

Paul W. Bennett

HISTORIC INJUSTICE

Canada's misguided betrayal of school system founder
Egerton Ryerson



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Executive summary | *sommaire*

Canada’s best known school system founder Egerton Ryerson and the United States’ Horace Mann are each towering figures in the history of public education in North America. Both men received praise during their lifetimes – and for decades after – for leading the fight for universal tax-supported schooling. Their successes in Massachusetts and Canada West/Ontario, respectively, inspired the spread of publicly funded education throughout all Canadian provinces and American states.

Americans tend to be kinder than Canadians to their past heroes. In this case, Mann is still venerated in the public sphere as “the father of American education.” Unfortunately, in Canada, Ryerson – despite his many laudable achievements – is unjustly vilified as the “architect” of Indigenous residential schools. Indeed, he has been cast aside, even by the university that bore his name.

The toppling and erasure of Ryerson in such a fashion is a glaring injustice that leaves a gaping hole in the narrative arc of Ontario’s, and Canada’s, educational foundations.

While Reverend Adolphus Egerton Ryerson – a Methodist school reformer opposed to the privileges of the colonial elites – did issue an 1847 letter sanctioning Indian residential schools, that should be placed in context; he certainly cannot be held responsible for the abuses committed at residential schools in the decades and centuries after his death in 1882. His minor role in the system’s creation is far outweighed by his 32-year record as “a beacon of educational reform, a fighter against injustice of all sorts, and a kind and generous man who pushed for religious equality.”

Ryerson laid the foundations for and determined the boundaries of public schooling in Ontario and, by extension, other provinces. His 1846 blueprint for public elementary education profoundly shaped the school system in Ontario and beyond.

Removing his name from Ryerson University, now Toronto Metropolitan University, and Toronto’s first Normal School simply does not pass the test of fairness. Street justice, justified by a commissioned university report, was administered swiftly without sober second thought.

It's up to historians to call out glaring examples of presentism that fail the test of historical accuracy and violate the fundamental principles of sound historical thinking. It's time to restore Ryerson's reputation and legacy, through the following actions:

- Ryerson's statue, like that of Horace Mann, should be displayed in a prominent public space with a descriptive panel showcasing his historical legacy, in all its complexity.
- Canada should enact a strategy of national heritage revitalization encompassing a set of federal and provincial initiatives focused on restoring proper public commemoration and championing historical consciousness curriculum reform in universities, education faculties, and schools.
- The Government of Ontario should commission a new monument at Queen's Park in Toronto to honour Egerton Ryerson, with a descriptive panel explaining his legacy in historical context.
- The Historic Sites and Monuments Canada should re-affirm "Adolphus Egerton Ryerson" as a "National Historic Person" with a new plaque and public display recognizing the totality of his educational legacy.

Sustainable change goes much deeper. Reclaiming lost history may require an Ontario provincial inquiry into the origins and founding mission of the Ministry of Education and its critical role in laying the foundations for the public education system across Canada.

It's time to engage the public in reversing the fashionable trend of erasing the past. What it will take is a movement dedicated to broader curriculum reform aimed at restoring our lost educational heritage and instilling "narrative competencies" in the current generation of students. [MLI](#)

Egerton Ryerson et Horace Mann, respectivement fondateurs les plus connus des systèmes scolaires au Canada et aux États-Unis, sont les figures emblématiques de l'histoire de l'enseignement public en Amérique du Nord. Les deux hommes ont été longuement salués de leur vivant et, des décennies plus tard – pour leur rôle pionnier en faveur de la scolarisation universelle financée par l'impôt. Grâce à leurs succès au Massachusetts, dans l'ouest du Canada et en Ontario, les écoles publiques se sont multipliées dans toutes les provinces canadiennes et les États américains.

Les Américains tendent à être plus bienveillants envers leurs anciens héros que les Canadiens. Horace Mann, en l'occurrence, est encore considéré comme le « Père de l'éducation américaine ». Malheureusement, au Canada, Egerton Ryerson – malgré ses nombreuses réalisations dignes d'éloges – est injustement désigné comme l'« architecte » des pensionnats autochtones. En fait, il a été écarté même par l'université qui portait son nom.

La chute de Ryerson et un tel effacement de sa mémoire sont une injustice manifeste et introduisent une discontinuité marquée dans la structure narrative de l'histoire de l'enseignement en Ontario et au Canada.

