Before the *Christian Guardian*:
American Methodist Periodicals in the Upper Canadian
Backwoods, 1818-1829¹

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Meeting in Ancaster, Upper Canada in the late summer of 1829, delegates attending the annual conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Canada issued \$2,000 in stock and used the borrowed funds to purchase a press, open a printing shop, and begin publishing a weekly newspaper in the colony's capital at York (later Toronto) called the *Christian Guardian*.² It was a decisive step and one that would eventually help draw Upper Canadian Methodists into the political and religious mainstream of British North America. Although intended at first to appeal principally to an audience of denominational readers, the *Christian Guardian* soon adopted so outspoken a reformist editorial slant that it became one of Upper Canada's most popular periodicals. With more than 3,000 Methodist and non-Methodist subscribers by the early 1830s, one detractor observed caustically that it "went into every hole and corner of the Upper Province."³ Under

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¹ Patricia Fleming was the first to point out to me that the habit Methodists inherited from John Wesley for keeping voluminous records made them an eminently practicable object for study. I am particularly grateful to her for sharing this insight. I would also like to express my thanks to the members of York University Libraries' Research and Awards Committee for a research release that facilitated the completion of this article.

² Wesleyan-Methodist Church in Canada, *The Minutes of the Annual Conference of the Wesleyan-Methodist Church in Canada, from 1824-1845 inclusive* (Toronto: Anson Green, 1846), 27-28.

³ John Hare and Jean-Pierre Wallot, "The Business of Printing and Publishing" in *The History of the Book in Canada*, eds. Patricia Fleming, Gilles Gallichan, and Yvan Lamonde (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 1:72; Janet Friskney "Towards a Canadian 'Cultural Mecca': The Methodist Book and

the able and energetic editorship of the youthful Methodist preacher Egerton Ryerson, the newspaper earned its reputation as an unyielding thorn in the side of Upper Canada's conservative governing elite as it opened a new space where policies could be debated, elections influenced, and political figures scrutinized.⁴ Indeed, so central did the *Guardian* become in the reformist battle for religious neutrality on the part of the state, that its impact on the colony's political and cultural life can be overstated only with difficulty.⁵ Yet for all of its undoubted influence, the *Christian Guardian* did not appear in a vacuum. Nor was it the first religious periodical to be widely read by Methodists in the colony. In fact, by the time the first issue of the *Guardian* finally appeared in November 1829, Upper Canadian Methodists had proven themselves to be loyal subscribers, readers, and contributors to American Methodist periodicals for more than a decade.

It is perhaps not surprising, in view of the enormous impact the *Christian Guardian* had on Methodist fortunes in Upper Canada, that Canadian religious and print culture historiography has tended to marginalize and even ignore those antecedents that helped prepare the ground for the *Guardian*. Indeed, historians of religion have generally had surprisingly little to say about the place print occupied in the lives of Upper Canada's earliest Methodists. Nancy Christie, for example, notes that those recruited as Methodist preachers typically came from uneducated, humble backgrounds, but says nothing about the requirement placed on them by the General Conference to improve themselves daily by study while serving as denominational colporteurs.⁶ In much the same way, Neil Semple's landmark history of Canadian Methodism offers little insight into

Publishing House's Pursuit of Book Publishing and Commitment to Canadian Writing, 1829-1926" (Master's thesis, Trent University, 1994), 36.

⁴ Egerton Ryerson, *Canadian Methodism: Its Epochs and Characteristics* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1882), 304ff.

⁵ Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, the Church of England's proponents insisted on preferential treatment as members of what they claimed was Upper Canada's established Church. It was not until the secularization of the Clergy Reserves in 1854 that those pretensions were finally dropped (Curtis Fahey, *In His Name: The Anglican Experience in Upper Canada, 1791-1854*, (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1991), 113-196; William Westfall, *Two Worlds: The Protestant Culture of Nineteenth Century Ontario* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), 82-125.

⁶ Nancy Christie, "In These Times of Democratic Rage and Delusion': Popular Religion and the Challenge to the Established Order, 1760-1815," in *The*

Methodist print culture as a force in its own right apart from noting in passing that the *Christian Guardian* became a locus of contention between Upper Canadian and British Wesleyan Methodists.⁷ On the other hand, those few scholars who have taken the province's religious print culture as their primary object of inquiry have tended to focus primarily on the early distribution work of British philanthropic organizations on the grounds that "most Bible and tract societies established in the colonies identified themselves as local affiliates of organizations based in Britain."⁸ These converging historiographical currents have meant that little attention has been paid to the influence American Methodist periodicals exercised over the development of Methodist religious identity in Upper Canada in the years between the close of the War of 1812 and the introduction of the *Christian Guardian* in November 1829. This paper will attempt to shed light on this generally understudied period by considering the role the monthly *Methodist Magazine*, and later the weekly *Christian Advocate*, played not only in reinvigorating Methodist revivalism across postwar Upper Canada, but also in inducting readers on both sides of the border into an imagined community of believers whose bonds transcended political differences.

Although Upper Canada was part of British North America, Methodism did not spread to the colony through the activities of British Wesleyan missionaries, but by the agency of American Methodist itinerant preachers who first crossed the frozen St. Lawrence River on horseback during the winter of 1790. The American Revolution had done much to differentiate American Methodism from its British Wesleyan parent. In a religious free market unencumbered by an established church, the debate over Methodism's continued subordination to the Church of England was perfectly irrelevant to citizens of the new republic. As they adapted to this new political climate, American Methodists soon abandoned the political conservatism and forms of social deference that continued to mark British Wesleyanism for many decades to come. But on one important point American Methodists and British Wesleys

Canadian Protestant Experience, ed. George Rawlyk (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 28-9.

⁷ Neil Semple, *The Lord's Dominion: The History of Canadian Methodism* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 76, 82, 92, 97, 125.

⁸ Janet Friskney, "Christian Faith," 1:139. George Parker, *The Beginnings of the Book Trade in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 19-20.

did not disagree: whatever form of ecclesiastical polity they adopted, Methodists everywhere remained a reading people.

