected and appointed parts of the government reached a deadlock. City councils, schools and other public offices were shut down because the elected assembly would not vote more funds for government functions. Many people in Upper and Lower Canada challenged the government's right to rule, as it had so little support from the people. In Lower Canada, the government responded by imposing more rigid and undemocratic rule, including the permission to spend money without the Assembly's approval. Although it became illegal in Lower Canada for people to gather together to criticize the government, in June of 1837, the *Patriotes* met in a variety of locations to plan an alternative revolutionary government. Political meetings in Lower Canada turned into military training camps as men were drawn into the cause. The British government responded to the threat of rebellion by calling loyal troops from all over British North America to contain the problem in Lower Canada.

The rebellions

British troops had been gathering in Montreal throughout November 1837, and on November 23 the army attacked the *Patriote* stronghold of Saint-Denis in the Richelieu River region near Montreal. The *Patriote* forces managed to withstand the assault for two days. The defeat of their comrades in nearby Saint-Charles three days later put an effective end to the uprising. Several *Patriote* supporters were killed, many were taken prisoner, and a number escaped into Vermont where they sought the American military support. American officials declared themselves unwilling to interfere in British affairs. A second armed uprising in the fall of 1838 was launched from Vermont. These rebels were defeated not by British army, but by in a humiliating confrontation with the popular support from an army of local Lower Canadian volunteers. In all, over 1,300 people were imprisoned, more than sixty were exiled or deported. Twelve were hanged. Over five hundred sought asylum in the United States, some remaining for years in that country.

William Lyon MacKenzie, who had been organizing supporters into revolutionary unions throughout southern Ontario, prepared to take advantage of the situation in Lower Canada. When MacKenzie heard of the victory at Saint-Denis, he decided to launch his own revolutionary strike by taking Toronto with his own army. The creation of alternative political unions had been most successful in the regions west of Toronto. It was from Montgomery's Tavern, just north of Toronto, that MacKenzie launched his army, 500 strong, on December 5, 1837. Things did not go well, however. Alarmed residents informed the Governor, and the company marching down Yonge Street was met by a delegation requesting surrender. The situation remained at an impasse for three or four days, while reinforcements on both sides arrived, and a large number of rebels deserted. Only two hundred of MacKenzie's men were armed, and when the Governor's army finally arrived, the rebels were quickly defeated. Montgomery's Tavern was burned and the leaders who were not captured fled to the United States. Although a number of rebel forces gathered throughout southwestern Ontario over the next few weeks, a government crackdown resulted in arrests and prevented further serious outbreaks of violence and disorder.



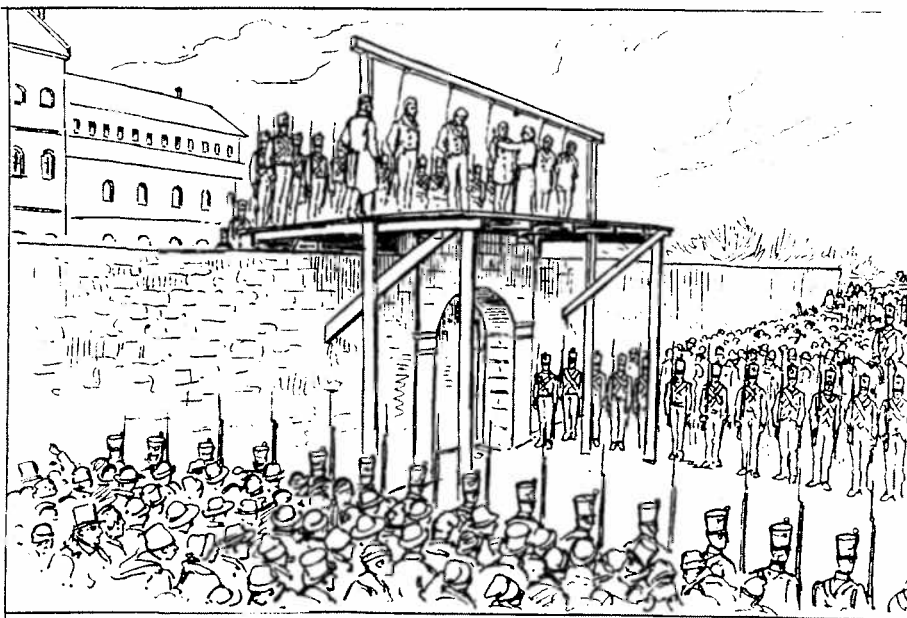
C.W. Jefferys, *Battle of St Eustache*
(National Archives of Canada)
Courtesy of the C.W. Jefferys Estate

Effects of the rebellions

The repressive measures enacted in both Upper and Lower Canada after the Rebellions indicated Britain's desire to preserve its rule in British North America. Thousands of British troops were called up, martial law passed, hundreds of rebels imprisoned and over a hundred were transported to Australian prisons. Newspapers that had supported *Patriote* causes were shut down. In Lower Canada, where the Rebellions had a deeper and wider popularity than in Upper Canada, the provincial assembly was removed entirely. A Special Council was appointed that acted in co-operation with the Governor, but without the consent of the people, to pass laws. Between 1838 and 1841 French Canadians effectively lost their right, guaranteed to them by the British government, to have 'no taxation without representation'.

Although the Rebellions were squashed almost, they had considerable impact on British North American society. Some historians have argued that the Rebellions forced the British government to rethink colonial rule, and were important factors pressuring Britain in 1848 to grant responsible government (the principle that cabinet must have the support of the majority of the elected legislative branch). Lord Durham's Report on the Rebellions in 1839 criticized the undemocratic control on the colonies by the elite Family Compact. The fact that Nova Scotia, which had no rebellion, was granted responsible government some months before it was granted to the Canadas, suggests that other more evolutionary factors were at work. Lord Durham's solution to the discontent in Upper and Lower Canada was to unite the Canadas through the Union Act (passed in 1839 and implemented in 1840). Durham's strategy was intended to strengthen British influence in the face of more radical American influences, reduce the political power of the French Canadians and encourage their adoption of British language, laws and culture.

Although responsible government was granted after 1848, the non-elected executive continued to have considerably more power than in other liberal democracies. A variety of committees that formerly answered to the elected assembly came increasingly under the control of a non-elected bureaucratic structure. Government became more monarchist and conservative after the Rebellions, and was far more wary of radical tendencies. The Rebellions, indeed, marked a turning point where government services—schools, asylums, prisons, bureaucracies—assumed more and more control over people's lives. The modernization of the political system, like the modernization of the economy that followed the Rebellions, tended to reinforce elitist power and centralized control in British North America.



12 Patriotes hanged
(National Archives of Canada, C-13493)

The assimilation of the French Canadian population of Quebec did not occur, as later developments have shown. Indeed, the harsh response of the British government during the Rebellions was possibly responsible for the deep nationalism that defined the Quebec society after the Rebellions. This nationalism was an important factor in the ethnic composition of Canadian society outside of Quebec, which remained very Anglophone and Protestant. For the British immigrants pouring into Upper and Lower Canada (renamed Canada West and Canada East after the Union) the commitment to British values and economic imperatives seemed to be confirmed. In both colonies, the conflict was in many ways a conflict between recent immigrants (many of them British), and the people who, after living in British North America for some time, had come to resent British control of colonial life. For Aboriginal populations, the process of settlement itself, and not the particularities of ethnic identity or liberal freedoms, were wreaking havoc on their way of life.