Il est crucial de considérer le contexte de la lettre de 1847 dans laquelle le révérend Adolphus Egerton Ryerson, un réformateur méthodiste opposé aux privilèges des élites coloniales, a exprimé son soutien pour les pensionnats autochtones – il ne saurait être tenu responsable des abus commis dans les pensionnats pendant les nombreuses décennies ayant suivi son décès, en 1882. Sa modeste contribution à la création du système est largement éclipsée par ses 32 années d'engagement en tant que pôle de réforme dans l'enseignement, de lutte contre les injustices sous toutes ses formes et de militantisme généreux en faveur de l'égalité religieuse.

Ryerson a posé et délimité les bases de l'enseignement public en Ontario et, par extension, dans les autres provinces. Son programme de 1846 pour l'enseignement public au niveau primaire a profondément façonné le système scolaire en Ontario et ailleurs.

Retirer son nom de l'Université Ryerson, désormais désignée comme l'Université métropolitaine de Toronto, et de la première école normale de Toronto, ne saurait être considéré comme conforme aux principes d'équité. La justice de la rue, légitimée par un rapport universitaire commandé, a été mise en œuvre précipitamment, sans réflexion approfondie.

Il revient aux historiens de dénoncer les exemples de présentisme ne respectant pas l'exactitude historique et violant les principes d'une réflexion historique rigoureuse. L'heure est venue de rétablir la réputation et l'héritage de Ryerson par ces mesures :

- La statue de Ryerson, comme celle de Mann, doit être placée dans un espace public majeur, accompagnée d'un panneau descriptif sur son héritage historique, dans toute sa complexité.*
- Le Canada doit adopter une stratégie de revitalisation du patrimoine national qui englobe diverses initiatives fédérales et provinciales visant à rétablir une commémoration publique appropriée et faire place, au moyen d'une réforme des programmes, à la sensibilisation à l'histoire dans les universités, les facultés d'éducation et les écoles.*
- L'Ontario doit faire ériger un nouveau monument à Queen's Park (Toronto) en l'honneur de Ryerson, accompagné d'un panneau descriptif sur son héritage historique.*
- La Commission des lieux et monuments historiques du Canada doit confirmer le statut de « Adolphus Egerton Ryerson » en tant que « Personnalité historique nationale » au moyen d'une nouvelle plaque et d'une exposition publique sur l'ensemble de son héritage en matière d'enseignement.*

Le changement durable va plus loin. La reconquête de l'histoire perdue pourrait nécessiter une enquête provinciale en Ontario sur les origines et la mission fondatrice du

ministère de l'Éducation et sur son rôle essentiel dans la mise en place des fondements du système scolaire public partout au Canada.

Il est temps d'inciter la population à renverser la tendance actuelle. Il faudra pour cela un mouvement ayant pour mission de réformer l'ensemble des programmes scolaires en vue de restaurer notre patrimoine éducatif perdu et d'inculquer des « compétences narratives » à la génération étudiante actuelle. [MLI](#)

Introduction

Toronto's first Normal School for teacher training, the former Ryerson University, no longer bears the name of its once honoured founder and has been re-named Toronto Metropolitan University. CBC's *The National* newscast on April 26, 2022, covered the story with a short piece presented through the eyes of Indigenous social work student Sarah Dennis of Nipissing First Nation who led the campaign to remove Egerton Ryerson's name from the university because of what the CBC termed "concerns" about "his links to Canada's residential schools" (Beaulne-Stueben 2021; *The National* 2022). Removing the Ryerson name from the university was a *fait accompli* after a band of marauding students defaced and toppled his statue in early June 2021, and the university's *Standing Strong (Mash Koh Wee Kah Pooh Win)* Task Force made it one of its key recommendations (Dallaire and Ellis 2021).

Horrible injustices happened in those Canadian residential schools and the needed redress was initiated by the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission report with its many "Calls to Action." Speaking at Ryerson University in June 2016, Commission Chair Murray Sinclair laid bare that tragic legacy, and warned that "getting to reconciliation was going to be harder" than "getting to the truth," but stopped short of proposing to change the university's name (Sloan 2016). That all changed in late May 2021 when national news reports appeared echoing claims that the remains of 215 Indigenous residential school students were detected on the former site of the Kamloops Indian Residential School (Dickson and Watson 2021). After a widespread public outcry, anyone associated with those schools was vilified, including an unlikely target – Ryerson, an Upper Canadian Methodist reformer, revered by the Mississauga of the Credit, once reputed to be the architect of Ontario's public education system.