Since the time John Wesley established Methodism as a renewal movement within the Church of England in the middle decades of the eighteenth century, he demanded that his followers devote a portion of each day to study. To ensure that they would have a ready and affordable supply of reading material best suited to advance their spiritual welfare, Wesley took it upon himself to write, edit, abridge, and publish countless titles that were then sold by his travelling preachers and through the Methodist preaching houses that dotted the British countryside. Indeed, by the time of his death in 1791, Wesley's publishing and bookselling business was yielding an annual income that exceeded England's eight largest bishoprics combined.⁹ Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, American Methodists became the first denomination to establish their own religious publishing house, the Methodist Book Concern, in 1789. About a decade later, formal resolutions were passed by the General Conference requiring that all preachers, including those assigned to Upper Canada, function as travelling booksellers on behalf of the Methodist Book Concern.¹⁰

Upper Canadian Methodists, most of whom lived outside the colony's few urban centres at Kingston, Niagara, and York (Toronto), relied heavily on a growing corps of American preachers to supply them with books and periodicals for at least the first quarter of the nineteenth century. "The result of the preachers' efforts in this line," noted one of Canadian Methodism's first historians, "was that the principal Methodist families in the early days were better supplied with standard books in theology and religion than similar families are now, – not only relatively, but often really. What a boon were these publications in the then tardy state of communication with the outside world."¹¹

After the Revolution, American Methodism grew at a dizzying rate. Expansion was especially steep in the first decade of the nineteenth century when the membership roles of the Methodist Episcopal

⁹ Henry Ablove, *Evangelist of Desire: John Wesley and the Methodists* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 9. See also Vicky Tolar Burton, *Spiritual Literacy in John Wesley's Methodism* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008), 235, 315–339.

¹⁰ Methodist Episcopal Church, *Journals of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1796–1836* (New York: Carleton & Phillips, 1855), 1:45. See also Hatch, *Democratization*, 142–143.

¹¹ John Carroll, *Case and His Cotemporaries; or, The Canadian Itinerants' Memorial* (Toronto: Samuel Rose, 1867), 1:153, 257.

Church more than doubled from 64,894 to 174,560.¹² Remarkably, the proportional rate of growth in Upper Canada was even more pronounced. In 1800, six preachers patrolled Upper Canada's four preaching circuits, which comprised 936 formal members. Within a decade, the number of preachers had more than doubled to thirteen, and the colony's ten preaching circuits intersected almost all the regions inhabited by non-Natives. Official membership statistics meanwhile had climbed to 2,603: an increase of 177%.¹³ So remarkable was this expansion that the phenomenon was referred to by Methodists on both sides of the border as the "Canada Fire."¹⁴

The American preachers responsible for the colony's wilderness circuits and who served as the chief engines of this expansion brought with them more than a contagious religious faith. They also brought saddlebags full of books and later periodicals to sell along their preaching circuits. Under the direction of itinerants who functioned as preachers, colporteurs, and subscription agents, the growth of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the expansion of the Methodist Book Concern's denominational market became mutually reinforcing. Thus the extraordinary growth of Methodism in the United States and Upper Canada was both a cause and an effect of the denomination's burgeoning religious print culture. While the distribution of religious texts could often help precipitate conversion, as one travelling preacher discovered in the western reaches of the province when a single tract on drunkenness resulted in dozens seeking repentance, every Upper Canadian converted to Methodism who began to attend regular preaching and class meetings became a potential participant in the Methodist Book Concern's market.¹⁵ As Methodist circuits grew in size, every one of the preachers that the New York conference, and later the Genesee conference, sent into the province before the War of 1812, became a more effective agent for distributing tracts and selling books.

¹² David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2005), 216. See also John Wigger, *Taking heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 197-200.

¹³ George Playter, *The History of Methodism in Canada* (Toronto: Anson Green, 1862), 67, 98. For statistics reflecting growth in both the Canadas, see George Cornish, *Cyclopaedia of Methodism in Canada* (Toronto: Methodist Book and Publishing House, 1881), 31.

¹⁴ George Rawlyk, *The Canada Fire: Radical Evangelicalism in British North America, 1775-1812* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), 102-123.

¹⁵ Abel Stevens, *Life and Times of Nathan Bangs, DD* (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1863), 143.

When war broke out in June 1812, Methodist growth in Upper Canada was brought to an abrupt halt. The border was closed and the majority of travelling preachers were forced to withdraw to the United States. The small handful who remained behind found themselves obliged to take up other work to make ends meet as attendance dropped and militia drills interrupted worship services. Isaac Brock, meanwhile, the officer in charge of British forces in the colony, eyed Methodist preachers with suspicion, observing that, "these American-based preachers held political principles that were highly prejudicial to the peace of Society."¹⁶

The years between 1812 and 1815 have been referred to as the "*non-historic period*" of Canadian Methodism because no membership statistics were kept, no preachers from Upper Canada communicated with the Genesee conference, and no minutes were kept of meetings held north of the border.¹⁷ By the time hostilities ceased in March 1815, it was clear that Methodism had suffered major reversals across the province. Membership in the upper and lower provinces combined had declined from a high of 3,293 just before the War to only 1,785.¹⁸ Even more worrying for a religious denomination that had spread from the United States and that had relied on preachers from south of the border to sustain its momentum, was an emergent but unmistakable shift in Upper Canada's political complexion that divided a period of relative ideological diversity from one increasingly dominated by the views of an influential conservative leadership that shared the anti-American prejudices of the colonial administration. Postwar trends associated with a steadily more uniform colonial ideology had considerable potential to complicate the lives of Methodists. As if this were not enough, British Wesleyans took the opportunity of Methodism's wartime decline to establish rival preaching outposts in both Upper and Lower Canada with an eye to eventually displacing American Methodism from British North America altogether.

In the face of obstacles such as these, prospects for a quick recovery after the War must have seemed remote. In their attempts to account for Methodism's postwar resurgence, historians of Canadian religion have tended to point to the steps Methodists took to recruit British, Canadian, and moderate American preachers who would have been unlikely to stir up political controversy in their ministry. Neil Semple

¹⁶ George Sheppard, *Plunder Profit, and Paroles: A Social History of the War of 1812 in Upper Canada* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), 25.

¹⁷ Carroll, *Case*, 1:261, 1:288. Italics in the original.

