

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY

PRESIDENTIAL REPORT ON THE LEGACY OF EGERTON RYERSON

William Robins

President

Victoria University

June 2021

## *Contents*

- Background
- Reconsidering the Legacy of Egerton Ryerson
- Historical Considerations
- Recognition of Egerton Ryerson at Victoria University
- Indigenous Students at Upper Canada Academy
- The Research Panel's Findings
- Response
  - Recommendation to the Board of Regents
  - Other Steps

---

## *Background*

In June, 2019, the Executive Committee of the Board of Regents of Victoria University charged me with providing a report on the legacy of Egerton Ryerson. They asked that the report consider historical and current contexts for understanding Ryerson's involvement with and impact upon Indigenous communities, and that it make recommendations regarding the honorific use of Ryerson's name on the Victoria University campus.

The Board's request arose at a time of growing concern about Ryerson's role in the history of residential schools for Indigenous peoples. I committed to examining Ryerson's intersections with Indigenous communities in light of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's direction that "*History plays an important role in reconciliation; to build for the future, Canadians must look to, and learn from, the past.*"<sup>1</sup> It was also clear that the use of Ryerson's name on campus should be considered not as a single issue, but in the wider context of commitments and actions on Indigenous issues that Victoria University has taken and can take in the future.

In considering this matter I consulted with Victoria University's senior administrators, student leaders, Special Advisor on Indigenous Issues, and Indigenous Advisory Circle. I spoke with many historians, and was struck by how much research still needs to be done on the intersections between Ryerson and Indigenous communities. Although documentary gaps mean that some important details may never be known, the surviving archives merit further investigation. Also, many interpretive frames of reference have yet to be brought to bear upon these parts of our past and their connection to current realities. Fulfilling the Board's request would require a new accounting of the historical intersections between Egerton Ryerson and Indigenous communities.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Vol. 6, *Canada's Residential Schools: Reconciliation* (Montreal, 2015), 4.

Four scholars with recognized knowledge and expertise, two of them Indigenous scholars and two non-Indigenous, agreed to serve on a Research Panel that would address Ryerson's legacy and his involvement with and impact upon Indigenous communities:

- Pamela Klassen (Professor and Chair of the Department for the Study of Religion, University of Toronto, and Fellow of Victoria College, as Convenor)
- Margaret Sault (Director of Lands, Membership, and Research, Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation)
- Bonnie Jane Maracle (Indigenous Learning Strategist, First Nations House, University of Toronto)
- Heidi Bohaker (Associate Professor, Department of History, University of Toronto)

The Research Panel benefited from the support of Roxanne Korpan (PhD Candidate, Department for the Study of Religion, University of Toronto). Their Research Report is included [here](#). I would like to thank the members of the Research Panel for their thoughtful work on this important matter.

I have discussed the conclusions of the Research Report with Victoria University's Indigenous Advisory Circle, the Special Advisor on Indigenous Issues, senior administrators, student leaders, and alumni representatives, as well as several professional historians. Both the Research Report and the consultations inform this Presidential Report.

---

### *Reconsidering the Legacy of Egerton Ryerson*

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the reputation of Egerton Ryerson (1803-1882) as an advocate for religious and civil rights, and as the architect of Ontario's public system of universal education, was at its peak. Nevertheless, even during the height of his fame, it was acknowledged that Ryerson's ideal of universal education had been only imperfectly realized. In 1889, Nathanael Burwash, Victoria University's fourth President, wrote:

"He grasped the great outlines of a comprehensive and national system of education for the Upper Canadian people, and patiently did he work toward that as his ideal. It would be too much to say that he completed the ideal. Such is not often given to mortal man. There are problems in this work still unsolved. There is still something for us to do."<sup>2</sup>

By the second half of the twentieth-century, more thoroughly revisionary interpretations of Ryerson emerged. In 1978, Goldwin French, the eleventh President of Victoria University, wrote:

"Ryerson has become enshrined as the champion of religious and civil liberty and the founder of Ontario's education system. ... It should be our aim now to begin disentangling the man from the myth and to acquire a more comprehensive grasp of his

---

<sup>2</sup> Nathanael Burwash, in *Ryerson Memorial Volume, 1844-1876*, ed. J. G. Hodgins (Toronto, 1889), 23.

objectives. During this process, we may begin to discern that Ryerson was a complex and ambivalent character.”<sup>3</sup>

Ryerson’s ideal of universal education, while radical for its time, was counterbalanced by his traditionalist conviction that education should prepare students for their ordained station in life:

“Not surprisingly, given his humanity and the contradictory influence of his own position of tradition, class, and religious conviction, Ryerson did not develop the radical dimension of his beliefs.”<sup>4</sup>

Reassessing Ryerson’s legacy has gained new urgency since the late 1990s when scholars brought to light a Department of Indian Affairs publication from 1898 that appended a letter written by Ryerson in 1847 to George Vardon, Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs, in which Ryerson offered advice about organizing industrial schools for Indigenous children.<sup>5</sup>

Ryerson proposed residential schools which would be overseen by the Indian Department but run by church denominations, which would be predicated upon Christianization, and which would train students to become agricultural labourers. In 1848 and 1851, the Indian Department, working with the Methodist Church, established residential industrial schools at Alderville (Alnwick) and at Munceytown (Mount Elgin).

Canadians are currently grappling with the destructive and traumatic impact of Canada’s residential school system, especially in the wake of the extensive work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. The *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission* places Ryerson’s 1847 proposals within the larger history of residential schooling.<sup>6</sup> While Ryerson did not create the idea of residential schools, and while the schools of the 1840s differed in significant ways from the institutions that emerged after Confederation, nevertheless Ryerson’s recommendations had an influence upon the way Canada’s destructive residential school system developed.

In light of these developments, many people—including students and others at Victoria—have voiced concerns about how Egerton Ryerson has been remembered and memorialized. In response to such concerns, the Board of Regents has requested this report on Ryerson’s legacy.

---

<sup>3</sup> Goldwin S. French, “Egerton Ryerson and the Methodist Model for Upper Canada,” in *Egerton Ryerson and His Times*, ed. N. McDonald and A. Chaiton (Toronto, 1978), 45-6.

<sup>4</sup> French 1978, 57.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Indian Affairs, *Statistics Respecting Indian Schools with Dr Ryerson’s Report of 1847 Attached* (Ottawa, 1898), 72-7.

<sup>6</sup> See The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, “Pre-Confederation Residential Schools,” Chapter 5 of *The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Vol. 1, *Canada’s Residential Schools: The History, Part 1, Origins to 1939* (Montreal, 2015), 63-82, esp. 77-8.

---

### *Historical Considerations*

For the history of Egerton Ryerson's career and his relationships with and impact upon Indigenous communities, I refer Board members to the report of the Research Panel.

Our understanding of the historical context is still unfolding.<sup>7</sup> For example, only a few weeks ago, the 1847 original of Ryerson's letter to Vardon (previously only known from the 1898 printing) was located, as well as another brief letter from Ryerson to Vardon, and a note from Vardon to another Indian Department official mentioning Ryerson's advice on industrial schools.<sup>8</sup> These documents may provide clues towards addressing some unresolved questions, such as why Vardon solicited Ryerson's advice, how Ryerson's advice was received by the Indian Department, and why a half-century later the Department of Indian Affairs capitalized on Ryerson's fame by publishing his letter.

The prospect of further work in the archives, the application of new frames of reference, and the fact that there are many diverse understandings about the intersections of that past and our present, mean that the historical examination of Ryerson's legacy will remain open for further insights, and there will be opportunities for Victoria University to contribute to this process.

---

### *Recognition of Egerton Ryerson at Victoria University*

Egerton Ryerson was one of the Methodist leaders who created Upper Canada Academy in the 1830s. He was responsible for negotiating the royal charter that officially established the Academy in 1836. When the Academy became a degree-granting institution, changing its name to Victoria College, Ryerson was appointed to be its first Principal, serving actively from 1842 to 1844 and nominally until 1847. He was Victoria College's first President, a largely nominal role, from 1850 to 1854. He remained actively involved with the College until the end of his life.

Ryerson has been celebrated at Victoria University for the role he played in its early history. During his lifetime, a student prize was established in his name, and upon his death a Chair in Philosophy. As part of Victoria University's 1936 centenary celebrations, the Board of Regents commissioned a two-volume biography of Ryerson; in that same year, the Board bestowed Ryerson's name upon a student residence. More recently, Ryerson has also been remembered at Victoria University for his contributions to the provincial system of education. Victoria College created a Ryerson Graduate Scholarship in education in 1997, and in 2006 established the Ryerson Stream of the Vic One first-year program, focused on the field of education.