The two North American school founders

Two prominent educators, Ryerson and his American counterpart Horace Mann, were widely acknowledged, during their lifetime and for a century after, as system founders and “icons” – persons of great influence and representative symbols worthy of veneration (Cubberley 1920; Cremin 1957; Sissons 1937). Successive waves of revisionism surfaced from the late 1960s to the 1980s and in the wake of the Indigenous rights movement and the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission from 2012 to 2015 diminishing the public reputation of Ryerson (Welton 2021; Bennett 2023). In the case of the United States, the creations of educational titans like Mann gradually, over time, lost primacy with shifts in interpretation giving more weight to economic and social forces in the emergence of the common schools. That was strongly reflected in the widely viewed PBS series, *School: The Story of Public Education* (Mondale and Patton 2001) and Mann’s democratizing impact was called into question in Bob Pepperman Taylor’s *Horace Mann’s Troubled Legacy* (2010). Taken together, successive waves of re-interpretation not only cut the founders down to human size but diminished their reputations.

The mixed legacies of Mann and Ryerson deserve more attention, and this policy paper sheds new light on the public recognition accorded the towering educational figures. The two early public education promoters were reinterpreted in the 1970s as middle class/bourgeois reformers striving to inculcate habits of industry and social discipline in response to the destabilizing effects of industrialism. That view eventually gave way to critiques focusing more on who was left out in the introduction of compulsory public schools – rural and urban poor, Black, and Indigenous children and those with special needs (Anderson 2008; Adams 2014; Knight 2016). In the light of the contemporary awakening over the horrific impact of residential schools, historians (Adams, 2014; Heath Justice and Carleton 2021; Peace 2021) have shed new light on the role of schooling in remolding “the Indian” and absorbing the descendants into what are now termed “settler-colonial” societies.

Founders of the American republic enjoy a status rarely conferred on Canada’s reputed nation-builders. As the widely recognized architect of the American common school system, Mann still stands, somewhat diminished, but continues to command notable respect in the US educational reform tradition and broader public discourse (Hayes 2006; Neem 2016; Buck 2024),

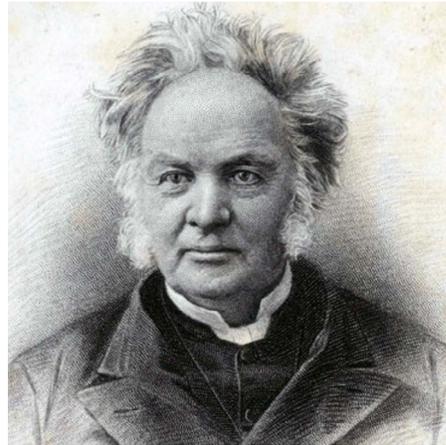
FIGURE 1: Horace Mann



Horace Mann, first Secretary of Education, State of Massachusetts, identified as Whig and Free Soil Congressman from Massachusetts, 1848–1853.

Source: Library of Congress

FIGURE 2: Egerton Ryerson



Egerton Ryerson, first Superintendent of Education, Canada West/Ontario, 1844–1876.

Source: LAC/MIKAN 3029964

while Ryerson has effectively been banished from the public square (Welton 2021; Dutil 2021). While Ryerson remains a “National Historic Person” on the Parks Canada roster, a June 2022 Historic Sites and Monuments Board review skirted the issue by leaving his designation description unchanged because the “limited text of the plaque” would not allow for communicating the “complex history” (Parks Canada 2024). A fair and balanced assessment of the two system founders, viewed in their totality of their achievements, demonstrates that neither of the leading mid-nineteenth century educators should be so easily consigned to the dustbin of history and that the banishment of Ryerson needs to be revisited, especially by policy-makers, historians, and the wider public.

