

THE 1837-1838 REBELLION



In the 1830s, reformers in the British settler colonies of Upper and Lower Canada organized demonstrations calling for a voice in their own government.

Such demands culminated in a series of mass uprisings in which hundreds of people took direct action to demand...

political freedom

and liberté!

PAPINEAU INDEPENDENCE

PAPINEAU ET LE SYSTEME ELECTORALE

While the rebellion was violently defeated...

...it cleared the path for "responsible" colonial rule.

Ultimately, however, the right to settler self-government was restricted to property-owning white men. To consolidate their power, these men passed legislation to exclude women, Indigenous peoples, and labourers from political life. In doing so, they solidified the foundation of settler colonialism by controlling access to the land, exploiting labour, and marginalizing opposition to a social, political, and economic order that continues today.

The 1837–1838 Rebellion: Consolidating Settler Colonialism in Canada

Poster by Orion Keresztesi

Introduction by Jarett Henderson

In the 1830s the struggle to abolish irresponsible colonial rule in Upper and Lower Canada, and replace it with a form of government controlled by local settlers rather than by imperial rulers or their appointed representatives, involved significant debate, public protest, threats of violence, and outright rebellion. While the 1837-1838 Rebellion is often celebrated as a defining moment in Canadian history when oppressed settlers fought for a voice in their own governance, it is important to remember that what resulted from this struggle was the imposition of the political framework necessary for settler colonialism to take hold in northern North America.

Wolfred Nelson, one of the leading advocates of political reform hinted at this in 1836, when he charged, “we cannot continue to be subjects if we will not be treated as such, but rather as slaves.” Nelson, along with Louis-Joseph Papineau in Lower Canada and William Lyon Mackenzie in Upper Canada, mobilized masses of settlers—men and women, francophone and anglophone, young and old, rural and urban, rich and poor—with their demands for political freedom and *liberté*. By the summer and fall of 1837 public meetings of thousands, many of whom were encouraged to attend by a rhetoric that drew on the language of American and French revolutionaries and British reformers, were being held across the countryside. These meetings culminated on 23 October 1837 with a 4,000-person rally at Saint-Charles, Lower Canada, where Nelson and Luc Côté delivered passionate speeches calling for open revolt. The first shots—in what is generally known as the 1837-38 Rebellion—were fired a month later.

On 23 November 1837, the first contingent of 800 *patriotes*—as the rebels in Lower Canada were known—attacked imperial troops stationed at Saint-Denis-sur-Richelieu, northeast of Montréal. By December 1837, armed conflict erupted in London and Toronto in Upper Canada, and Saint-Charles and Saint-Eustache in Lower Canada, leaving several hundred dead and wounded. Villages such as Saint-Benoît were torched and looted. In February 1838, *patriote* leader Robert Nelson proclaimed Lower Canada’s independence from a brutish British government that had “pilaged our treasury” and distributed “through the country a mercenary army...whose track is red with the blood of our people.” Nelson also declared the abolition of seigneurial tenure and the death penalty, the granting of civil rights to Indigenous peoples, and the use of French and English in all public affairs. But he also advocated for the prohibition of the *douaire coutumier* and the restriction of the right to vote to “every male person, of the age of twenty-one years and upwards.” Nelson’s republic, though, would prove to be a pipe dream as those who rebelled were quickly arrested and imprisoned. In Lower Canada, habeas corpus was suspended and those believed responsible were transported to British convict colonies in the Atlantic and Pacific. Samuel Lount and Peter Matthews were publicly executed.

The impetus for rebellion was achieved with the eventual granting of settler self-government, more popularly known as *responsible* government, in the 1840s. But in practice this British right would be limited to select, property-owning, white men. In fact, as Australian historian Ann Curthoys reminds us, this form of responsible rule recommended by the radical Earl of Durham in his 1839 *Report on the Affairs of British North America* ought to be seen as a “manifesto for effective settler colonialism.” Durham’s *Report* recommended the consolidation of white settler power through the reunion of the Canadas (“assimilation” as Durham termed it) as well as an ambitious project to displace Indigenous peoples from their territories (“wastelands” as Durham called them) and replace them with British settlers.

By the 1850s it was clear that the Rebellion ushered in a form of colonial rule that allowed for a greater measure of local control that included primarily white wealthy settler men on the one hand, while on the other hand actively and systematically excluded most Indigenous peoples, marginalized the working classes, and confirmed the exclusion of women as voters. As such, the Rebellion reminds us of the necessity and constant struggle that was (and is) required for political freedom in northern North America. The redrawing of the boundaries of colonial rule in the 1830s and 1840s, then, not only illustrates that under self-government all selves were not equal, but also that these exclusions were pivotal to the consolidation of patriarchy and white supremacy in early-Canada. In short, they made the practice of settler-colonialism a reality.

Biographies

Orion Keresztesi is an artist and activist inspired by the history of working people’s struggles—how they have shaped the world we live in and how they can help us do the same today. He is a proud member and President of Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 1281.

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Further Reading

Curthoys, Ann. “The Dog that Didn’t Bark: The Durham Report, Indigenous Dispossession, and Self-Government for Britain’s Settler Colonies.” In *Within and Without the Nation: Canadian History as Transnational History*, edited by Karen Dubinsky, Adele Perry, and Henry Yu, 25-48. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015.

Ducharme, Michel. *Le concept de liberté au Canada à l’époque des révolutions atlantiques, 1776-1838*. Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010.

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Henderson, Jarett. “Banishment to Bermuda: Gender, Race, Empire, Independence and the Struggle to Abolish Irresponsible Government in Lower Canada.” *Histoire sociale/Social History* 46, no. 92 (2013): 321-48.