¹⁸ Playter, *History*, 143.

in particular argues that this shift in recruiting practices marked a key departure in the development of religion in Upper Canada that set Methodism north of the border on a trajectory that would inevitably lead to ecclesiastical independence and later union with the British Wesleyans. Semple's teleological argument, however, fails to explain why Canadian Methodists in the years immediately following the war refused to submit to the authority of British Wesleyan missionaries eager to establish a presence in Upper Canada. Although that would have opened an easy way for Methodists to counter mounting suspicions about their political loyalties, they determinedly opposed the advances of their Wesleyan cousins. Although this might have been a key turning point for the denomination in Canada, Methodists chose instead to brave allegations of disloyalty and even charges of outright sedition in order to maintain their ties to the American Methodist Episcopal Church.

Historians who have based their narratives primarily on readings of documents concerned with ecclesiastical polity and colonial politics have found it difficult to explain why Methodists persisted in this view despite a pronounced increase in anti-Americanism across the colony. At least part of the reason seems to lie in the way in which Methodism's transnational market for books and periodicals reinforced a sense of membership in a community that transcended political differences. Although the timing was entirely accidental, the bonds uniting participants in that market were strengthened precisely in the years following the War by the introduction of the Concern's first successful monthly, the *Methodist Magazine*, in January 1818. Importantly, Canadian Methodists were more than passive readers of the *Magazine*. They also routinely published their own stories describing Methodism's advances north of the border and in so doing were able to see their narratives juxtaposed to those of their American brethren. Thus each month Canadian Methodists would have received a powerful demonstration in print that they belonged to a larger community of readers and believers whose bonds grew sufficiently strong to resist the divisions along geopolitical lines urged by the colony's ascendant ideological and religious forces.

John Dickins, the Methodist Book Concern's first Book Agent, made two attempts to introduce a monthly before his death in 1798. Both failed in less than two years.¹⁹ Nothing more came of it

¹⁹ Methodist Episcopal Church, *Journals*, 1:119. See also Nathan Bangs, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1838-1841) 2:317, 3:53.

until the War of 1812 drew to a close and Joshua Soule was elected Book Agent by the General Conference in the spring of 1816. After Soule's election, the Book Committee passed several resolutions underscoring the need for a periodical and urging him to begin publishing a monthly in octavo twelve times per year. The Committee also directed the nine individual conferences that then made up the Methodist Episcopal Church – including the Genesee Conference that embraced Upper Canada – to furnish the *Methodist Magazine* with original material for publication.²⁰ Fortunately for the Committee, Soule was so committed to the venture that he was even willing to risk some of his own money to back the new periodical. Soule's gamble paid off eighteen months later when, in January 1818, the first issue of the new and ultimately successful *Methodist Magazine* appeared. An octavo numbering forty pages, the first issue contained letters, biographical pieces, an obituary, religious poetry, articles on theology, and a dedication written by Soule to “patrons and friends in the United States, and especially to the members of the Methodist Episcopal Church.”²¹

Despite Soule's apparently muted expectations about its potential appeal to readers north of the border, the *Methodist Magazine* found a ready and enthusiastic welcome in Upper Canada. George Playter notes that it “was much circulated in Canada among preachers and members,” and situates it as a direct forerunner to the *Christian Advocate* and the Upper Canadian *Christian Guardian* as periodical repositories “of records concerning the M[ethodist]. E[piscopal]. Church, either in the United States or Canada.”²² By the end of 1824, William Case, an American Methodist preacher who had served in the colony both before and after the War of 1812, was able to report that even around Kingston, an area typically more resistant to Methodism than other parts of the colony, the *Magazine* had found a significant number of subscribers. “Sixty-four subscribers,” he wrote, had “given in their names for the Magazine” in that region, together with seventy in the “Bay of Quinty [*sic*] circuit alone.” “The list of subscribers,” he went on to add, “might be easily increased, greatly to the advantage of the cause of religion, as well as the interests of the [C]oncern, if an active part were taken by the preachers in the circulation of this

²⁰ The *Christian Advocate* was published weekly by the Methodist Book Concern in New York beginning in September 1826. Methodist Episcopal Church, *Journals*, 1:171-172.

²¹ Joshua Soule, “Address,” *Methodist Magazine*, January 1818, 3-7.

²² Playter, *History*, 165-166.

valuable work.”²³ The year Case’s letter was published, Kingston and the Bay of Quinte had a combined Methodist membership of 652. A conservative extrapolation of these subscription figures across the rest of the colony’s preaching circuits embracing 6,357 formal members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1825, suggests that the total number of active Canadian subscriptions to the *Magazine* less than ten years after its introduction was upwards of 1,500. By comparison, the *Upper Canada Gazette*, the province’s official weekly newspaper, was printed in runs of only 300 copies and William Lyon Mackenzie’s more popular *Colonial Advocate* counted not more than about 400 subscribers around the same time.²⁴ Through its network of preachers who functioned as subscription agents across Upper Canada’s backwoods, then, it appears that the *Methodist Magazine* was probably reaching a substantially larger number of paying subscribers north of the border than any periodical produced by Canadian printers at that time.

The *Magazine*’s striking popularity among the colony’s Methodists can be accounted for in several ways. On the one hand, Methodist preachers were notoriously underpaid for their efforts and found themselves regularly obliged to make up shortfalls in their salaries by selling the Concern’s books and periodicals along their circuits. Since the General Conference of 1800, preachers had been paid commissions of between fifteen and twenty-five percent on whatever they sold. With not only the welfare of the denomination, but their own financial interests to consider, it seems probable that Methodist preachers would have promoted these wares with some energy. For their part, Upper Canadian preachers were, as one of their number noted, “indefatigable sales-men of good books ... partly by a sense of duty and respect to the rule of Conference on the subject, and partly by necessity; for the little profits they made on books sold, went to supplement their very small allowances.”²⁵

But motivated subscription agents would not have been enough on their own to guarantee success. Canadian Methodists likely took a far more active interest in the periodical when they began to see stories of their own reflected in its pages. The way for this was opened

²³ William Case, “Utility of the Magazine,” *Methodist Magazine*, March 1825, 109.