Horace Mann, public education and the revisionists

Education reformer Horace Mann of Massachusetts (1796–1859) once enjoyed exalted status in the pantheon of the American democratic tradition. Shaped by the Whiggish or “progressive” ideas of his time, Mann was a slavery abolitionist and Whig politician known for his commitment to promoting common schools and popularly described as the “Father of

American Education.” The first volume in Lawrence A. Cremin’s Classics in Education Series was titled *Republic and the School: Horace Mann on the Education of Free Men* (Cremin 1957) and based upon excerpts from Mann’s famous annual reports seeking to demonstrate “their relevance to today’s educational problems.” It was, putting it simply, the genesis of “the American educational heritage.” As series editor, Cremin put it this way: “There could be no more appropriate beginning than a volume of selections from Horace Mann’s reports (1834–1848) to the Massachusetts Board of Education. As the commanding figure of the early public school movement, Mann more than anyone articulated the nineteenth-century American faith in education. His work still stands as the classic statement of the relationship between freedom, popular education, and republican government.”

While that vision of Mann has waned, it continues to reverberate through American public education. Commenting on the enduring value of Mann’s legacy on the landmark 2001 PBS education series, E.D. Hirsch Jr. stated: “Horace Mann is rightly the patron saint of public education, not only because of what he always managed to accomplish in Massachusetts but because of what he said in [his annual] reports. He talked about the *public schools having this levelling effect, that merit should be able to rise*. There is, I think, a deep connection between Mann’s vision and [Thomas] Jefferson’s because both of them *disliked the idea of the family you were being born into determining how you ended up in American life*” (Mondale and Patton 2021, 31).

As Massachusetts secretary of education from 1837 to 1848, Mann utilized his persuasive speeches and writings, much like Ryerson, to set the direction and exercise moral leadership. He initiated a biweekly *Common School Journal* in 1838 for teachers and lectured widely to a wide variety of public audiences. His twelve annual reports to the board ranged far and wide through the field of pedagogy, making the case for the public school and addressing its problems. While Mann was, first and foremost, a pragmatic thinker, his message did come down to about six main propositions:

1. a democratic republic cannot long remain ignorant and free, hence the necessity of universal popular education;
2. such education must be paid for, controlled, and sustained by an interested public;
3. such education is best provided in schools embracing children of all religious, social, and ethnic backgrounds;

4. such education, while profoundly moral in character, must be free of sectarian religious influence;
5. such education must be permeated throughout by the spirit, methods, and discipline of a free society, which preclude harsh methods in the classroom; and
6. such education can be provided only by well-trained, professional teachers.

Mann's educational ideas encountered strong resistance – from Protestant and Catholic clergy who deplored nonsectarian schools, from educators who condemned his pedagogy as subversive of classroom authority, and from politicians who opposed the board as an improper infringement of local educational authority. Over time, and with perseverance, his views prevailed and overrode the opposition (Cremin 1998).

 *Most American states eventually adopted a version of the public school system Mann established in Massachusetts.*

Most American states eventually adopted a version of the public school system Mann established in Massachusetts, including his plan to implement normal schools, the first colleges for the training of professional teachers (Cremin 1998). While Mann is most widely credited with laying the initial foundations for publicly funded education, a more complete picture of the Common School Movement has emerged that included two other American pioneers, common schools champion Henry Barnard of Rhode Island (MacMullen 1991) and Connecticut teacher and writer Catharine Beecher who promoted equal access to education for women (Michals 2015).

Establishing common schools, for Mann, was very much a manifestation of his modernizing social reform impulse, rooted in the mid-19th century Protestant ethic of hard work and discipline where schools, particularly in New England, were viewed as a way of advancing the children of ordinary folk (Groen 2008). Judging from his final report, Mann saw common schools more

as agents of social reform than guarantors of democracy. Public education was not only the leading edge of social and economic progress, but a “great equalizer of conditions of men – the balance wheel of the social machinery” (Cremin 1957, 79–80).

The idealistic and rather mythical image of Mann succumbed to successive waves of revisionism. One of the first to challenge the prevailing orthodoxy was a rising academic aligned with the New Left school and committed to making the past speak to the present. Michael Katz’s first book, *The Irony of Early School Reform* (1968), delved into Horace Mann and his school reforms in Massachusetts. The American public school as conceived by Mann, Katz argued, was a school reform “innovation” driven by a “social control impulse” rather than a heroic “triumph of benevolence and democracy” where “the privileged and powerful imposed their will upon the poor and the ethnic minorities by means of administrative bureaucracies designed to insure control from above” (Katz 1975; Katz 1987).