The Ryerson Chair in Philosophy ceased when the college departments at the University of Toronto amalgamated. The Vic One stream changed its name to the Education Stream in 2019. Today there are three honorific uses of Ryerson's name: Ryerson House, the Ryerson

---

<sup>7</sup> Ryerson University has struck a task force to consider the legacy of Egerton Ryerson; they plan to share their report in September 2021, and we await their findings with interest.

<sup>8</sup> Bill Russell, personal communication.

Scholarship at Emmanuel College, and the Ryerson Graduate Scholarship at Victoria College. Responsibility for the names of buildings rests with the Board of Regents, and of scholarships with the Victoria University Senate.

---

### *Indigenous Students at Upper Canada Academy*

Many Board members already know that Upper Canada Academy was founded as a non-sectarian institution, and was the first school not controlled by the established church to receive a British royal charter. Less widely known is that its founders envisaged that Upper Canada Academy would teach students from the province's settler and Indigenous populations alike. This intention was explicitly conveyed by Egerton Ryerson to Crown officials and the British public when explaining why the Academy was seeking a royal charter.

For the six years of Upper Canada Academy's existence, 1836-1842, records are spotty (enrolment lists survive for only two of those years). C.B. Sissons has identified at least ten Indigenous students, seven male and three female, in attendance during that period.<sup>9</sup> He estimates that about four hundred students (about one third female) passed through the school in those years. This means that at a time when the Indigenous population of Upper Canada was around 2.5%, Indigenous students made up about 2.5% or more of the Academy's students.<sup>10</sup> These students were from Anishinaabe settlements with well-attended Methodist day schools, such as the Credit River and Rice Lake. The cost of their attendance was covered by the Methodist Missionary Society and individual donors.<sup>11</sup>

No research has yet been conducted on the attendance of Indigenous students after 1842. We know that some continued to attend, but numbers seem to have dropped, probably in part as a consequence of the 1840 breach between British and Canadian Methodists which undermined funding for Indigenous education and upset collaboration between the College and the Alderville and Rice Lake settlements. There was still an expectation that promising students in Indigenous day schools might go on to attend Victoria College. In 1845, Chief Joseph Sawyer asked that the current schoolteacher at the Credit be replaced with "one whose acquirements would be such as to fit some of the Boys for the college at Cobourg."<sup>12</sup>

This part of Victoria University's founding story can offer a common focal point when reflecting upon the University's current commitment to inclusive education and respectful relationship-

---

<sup>9</sup> Henry Bird Steinhauer (originally from Lake Simcoe, he entered with the Academy's first class in 1836, split his time between studying at the Academy and teaching at the day school in Alderville, and graduated top of his class in 1839); William Wilson (from the Credit, he had apprenticed as a copy-editor and typesetter at the *Guardian* under Ryerson, and graduated top of his class); David Wawanosh (from St Clair, where he was later Chief); Charles Cobbage (from Rice Lake); John Williams (from Alderville); David Whinny (from Alderville); Sarah Rice Lake (from Rice Lake); Sally Cow (from Rice Lake), and Susan Sunday (from Rice Lake). See C. B. Sissons, *A History of Victoria University* (Toronto, 1952), 33.

<sup>10</sup> In 1842, the Bagot Commission enumerated 11,900 First Nations people in the Province, not counting the visiting American Indians at Manitoulin Island; that amounts to 2.44% of the 1842 census population of Upper Canada of 487,053.

<sup>11</sup> Individual donors included Egerton Ryerson, who covered the costs for William Wilson.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Donald Smith, *Mississauga Portraits* (Toronto, 2013), 61. The Victoria College enrolment list for that year, 1845, shows one student from the Credit, J. McCollum, in attendance.

building with Indigenous peoples, as is recognized in the terms of reference of Victoria University's Indigenous Advisory Circle:

“When founded, one of the objectives of the University was to develop relationships with established First Nations communities in the area and provide educational opportunities to their members. Today, the University is seeking to rekindle that relationship with Indigenous communities, while taking into account its history and the responsibilities outlined in Treaties that exist.”

---

### *The Research Panel's Findings*

The Research Panel examined many aspects of Ryerson's career and legacy. I draw the Board's attention to four key aspects of their findings.