²⁴ Jeffrey L. McNairn, *The Capacity to Judge: Public Opinion and Deliberative Democracy in Upper Canada, 1791-1854* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 28, 132, 149; John Hare and Jean-Pierre Wallot, “Business of Printing,” 1:72.

²⁵ Carroll, *Case*, 1:257.

when the Book Committee reporting at the General Conference of 1816 determined that "it shall be the duty of each annual conference to appoint a committee of three, who shall receive communications from their brethren, and correspond with the editor in order to furnish him with materials proper for publication."²⁶ Since Upper Canada remained part of the Genesee annual conference until 1824, there was still no guarantee that Canadian content would be published in the *Magazine*. Fortunately, however, William Case was one of the three preachers assigned by Genesee to supply the new periodical with copy.²⁷ For this reason it seems highly probable that Joshua Soule wrote to Case to supply him with an account of the effects of the War on Methodism in Upper Canada. Case, who returned to Upper Canada after the War and never again accepted a preaching appointment in the United States, was not slow to respond. His report appeared in the first issue of the *Magazine's* second volume.²⁸

This was only the beginning. In subsequent years the minutes of meetings, missionary reports, stories of revival, and other narratives written by and about the affairs of Upper Canadian Methodists appeared regularly in the *Magazine*. In the summer of 1820, for example, William Case and Henry Ryan submitted a report to the *Magazine* describing the success of the proceedings of the annual meeting of the Genesee conference while noting the fact that, despite its American majority, delegates met on the Canadian side of the border in Niagara. "Religion in this province," the authors went on to note proudly, "we think to be on the rise. The last four years have been a season of harvest indeed, and revivals are still going on." As the narrative unfolds it is striking to note how this assessment about religious revival in general becomes easily elided with a narrower form of denominational triumphalism as the authors describe the burgeoning growth of the Sunday school movement. Thus while Case and Ryan recorded that the province had more than 200 adults involved in teaching in the province's various Sunday schools, they

²⁶ Methodist Episcopal Church, *Journals*, 1:171-172.

²⁷ Carroll, *Case*, 2:131. This seems to have developed out of an earlier committee, organized by the Genesee conference at the time of its establishment in 1810, to examine texts prepared by its preachers for publication by the Concern as books and tracts. Carroll notes that this committee was distinctly transnational from the start with a membership of nine preachers consisting of "five from the United States and four from Canada." See Carroll, *Case*, 1:196.

²⁸ William Case, "Account of the Late Revivals of Religion in the Province of Upper Canada," *Methodist Magazine*, January 1819, 33-38.

offered a more precise denominational gloss on that figure when they noted that only sixteen were Anglican, fifteen Presbyterian and Congregational, eighteen Baptist, five Wesleyan, and ten Quaker. The rest – some 140 – were Methodist.²⁹ Although it is not entirely clear how Case and Ryan arrived at this particular accounting, the precise accuracy of the figures is less important than the qualitative message they were meant to convey. The overarching lesson that the authors seemed to want their readers in both the United States and Upper Canada to take from this piece was simply that Methodist interests were being advanced with as much energy, enthusiasm, and effectiveness north of the border as south of it.

The *Methodist Magazine* also functioned as a public forum in which preachers assigned to work in Upper Canada appealed to the Methodist Book Concern, the Methodist Missionary Society, and other denominational organizations located south of the border for help. Fitch Reed, for example, who travelled to Upper Canada from New York as a missionary in July 1820, wrote an impassioned letter for publication in the *Magazine* describing his struggles on behalf of the Missionary Society as he and others attempted to meet the spiritual needs of immigrants settling deep in the province's backwoods and away from whatever small conveniences life in the colony's few towns could afford. Much of Reed's concern seems to have revolved around providing his converts with access to printed materials – especially Bibles. Reed describes the “cry of the people” as they asked “Have you none to give us or sell to us at a small price? We have none to read in our families, or give our children in Sunday Schools.”³⁰ The appeal did not fall on deaf ears. About the same time Reed crossed the border into Upper Canada, Nathan Bangs was busy assuming control of the Methodist Book Concern in New York. Although born in the United States, Bangs first embraced Methodism while working as a teacher in Upper Canada at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Shortly after his conversion, Bangs was received on trial and became one of the colony's most active and energetic travelling preachers. Indeed, George Rawlyk refers to Bangs as one of the most “influential Methodist actors in the unfolding Upper Canadian religious drama” during the first decade of the nineteenth century.³¹ In addition to

²⁹ William Case and Henry Ryan, “State of Religion in Upper-Canada, in a Letter Addressed to the Editor,” *Methodist Magazine*, October 1820, 394-396.

³⁰ Fitch Reed, “State of Religion in Upper Canada,” *Methodist Magazine*, September 1821, 351-353.

³¹ Rawlyk, *Canada Fire*, 106.

labouring amid conditions that must have seemed extremely harsh and primitive when compared to the surroundings of his New England upbringing, Bangs proved himself almost without peer as he opened new preaching circuits in the province's western reaches, helped organize Upper Canada's first revivalist camp meeting, and became one of the first Methodists to preach to the colony's Natives. Thus the realities Reed described in his letter were ones that Bangs could readily understand.

It is perhaps for this reason that not one but two of Reed's letters found a place in this issue of the *Magazine*. Although Sunday schools were all but unknown in Upper Canada when Bangs left the colony in 1808, he had since become one of their most strategic supporters. As both Senior Book Agent and editor of the *Magazine*, Bangs was able to expand the Concern's catalogue of juvenile offerings while also using the *Magazine* to publish accounts and appeals like those written by Reed to encourage the establishment of new Sunday schools and thereby stimulate market demand on both sides of the border. Reed's observation, for example, that Sunday schools in Upper Canada "are fast rising in the estimation of the people, and increasing throughout the country"³² would have not only advertised his own successes, but also encouraged others to exert their energies in the same direction. Bangs complied with Reed's plea for Bibles and continued to keep a close eye on developments in Upper Canada. About a year later another letter appeared, this one written by William Case, acknowledging the receipt of Bibles and Testaments while adding that they "will be joyfully and thankfully received by the [S]abbath schools."³³ Perhaps by coincidence, another letter describing Reed's subsequent activities in Upper Canada appeared in the same issue as well, describing the establishment of six new societies, the addition of seventy new members, and the formation of two new Sunday schools. "Surely the Lord is at work among the people," Reed summarized, "and I believe he will still perform gloriously in this country."³⁴

Despite having themselves set apart as a conference in their own right at the quadrennial General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in May 1824, the commitment Upper Canadian Methodists maintained to the *Methodist Magazine* remained undiminished. Preachers meeting in Hallowell (later Picton) for the

³² Rawlyk, *Canada Fire*, 106.