The radical critique of Mann’s vision and legacy faced considerable pushback, but it did spark a re-examination of the durable mythology surrounding the creation of the American public school system. Seen through a clear and sharper lens, educational historians and policy-makers began to confront a number of paradoxes associated with Mann, his life and work (Kaestle 2001). In his defence, Mann deserves recognition for advancing the cause of public schooling and his concrete achievements in introducing a comprehensive survey of the condition of the state’s schools, establishing training institutes for teachers, increasing the length of the school year to six months, and gathering support for more funding for teacher salaries, books and school construction. As a crusader for more accessible education that embraced different social classes, Mann also worked to promote colonial expansion, industry, canals, and railroads as Massachusetts State Senator and as head of the Senate (Mondale and Pratt 2001).

On the other side of the ledger, Mann promoted a vision of education where all children should learn together in “common” schools, yet he did not take a stand against school segregation in his own city of Boston. Alarmed by the social upheaval, rising immigration and ethno-religious tensions of the times, Mann and his reform compatriots also promoted state-regulated public education as a way to bring order and discipline to the working class (Kaestle 2001).

Much of the emerging consensus found expression in a profoundly influential 1983 book, Carl Kaestle's *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society* (1983). Sensitive to the complexity of historical development and the tendency of "good intentions" to go wrong, Kaestle examined the "noble civic intentions" of Mann and his generation in the light of social changes underway in Antebellum (pre-Civil War) America. School reformers like Mann believed that "moral education and good citizenship" could "alleviate a host of worrisome problems and secure the nation's destiny" by helping Americans "internalize discipline" through public schooling (Kaestle 1983, 71, 75, 89).

The Mann legacy and its continuing relevance

More recent studies of the origins of American public schooling have not restored Mann's heroic status but continue to recognize the relevance of his significant contribution. In *Horace Mann's Troubling Legacy*, Bob Pepperman Taylor (2010) critically examined his role in entrenching "civic education" as the central mission of, and primary defence offered in support of, public schools. He contrasts civic education, which strives to create informed, virtuous, and engaged citizens, with intellectual education in the liberal tradition, which aims to create free-thinking, creative, and independently minded individuals. Mann's vision, according to Taylor, was to expand state schooling as a bulwark against social fragmentation. The true tragedy of Mann's legacy, he contended, was entrenching a conception of public education that "*elevated the political at the expense of the intellectual*" and did little to advance the cause of freedom of expression and individual rights (Taylor 2010, xi and 18).

Today's American commentators continue to see Mann's views as a touchstone and source of insights. Confronted with "culture war" battles over books, an exodus from public schools, social activism in classrooms, and the paucity of civic education, Thomas B. Fordham policy analyst Daniel Buck recently drew on Mann's thoughts and writings on "political education" in his often-cited twelfth annual report (Cremin 1957, 84–97). Back in the 1840s, Mann foresaw the risk that children could be "indoctrinated" into "political heresies" fueled by "partyism" and sought to guard against that tendency. He was also attuned to the potential for the selection of school books to "favour

one party or the other.” In one memorable passage, Mann anticipated that, over time, “each schoolroom” could become “a political clubroom, exploding with political resolves, or flaming out with political addresses, prepared by beardless boys, in scarcely-legible hand-writing, and in worse grammar” (Cremin 1957, 92–93; Buck 2024, 3).

Contemporary education policy analysts like Buck credit Mann with understanding and recognizing the “public education’s dual purpose” – in forming “the individual child as well as the broader society.” While derided by critics as being pragmatic and utilitarian, Buck sees him in “a more emboldened way.” Today what appeals to conservative thinkers and entrepreneurs was his determination to produce “self-reliant, self-sufficient individuals” with a foundation of practical skills but also capable of reading and participating in public debates. Common schools, according to Buck, helped to “unify the country” and transmit “shared cultural knowledge” including “shared civic values” in the formative years. “The training of the schoolroom,” in Mann’s words, “expands into the institutions and fortunes of the State” (Buck 2024a, 2).

The rise and fall of “The House that Ryerson built”

Ontario’s bicentennial year, 1984, was probably the height of the Ryerson tradition in public education and that is confirmed in the OISE Press memorial book, entitled *The House That Ryerson Built* (Oliver, Holmes, and Winchester 1984; Brehaut 1984). The lead essay was written by my dear old OISE history professor, the late Willard Brehaut, who specialized in teaching the history of educational administration. As a former PEI School Inspector and founding OISE faculty member, Brehaut was a product of the system, rising from classroom teacher to principal and then school superintendent.