1. Egerton Ryerson's work as a Methodist missionary was part of a colonializing enterprise aimed at “Christianizing” and “civilizing” Indigenous peoples.
2. Ryerson in his early career developed close ties with several Anishinaabe communities, especially the Mississaugas of the Credit. However, his 1847 proposals for industrial schools disregarded aspirations that had been expressed by Indigenous leaders about the purposes and organization of such schools.
3. Ryerson in the 1830s affirmed that Upper Canada Academy (the future Victoria University) would be an educational institution of benefit to settler and Indigenous students alike. The Research Panel asks us to consider these stated intentions as a gambit for garnering support from British authorities, and as making a commitment that Upper Canada Academy and Victoria University realized only very partially.
4. Ryerson spent thirty years as Superintendent of Schools of Ontario advocating for and implementing a system of universal, free education open to all. However, this principle of universality was sorely limited when it came to providing equal opportunities for Indigenous students, Black students, students with disabilities, and female-identified students, with long-lasting negative impacts on those individuals and their communities.

On the basis of their conclusions, the Research Panel recommends that, while Egerton Ryerson and his role in the early history of Victoria should not be forgotten, Victoria University no longer use Ryerson's name in an honorific manner.

The Research Panel also recommends that Victoria University adopt steps to contextualize Ryerson in his time and to reckon with the responsibilities of living as treaty people in the twenty-first century. They identify specific, concrete actions that can be taken in the areas of Accountability, Language Revitalization, Student-Focused Initiatives, Research and Archival Support, and Relationship-Building.

---

## *Response*

In light of the Research Panel's recommendation that Victoria University no longer use Egerton Ryerson's name in an honorific manner, I will ask the Executive Committee of the Senate to reassess the status of the two scholarships named after Egerton Ryerson. Regarding the residence that bears Ryerson's name, my recommendation is below, preceded by a brief account of how the residence came to be so named.

### *Recommendation to the Board of Regents*

In 1931, Victoria University completed a set of new student residences, including one called "First House," which was named for its location, being the first house after descending the steps from the upper to the lower residences.

As Victoria University arrived at the centenary of its 1836 establishment by royal charter, the Board of Regents discussed re-naming this residence to contribute to "the perpetuation of the memory of outstanding leaders in the history of Victoria University and its colleges." In 1936, the Board officially changed the name of "First House" to "Ryerson House."<sup>13</sup>

At Victoria University in the 1930s, Ryerson's name evoked his long struggle for ideals of inclusion, especially his roles as a defender of civil and religious rights, and in obtaining a charter from the British Crown for an educational institution that did not exclude students on the basis of their religion.

By comparison, at Victoria University in the 2020s, Ryerson's name evokes a complicated and troubling legacy. Ryerson enabled a discriminatory model of education that caused real harm to Indigenous students and their communities, through the development of residential schools and their destructive and traumatic impact. This and other practices of exclusion that he enabled, including segregated schools for Black students, counteracted the ideals of inclusion that he professed.

In keeping with the findings of the Research Panel and my consultations with stakeholder groups, I accept the conclusion that Egerton Ryerson's name should no longer be used honorifically at Victoria University.

Accordingly, I recommend that the Board of Regents of Victoria University return the residence called "Ryerson House" to its original name of "First House."

---

<sup>13</sup> Victoria University Archives, 1987.125V2-3 (Board of Regents, Minutes, June 13, 1935, and March 12, 1936).



## *Other Steps*

Victoria University's new Strategic Framework furthers the University's commitment to contributing meaningfully to processes of truth and reconciliation, and to expanding diversity, inclusion, and anti-racism initiatives. The concrete steps outlined by the Research Panel converge with discussions taking place across Victoria University about heightening the presence and visibility of Indigenous peoples and cultures, and fostering understanding of Indigenous cultures and histories.

Over the coming months I will work with senior leaders, the Indigenous Advisory Circle, and other stakeholders on a plan that sets in motion the steps proposed by the Research Panel and other actions that will address Ryerson's legacy and contribute to the University's wider commitments. Those plans will include, but will not be limited to:

- Broadening participation at Victoria University of Indigenous students, faculty, staff, and community members.
- Identifying or creating spaces on campus that could honour Indigenous people who have influenced Victoria University's history.
- Assembling and making available to all members of the Victoria community—from students to Board members—a dossier of materials that charts Ryerson's relationships with Indigenous peoples and his place within the history of residential schooling, and that acknowledges the admixture of ideals of inclusion and practices of exclusion in his approach to education, including at Victoria University.
- Supporting researchers—Indigenous community members, students, professors, and others—to tap into Victoria's significant archival holdings relevant to nineteenth-century Indigenous communities and Indigenous-settler relations.

These are just some of the steps to be taken to promote ongoing education and reflection at Victoria University about the legacy of Egerton Ryerson and to live into our responsibilities as treaty people in the twenty-first century.