³³ William Case, "Upper Canada District," May 1822, 198.

³⁴ Fitch Reed, "Upper Canada Mission," May 1822, 195.

first meeting of the Canada Conference dispatched written minutes to the editor of the *Magazine* for publication the day after the conference concluded in August 1824. The appearance of these minutes in the October 1824 issue of the *Magazine* allowed Canadian Methodists to do more than assure their American coreligionists that their affairs were being conducted “in accordance with the design of the Parent Institution.”³⁵ Because the *Methodist Magazine* continued to enjoy a wide readership among Methodists north of the border, it also allowed rank-and-file Methodists in Upper Canada to discover what had transpired at the first meeting of preachers in their own conference. Thus the *Methodist Magazine* functioned as more than a means for communicating across the border. It also became a vital organ used by Canadian preachers to communicate with their own congregations across the colony. Far more than a dry accounting of institutional minutiae, minutes and other published narratives opened a unique window for Americans and Canadians alike on new missions north of the border among “the destitute in the new settlements in Upper Canada,” as well as among Natives at the Grand River Mission, and across the colony through branch societies and Sunday schools.

Indeed, the *Methodist Magazine* was the most important contemporary source for preachers and laypersons wishing to stay apprised of nascent Methodist missionary activities among the colony’s Natives along the Grand River, the Thames, and the Credit. Before the early 1820s, Methodists had shown only sporadic interest in evangelization outside the boundaries of white settlement. Nathan Bangs and David Sawyer preached to some isolated Native communities as early as 1801, and William Case did so as circumstances allowed.³⁶ A more systematic approach was not adopted in Upper Canada until Alvin Torrey, an American by birth who had laboured in Upper Canada since 1820, began to preach among the Mohawks settled along the banks of the Grand River in the western portion of his Lyon’s Creek circuit shortly before the meeting of the Genesee annual conference in midsummer 1823. Torrey pioneered Methodist expansion among Natives for the next five years until he returned to the United States in 1828.³⁷ Although Mohawks in this region of the colony had been identified for decades with the Anglicanism of Joseph

³⁵ William Case, “Canada Conference,” *Methodist Magazine*, October 1824, 398–399.

³⁶ Stevens, *Bangs*, 110; Playter, *History*, 74; Semple, *Lord’s Dominion*, 150–3.

³⁷ Playter, *History*, 295.

Brant, Torry concluded on his own evidence that their Christian convictions were superficial.³⁸ Sometime later, Nathan Bangs appears to have solicited from Torry an account of the state of the Mission for the *Methodist Magazine*. Torry's response, which became the first printed record of Methodist missionary activities among Natives in Upper Canada, appeared in the *Magazine's* January issue of 1824. Torry described at length "a powerful awakening" sweeping over the mission, the establishment of Sunday schools, and included a long letter written by Seth Crawford describing a camp meeting revival that took place at the Mission the previous summer.³⁹ At no point in his narrative, however, does Torry mention the fact that the Mission was located outside the United States. Indeed, Torry drew no attention to politics or government until December 1825 when he noted, in the second of two reports published in the *Methodist Magazine* that year, that the colony's government was showing "good will" toward Native converts "on account of their reformation and disposition for civilization." Torry cites as his chief example a visit paid to the Mission in June 1825 by "several gentlemen from York, of high respectability," including "clergymen of the establishment," who distributed "presents" on behalf of the government.⁴⁰

Although Torry's assessment of the government's intentions would prove mistakenly optimistic within several years,⁴¹ his rhetorical approach in these articles is telling. In the first, he draws no obvious attention to the fact that his field of labour is located in a geopolitical context quite different from that informing the lives of most of his readers. And in the second, he omits anything that might explain to his readers how these agents of state and church might differ in their sociopolitical outlook from church leaders and government officials in the United States. The *Magazine's* readers are simply left to infer from

³⁸ Alvin Torry, *Autobiography of Rev. Alvin Torry: First Missionary to the Six Nations and the Northwestern Tribes of British North America* (Auburn, [NY]: W.J. Moses, 1864), 46, 67.

³⁹ Alvin Torry, "Grand-River Mission," *Methodist Magazine*, January 1824, 33-35.

⁴⁰ Alvin Torry, "Religious and Missionary Intelligence: Grand River (U.C.) Mission," *Methodist Magazine*, December 1825, 479. See also Alvin Torry, "Religious and Missionary Intelligence: Grand River (U.C.) Mission," *Methodist Magazine*, May 1825, 199-201.

⁴¹ See Peter Jones, *Life and Journals of Keh-ke-wa-guo-nā-ba: (Rev. Peter Jones,) Wesleyan Missionary*, (Toronto: Anson Green, 1860), 38-39, 106. For more on Peter Jones and his self fashioning in print, see Kyle Wyatt, "'Rejoicing in this unpronounceable name': Peter Jones's Authorial Identity," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada* 47, no. 2 (2009): 153-176.

the text that a favourable disposition on the part of the government is something to be valued. Indeed, despite their alleged benevolence, these officials are characterized by Torry as being far less interested in genuine spiritual conversion than in the apparent civilizing effect Methodist activities were having on Native communities. Thus Torry leaves readers with an unmistakable impression that the indifference of Canadian officials about the real purpose of his work effectively contributed to the emergence of a missionary environment that was in practice largely indistinguishable from the religious free market in the United States. As an American preacher accustomed to religious neutrality on the part of the state, he felt that the denominational preferences of the colony's bureaucrats ultimately mattered little as long as they were content not to meddle in the affairs of the missionaries. By publishing articles of this kind, the *Magazine* became a useful vehicle for softening what were in fact very real national differences as it foregrounded only those things that denominational readers across North America held in common: an equally vigorous dedication to Native missions that simultaneously reinforced their own sense of participation in a transnational community of common spiritual purpose and shared religious identity.