The introductory essay, produced by Brehaut, identified nine major trends in the history of Ontario education. He also enumerates a few of the enduring educational legacies of Ryerson’s 32 years in office:

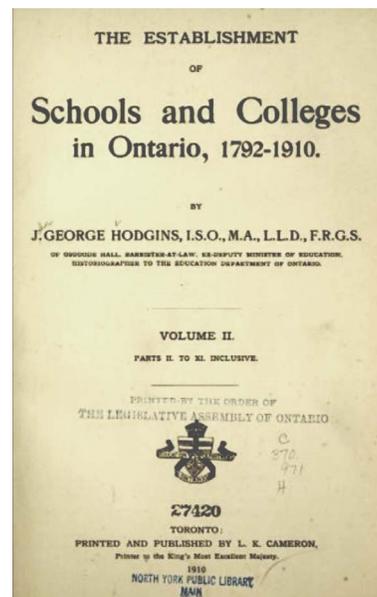
- A universal, free elementary education for all children.
- Authorized standard textbooks, the “Ontario Readers.”
- Establishment of Normal Schools (teacher’s colleges).
- Professional certification of teachers.

- Teacher regulations – duties and responsibilities.
- Creation of local school boards and school districts.
- Compulsory school attendance law.
- Recognition for Roman Catholic separate schools.
- Established school divisions: elementary, secondary, and collegiate levels.

The central thesis was crystal clear: Superintendent Egerton Ryerson set in motion the creation of a modern, progressive public school system, and his masterful defence of common schools inspired chief superintendents in other provinces. In Brehaut’s words, the “main forces and trends that shaped Ontario public education” could be traced back to Ryerson, the architect of the system (Brehaut 1984).

Much of Brehaut’s essay reflects the profound influence of his mentor, Charles Phillips, former “dean” of Canadian education history, best known for his seminal work, *The Development of Education in Canada*. Its first edition, published in 1957, reflected the Whiggish tradition of expanding individual freedom and rights which held sway at the time. According to Phillips, Ryerson’s arrival heralded the advent of a more enlightened, progressive era shaped by Methodist reform impulses. Like many “Red Tories” of the 1950s, Phillips and his student Brehaut “exalted Ryerson to the status of mythic hero.” In the prevailing narrative, Ryerson was revered for fashioning a centralized, universal, free public system that was the engine of progress and democracy (Phillips 1957; Brehaut 1984). In short, a Canadian version of Mann of Massachusetts.

FIGURE 3: The Establishment of Schools and Colleges (Hodgins 1910)



Source: Dictionary of Canadian Biography

The revisionist critique of the Ryerson legacy

Reverend Egerton Ryerson was a Methodist social reformer who challenged the privileges and prerogatives of the Church of England and its associated colonial oligarchy, essentially the remnants of the “Family Compact.” He campaigned fiercely against the elites controlling the state church and in favour of a more populist brand of social gospel Christianity and a broader form of democratic citizenship. As superintendent of education, the newly appointed Ryerson drafted the *Common School Act* in 1846 that established universal free access for children to schooling in Ontario. Common schools, in his view, had a socializing task and should be built upon a Christian moral foundation, especially given the precarious nature of the colony, labour unrest, and divisive Christian sectarianism. Among his contemporaries, he exhibited “a spirit of egalitarianism” and openness to including the labouring classes and the poor in the public schools, in stark contrast to the more elitist Anglican thinkers of the time (Sissons 1937; Welton 2021).

Yet Ryerson fell short of being the “mythical hero” presented in the seminal education histories of Charles Phillips and C.B. Sissons, and Ontario’s version of a “great man” patterned, in some ways after Mann of Massachusetts, did not last. The first wave of Canadian revisionist scholars drew inspiration from the work of American social historian Michael B. Katz, author of *The Irony of School Reform* (1968), who taught at OISE and McMaster University and exerted a profound influence and a band of Canadian “revisionist” scholars, consisting mainly of his colleagues and graduate students in the 1970s and early 1980s (Houston 1972, 250; and Prentice and Houston 1988). Education professors such as Alison Prentice and Bruce Curtis came to the fore and revealed that his educational philosophy sought, in some ways, to implant “middle class values and attitudes” and to impart the virtues of industriousness, cleanliness, obedience, discipline and control over the underclass (Prentice 1977; Curtis 1988).