But if Torry and the *Methodist Magazine* seemed content to gloss over political and national differences, denominational differences that existed between Episcopal Methodists and British Wesleyans in Upper Canada were quite another matter. After the War of 1812, British Wesleyans and Episcopal Methodists competed with one another in Upper and Lower Canada. After 1820, the two bodies came to an uneasy agreement that called for British Wesleyans to leave Upper Canada in exchange for the Methodist Episcopal Church withdrawing its preachers from Lower Canada. Even after 1820, however, the Wesleyans refused to leave Kingston and occasionally expressed a desire to resume their activities further west. Both before and after 1820, the *Methodist Magazine* was used on occasion to counter the appeal of Wesleyanism to Upper Canadian Methodists by reinforcing Methodist denominational bonds and alerting Upper Canadian subscribers to the ways in which British Wesleyans, at least in their view, continued to act in bad faith despite the 1820 agreement arrived at in London through official channels. Notice of that agreement appeared in the *Magazine* in December 1820 and in May 1821 Fitch Reed wrote from the colony's capital at York to remind his readers of that agreement, noting that "There is a prospect that the

difficulties which have hitherto existed, will give place to the general peace and prosperity of the church of Christ.”⁴² Although outside of Kingston there was little contact between Episcopal Methodists and British Wesleyans in Upper Canada, in 1824 an article appeared in the *Magazine* strongly suggesting that the relative successes of the two bodies measured quantitatively clearly showed on whom God’s favour rested. In the two Canadas, the British Wesleyans reported a total of 1,081 members under the direction of nine ministers, while the Americans reported 5,450 under the direction of thirty preachers. These were published to refute the *Wesleyan Repository*’s recent accusation that, “the Canada Methodists will not now receive preachers from the United States.”⁴³ Bangs and the author of the article let the statistics speak for themselves. So while the differences between Wesleyans and Methodists generally simmered quietly below the surface, its American editor was not unafraid on occasion to use the *Magazine* to counter British Wesleyan advances and galvanize his own denomination north of the border.

While the *Magazine* was undoubtedly useful for strengthening the bonds uniting Methodists in Canada and the United States, its status as a monthly imposed firm limits on the extent to which it could react to situations unfolding on the ground. That changed with the appearance of the weekly *Christian Advocate* in September 1826. The paper was an immediate success. Nathan Bangs, under whose direction the paper was established midway through his final term as Senior Book Agent in New York, noted that, “In a very short time, its number of subscribers far exceeded every other paper published in the United States, being about twenty-five thousand.”⁴⁴ The *Advocate*, like the *Magazine*, also found a reading audience in Upper Canada. Indeed, Bangs took far more trouble to cultivate the

⁴² “Resolutions of the British Conference in Reference to their Relation with the American General Conference,” *Methodist Magazine*, December 1820, 474; Jabez Bunting, “The Address of the British Conference to the General Conference in America,” *Methodist Magazine*, December 1820, 473; Fitch Reed, “State of Religion in Upper-Canada,” *Methodist Magazine*, September 1821, 351-353.

⁴³ “Defence of the Delegation to the English Conference,” *Methodist Magazine*, May 1824, 187-188. In fact, while the figures for British Wesleyans appear to be accurate, the total number of Canadians belonging to the Methodist Episcopal Church was considerably higher at almost 9,000. See Playter *History*, 328; Wesleyan-Methodist Church in Canada, *Minutes*, 18.

⁴⁴ Stevens, *Bangs*, 244. See also Nathan Bangs, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1838-1841), 322-323; Playter, *History*, 288.

interest of Canadians in the *Advocate* than his predecessor Joshua Soule had done with the *Magazine*. Although Bangs had reasons that were undeniably personal for doing so – he always regarded Upper Canada as his spiritual birthplace and had also married a Canadian before returning to the United States in 1808 – his business reasons were more compelling. Such efforts were invited by the existing success of the *Methodist Magazine* north of the border, the continued growth of the denominational market for the Concern's commodities in the province, and the establishment of a separate Upper Canadian conference within the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1824.⁴⁵

In the intervening years, a faction of Canadian Methodists led by the formidable and disgruntled preacher Henry Ryan, also mounted a strident campaign to agitate for complete separation from the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States.⁴⁶ Aware of these difficulties, and a steadfast opponent of ecclesiastical separation, Bangs probably hoped the widest possible circulation of the *Christian Advocate* in Upper Canada might help to strengthen the church's transnational bonds in much the same way the *Methodist Magazine* had throughout the previous eight years.⁴⁷ Bangs was also probably coming to realize that Upper Canadian Methodists, hindered by increasingly outspoken political opponents and beleaguered by growing internal dissent, formed a market that the Concern could no longer take for granted. All these reasons invited a greater effort on his part to gain the cooperation of the Canada conference and its preachers in this new endeavour. When the Canadian preachers met for their annual conference in Hamilton in August 1826, Bangs made an official visit as the Concern's Senior Agent and personally "informed the Conference that they had resolved on publishing a weekly religious newspaper in New York, for the benefit of the general work in the United States and Canada, and hoped for the approval and aid of the Provincial Conference in the undertaking."⁴⁸ Bangs must have been relieved when the Canada conference, in spite

⁴⁵ Methodist Episcopal Church, *Journals*, 1:224, 1:302; Playter, *History*, 234-236.

⁴⁶ Anson Green, *The Life and Times of the Rev. Anson Green* (Toronto: The Methodist Book-Room, 1877), 38-39; Playter, *History*, 244; Semple, *Lord's Dominion*, 71-74.

⁴⁷ For more on Bangs's opposition to Canadian independence, see C.B. Sissons, *Egerton Ryerson: His Life and Letters* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), 1:77; Stevens, *Bangs*, 260-1.

⁴⁸ Playter, *History*, 288; Thomas Webster, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Canada* (Hamilton: Canada Christian Advocate Office, 1879), 197.

of growing pressures from within and without to sever its ties to the American church, resolved "That we highly approve of the publication of said paper; and we pledge ourselves to encourage its circulation."⁴⁹

The success of the *Advocate* on both sides of the border was enabled in large part by the fact that Methodist itinerant preachers continued to function as commissioned subscription agents for the *Advocate* just as they had for the *Methodist Magazine*. Anson Green, an American-born preacher received on trial by the Canadian conference in 1825, described his own efforts to promote the *Advocate* along his first preaching circuit in Ancaster. "I read portions of it in my congregations," he noted, "and obtained quite a number of subscribers, advancing the pay for those who were not prepared to do it themselves – most of whom paid me during the year. It is an excellent paper and much needed."⁵⁰ By subscribing on behalf of "those who were not prepared to do it themselves," Green went beyond the formal requirement of promotion and probably also gave away the many free copies he would have received for every six subscriptions he obtained.⁵¹ Thomas Webster, though he would have disagreed with Green on many subjects touching on Canadian Methodism, shared Green's views about the importance of the paper, concluding in his biography of James Richardson, the fourth bishop of the dissident Methodist Episcopal Church in Canada, that "The paper was well received throughout the province."⁵²

Despite growing pressure on Canadian Methodists to sever their ties to the American Methodist Episcopal Church, Methodists north of the border submitted substantially more material to the *Christian Advocate* for publication than they had to the monthly *Methodist Magazine*. In less than one month of its appearance the first article concerned exclusively with Methodism in Upper Canada appeared, describing the Hamilton conference Nathan Bangs had attended the previous August to encourage preachers to circulate the *Advocate*.⁵³ Dozens of additional articles appeared in the paper's

⁴⁹ Wesleyan-Methodist Church in Canada, *Minutes*, 13.

⁵⁰ Green, *Life and Times*, 90-91.

⁵¹ "Terms," *Christian Advocate*, 9 September 1826, 1.

⁵² Thomas Webster, *Life of Rev. James Richardson* (Toronto: J.B. Magurn, 1876), 112. The Methodist Episcopal Church in Canada was formed in June 1834 by a splinter group of Upper Canadian Methodists who refused to follow the majority of the colony's Methodists when they merged with the British Wesleys in 1833 (Semple, *Lord's Dominion*, 90-1).

⁵³ "Canada Conference," *Christian Advocate*, 26 September 1826, 10.

first year – some concerned exclusively with Upper Canada and others combining events north and south of the border into a single narrative – describing the lives of individual preachers, religious revivals, missionary work, and the growth of Sunday schools. In one typical example, descriptions of revivals in Virginia, New York, and the Mississippi were bracketed with accounts of revivals in Ancaster and Hallowell, Upper Canada.⁵⁴ In another article, Anson Green, writing from his Ancaster circuit in the spring of 1827, reminded readers that the progress Sunday schools had made along his circuit had much to do with the American examples he had read about earlier. “Such a Sunday School Union as you have now formed in New-York has, for some time, been a desideratum in the economy of our Zion,” Green observed, adding, “It has already given a zest to the cause of Sabbath Schools on this circuit, which it never possessed before.” Green’s letter also provides strong evidence of the way the market for books and periodicals became mutually reinforcing as the continued spread of denominational Sunday schools increased the demand for the Concern’s products.⁵⁵ After noting that the denominational Sunday schools on his circuit had increased in that year from two to ten, Green added that he had enclosed thirty dollars in exchange for which he asked that, “after deducting the necessary expenses, you will please send back in books.”⁵⁶ The publication of Green’s letter in the *Advocate*, together with a second article on Canadian Sunday schools written by Thomas Demorset, signaled that Bangs wished to set the activities of these preachers not only before Upper Canadians, but all his North American readers, as examples intended to invite imitation.⁵⁷ In the same way, Canadians under the direction of William Case, continued to submit reports to the *Advocate* detailing their work among Natives on the Grand River,

⁵⁴ “Revivals of Religion,” *Christian Advocate*, 23 December 1826, 62.

⁵⁵ The Methodist Episcopal Church organized its own Sunday School Union on 2 April 1827 to counter the Calvinistic influence of the ostensibly nondenominational American Sunday School Union. The Methodist Union in Upper Canada would have inevitably sharpened denominational differences in Upper Canada as well, especially since the vast majority of the province’s Sunday school teachers were Methodists. See James Kirby, Russell Richey and Kenneth Rowe, *The Methodists* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), 181.

⁵⁶ Anson Green, *Christian Advocate*, 13 July 1827, 178.

⁵⁷ Thomas Demorset, “Sunday Schools in Canada,” *Christian Advocate*, 13 July 1827, 178.

the Credit, and on the Thames throughout 1827 and into 1828.⁵⁸ Thus even on the eve of ecclesiastical independence, the *Advocate* continued to draw Canadian and American Methodists together into a community of common purpose.

Indeed, for all its pretended importance by Canadian Methodists eager to advance their political agenda for religious equality in British North America, the achievement of ecclesiastical independence had no discernable impact on the extent to which Canadians continued to assert a sense of ownership over the *Advocate* both by subscribing to it and by using it as a means to communicate religious news to one another. For example, just as they had in the summer of 1827, Upper Canadian Methodists dispatched the minutes of their annual conference in 1828 – this time as an ecclesiastical body with no formal ties to the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States – to the *Advocate* for publication.⁵⁹ Canadians also continued to publish regular reports on the progress of their missionary activities among the colony's Natives.⁶⁰ Doubtless understanding that the paper continued to enjoy a wide readership north of the border, they saw the *Advocate* as the least expensive means for reaching their own members. But if the published conversation was now primarily between themselves, it was one they were acutely aware was also being overheard by Americans. That, however, continued to yield benefits inasmuch as the Methodist Episcopal Church in America did not cease to help fund Canadian Methodist activities, including missions among Natives, after ecclesiastical independence. Just as importantly, preachers in Upper Canada continued to earn commissions on the sale of the New York Methodist Book Concern's products north of the border. That in turn meant that each year the Concern also paid Canadians an annual dividend on the Concern's profits in recognition of their ongoing patronage.

⁵⁸ See for example, "Missionary Intelligence: Canada Conference Missionary Society," *Christian Advocate*, 12 May 1827, 141; William Case, "Missionary Intelligence: Progress of the Gospel Among the Indians in Upper Canada," *Christian Advocate*, 4 January 1828, 70.