Revisionism held sway in the 1980s, and with it, Ryerson and his contemporaries took on a new appearance. Many of Canada’s pre-eminent education historians of the 1980s and 1990s, such as Alison Prentice, Susan Houston, J.D. Wilson, Neil MacDonald, and Bruce Curtis, portrayed Ryerson as a “conservative reformer.” Public school promoters steeped in Ryerson’s philosophy and principles, they claimed, sought to fashion a coherent system

of state schooling which, in effect, reproduced the class hierarchy of Upper Canada and imposed public schools on local communities. Peeling away the layers of complexity, the House of Ryerson existed to perpetuate Upper Canadian social order and middle-class Protestant virtues such as civility, cleanliness, industry, obedience, and orderly behaviour. While compelling in theory and plausible as an explanation, second level studies were unable to add much in terms of school-level evidence to sustain the overarching claims. By the standards of his time, he still did not fit the label “conservative” because of his distaste for upper crust Anglican elitism and his Methodist reform instincts (Welton 2021).

Why Horace Mann is still standing

Mann still stands, albeit somewhat diminished, as one of the recognized founders of the American republic. Beginning in the 1830s and 1840s, he took the lead in promoting Thomas Jefferson’s vision for a state-wide school system as a pillar of democratic life. When Mann was appointed in Massachusetts, he became first secretary of education in the United States. In the conventional popular mythology, Mann became the “paragon” for public education by promoting wider access to tax-supported schools and riding horseback from district and working to improve education provision in local schoolhouses. While public schools served White children and inequalities persisted, he was tenacious in pursuit of his vision. “Education, beyond all other devices of human origin,” he wrote, “is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the great balance wheel of the social machinery” (Mondale and Patton 2001, 29).

A famous statue of Mann, by Emma Stebbins in 1863 and cast in 1865, still stands outside the Massachusetts State House in Boston. The bronze statue depicts Mann holding a book and rests on a granite pedestal and, since September 11, 2001, it is protected behind a fence, but visible at a distance from the Beacon Street sidewalk. It now evokes a reasoned pride and a sense of faith in the democratic origins of public schools. His pragmatic vision of public education, expressed 150 years ago, stood the test of time – more accessible, nonsectarian, upholding a common morality, as well as tax-supported, locally managed, and state regulated with an ultimate goal of providing equal educational opportunities to all children (Hayes 2006).

When it comes to the American school system, it is still seen as one of the building blocks in the shaping of the republic. Most American historians continue to view Mann's legacy as positive, contending that his overall contributions led to a more egalitarian and democratic society. He is still credited with being one of the critical figures who spearheaded "the most successful progressive social movement of the 19th century: Public Education" (Kaestle 2001). One American education historian captured the prevailing consensus: "Institutions are the basic building blocks of any society. We must be willing to see our schools not just as sites for exercising power but also as places where our civic and human capabilities are nurtured. Our public schools are deeply flawed, as scholarship since the 1960s has made clear, but they remain vital to achieving our democracy. Their vices, but also their virtues, are ours" (Neem 2016, 353).

FIGURE 4: The Horace Mann statue



The bronze statue of Horace Mann (1865) by Emma Stebbins, installed outside the Massachusetts State House, in Boston, Massachusetts. It depicts Mann holding a book, and rests on a granite base.

Source: Public domain

The toppling of a Canadian icon, Egerton Ryerson

While historical figures move in and out of favour with the tides of popular opinion, the toppling and erasure of Egerton Ryerson in such fashion warrants closer scrutiny from a variety of vantage points. One of those is what it portends for historical consciousness and the hole it leaves in the narrative arc of the Canadian educational foundations. It's unthinkable that his American counterpart, Mann of Massachusetts, would ever be treated with such disregard. Simply put, Canadian education history without Ryerson is like studying Shakespeare without referencing Hamlet. Most surprising of all, none of the ranking academics in the Canadian History of Education Association (CHEA) breathed a word, leaving his defence up to a courageous

and rag-tag band of prominent history scholars (Stagg and Dutil 2021), high school history teachers (Sly 2019), public policy experts (Dutil 2021), and progressive reformers, many steeped in the Methodist “social gospel” tradition (McDonald 2021).