⁵⁹ "Canada Conference," *Christian Advocate*, 28 September 1827, 14; "Canada Conference: Minutes of the Canada," *Christian Advocate*, 24 October 1828, 31.

⁶⁰ See, for example, William Case, "Missionary Intelligence: Progress of the Gospel Among the Indians in Upper Canada," *Christian Advocate*, 19 September 1828, 10; "Missionary Intelligence: Indian Missions in Upper Canada. Munceytown Mission. Grand River Mission," *Christian Advocate* 3 October 1828, 18; "Indians and Destitute Settlers in Upper Canada," *Christian Advocate*, 7 November 1828, 37.

The print economy uniting North American Methodists into an imagined community of readers, despite their political and now ecclesiastical differences, remained remarkably undisturbed until Ryerson began publishing the *Christian Guardian* in the autumn of 1829. The Methodist Book Concern continued to pay commissions to Canadian preachers on the sale of books and periodicals made along their preaching circuits and to pay the Methodist Episcopal Church in Canada annual dividends in recognition of its undivided patronage. Delegates attending the General Conference of 1828 who settled on these terms, however, seem not to have anticipated that Canadians might begin publishing their own weekly or to have imagined, if they did, that Canadian subscriptions to the New York *Christian Advocate* would somehow continue undiminished. Perhaps during the first year of the *Guardian's* existence that may have been the case, but soon large numbers of Canadians allowed their subscriptions to the *Advocate* to expire. The issue came to a head in 1832 when John Emory, Bangs's successor as Senior Book Agent of the Concern, raised the issue at the General Conference in Philadelphia. "In consequence of the establishment of a separate weekly paper, under the control, and for the exclusive benefit of the Canada annual conference," Emory complained, "the subscriptions for the Christian Advocate and Journal, which were once respectable within the bounds of that conference, have been almost wholly discontinued."⁶¹ Between the achievement of ecclesiastical independence in 1828, and the subsequent quadrennial General Conference in 1832, the number of Methodists in Upper Canada grew from about 9,000 to just under 15,000 formal members.⁶² Emory, who understood the Concern's domestic market in terms that were exclusively denominational, expected growth in ecclesiastical membership to be accompanied by a proportionate increase in the number of subscriptions Canadians maintained to the *Advocate*. That this was not the case marked the first significant step Canadians took in the direction of achieving a form of cultural and financial independence from the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and one that proved to be far more consequential than the nominal ecclesiastical independence they achieved in 1828. Although Canadians continued to import books from the Concern after 1832, the hold of the *Advocate* on Canadian readers was broken,

⁶¹ Robert Emory, *The Life of the Rev. John Emory, D.D. One of the Bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: George Land, 1841), 333-334.

⁶² Wesleyan-Methodist Church in Canada, *Minutes*, 18, 47

and with it the appearance of Canadian narratives in an American periodical was no longer a routine occurrence. In the absence of such reports, American Methodists no longer received regular news describing denominational advances north of the border. More importantly, Canadians no longer saw their own stories juxtaposed to those of their American brethren. Thus a critical weakening of North American Methodism's transnational character took place after 1829 that opened the way once again for British Wesleyan advances in the colony. Indeed, as Canadian delegates sat in attendance at the General Conference in Philadelphia in 1832, Egerton Ryerson was already well on his way to preparing the ground in Upper Canada for an eventual merger with the British Wesleys.

In sum, despite a sharp decline in membership, the arrival of British Wesleyan missionaries west of the Ottawa River, and an unmistakable rise in anti-American sentiment across the colony following the War of 1812, Episcopal Methodism made a spectacular postwar recovery in Upper Canada. Although historians have tended to account for this surprising turn of events by pointing to new strategies Methodists adopted for recruiting preachers unlikely to stir up political controversy, their narratives have neglected to account for the role Methodism's burgeoning and remarkably durable postwar religious print culture played in that recovery. Yet by reinvigorating the transnational ties that bound Canadian and American Methodists together in a single imagined community of readers, the *Methodist Magazine* and the later *Christian Advocate* served as a pervasive counterweight to what might otherwise have seemed an ever widening ideological gap separating the inhabitants of British North America from the citizens of the United States. With a dedicated corps of preachers serving as subscription agents across the colony's backwoods, the *Magazine* and the *Advocate* soon found a ready audience of subscribers. As Canadians and Americans read about Methodism's advances on both sides of the border, and as Canadians patterned the growth of Sunday schools and other missionary activities on American models, the linkages binding North American Methodist readers into a single community of common interest and shared conviction only strengthened. The ecclesiastical independence Canadians won in the spring of 1828, though useful for political purposes as they struggled to advance their standing as loyal subjects in the colony, did little to change that reality on the ground. It was not until the appearance of the *Christian Guardian* in 1829 that these linkages began to weaken. Seen through a lens that is more

transnational in bearing, the *Guardian* takes on added importance as not only the chief outlet through which Canadian Methodists fought for religious equality in Upper Canada's nascent public sphere, but also the vehicle through which they ultimately won genuine cultural and financial independence from their American brethren.

SOMMAIRE

Cet article fait valoir que la distribution des périodiques méthodistes américains à travers le Haut-Canada à la fin de la guerre de 1812 a eu une profonde influence sur l'évolution de l'identité religieuse méthodiste au nord de la frontière. Outre qu'ils ont aidé durant la période de l'après-guerre à favoriser une remontée spectaculaire du mouvement, ces périodiques ont servi à harmoniser les relations transnationales naguère tendues qu'entretenaient les Méthodistes canadiens et américains à une époque où le sentiment anti-américain était à la hausse. Les liens unissant les méthodistes de l'Amérique du Nord en une seule communauté de lecteurs se sont depuis lors nettement renforcés, témoin les progrès du méthodisme constatés des deux côtés de la frontière canado-américaine ou encore la croissance affichée au Canada des écoles du dimanche et autres activités missionnaires sur le modèle américain. La diffusion soutenue de ces périodiques a grandement contribué à préparer le terrain pour le lancement en 1829 de l'hebdomadaire méthodiste canadien, le *Christian Guardian*.