Ryerson was the undisputed founder of public schooling in Canada West (Ontario) and an unlikely candidate for vilification. Two of his greatest defenders, Ryerson University professors Ronald Stagg and Patrice Dutil, provided an assessment starkly different than that of the *Standing Strong* task force report. Ryerson, they pointed out in April 2021, was “one of the most influential figures in the history of Upper Canada and was in his day considered the very paragon of the forward-looking, progressive, inclusive, worldly intellectual. He was a beacon of educational reform, a fighter against injustice of all sorts, and a kind and generous man. A Methodist minister, he pushed for religious equality and was long celebrated as the founder of Ontario’s public school system” (Stagg and Dutil 2021a).

Ryerson and Indigenous residential schools: why context matters

Canada’s Indigenous residential schools were horrible institutions and, especially since the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission report, anyone painted with the brush of association is tainted and bound to suffer consequences. While Ryerson is blamed for instigating residential schools, that’s not quite accurate, to say the least. He did not invent the residential school because it was British colonial policy long before he took office. His views were shaped during 1826–27 while he was missionary to the Mississauga’s of Credit River and unlike many White settlers, he was neither ignorant to nor disrespectful of Indigenous people. (Smith 2021).

Working with the Mississauga’s, Ryerson met and became a close friend of Methodist Ojibwe minister Peter Jones (Kahkewaquonaby) and supported the Mississauga’s claim to a land base at the mouth of the Credit River. For a decade after he left the mission, notably during an 1836–37 trip to England, Ryerson continued to press from the British Colonial Office protection for the Anishinaabeg’s remaining land base in Upper Canada. Furthermore, Ryerson (1803–1882) died *before* “Indian boarding schools” became federal

government policy (in 1883) and it's those compulsory institutions that stand accused of being vile state-sanctioned instruments of cultural genocide (Smith 2021).

Ryerson's involvement with what came to be federal Indian residential schools was limited to providing the Indian Department of the United Canadas with a 3,000-word 1847 letter containing recommendations. The oft-cited recommendation read as follows: "It is a fact established by numerous experiments, that the North American Indian cannot be civilized or preserved in a state of civilization (including habits of industry and sobriety) except in connection with, if not by the influence of, not only religious instruction and sentiment but of religious feelings. Indians should be schooled in separate, denominational, boarding, English-only and agriculturally-oriented (industrial) institutions" (Ryerson 1847, 73–74). While his proposed framework may have carried some influence, Ryerson was not involved in the formulation of the policy (Welton 2021).

“*Egerton Ryerson was a beacon of educational reform, a fighter against injustice of all sorts, and a kind and generous man.*”

Much like Peter Jones, he was concerned about the potential for cultural and economic displacement and favoured agricultural training schools, or “industrial schools” to prepare young men for changes in agriculture. Such thinking was popular at the time, especially among those familiar with the American Methodist Shawnee school considered “a progressive venture” possibly worthy of imitation. Two Methodist Indian schools established under his watch, Mount Elgin at Munceytown and Alnwick at Alderville were voluntary and entirely church-run institutions. It must be noted, in fairness, that Ryerson, like most of his contemporaries, permitted segregated schools to be established in Canada West and accepted the fact that, in many places, “prejudices and feelings are stronger than the law” (Semple 1996; Smith 2021).

Ryerson has been a victim of “presentism” – viewing history through the lens of modern morality – in this case, a harsh judgment driven by recent dramatic shifts in society, culture, and values. Education historians and public policy analysts, drawing upon ground-breaking research of Donald B. Smith, Thomas Peace, and others, now recognize that Ryerson was an educational progressive by the standards of his time, holding views similar to his friend and ally, Peter Jones of the Mississaugas (Kahkewquonaby), Black anti-slavery advocate Josiah Henson, and Philipp Emanuel von Fellenberg. Like most social reformers of the period, back in the late-1840s, Ryerson saw potential in the development of agricultural training schools for “Indian children” as a way of advancing their welfare and economic prospects. In outlining a separate curriculum for Indigenous children, he did prepare the ground for the inequities between Indigenous and settler schools that later developed. As a result of his two different reports, Indigenous schools evolved separate from “a settler-public school system” (Peace 2021). It’s important to recognize that schools for Indigenous children, on First Nations reserves, originally church-run, were not placed under federal Indian Department supervision until the 1880s, long after Ryerson’s passing (Miller 1996). None of this really detracts from Ryerson’s blueprint for the entire system, which had an enduring impact and deserves lasting recognition.

Continental differences that matter

What explains the salient differences in the status accorded to Mann and Ryerson in their respective countries? Cross-national comparisons based upon Seymour Martin Lipset’s seminal sociological theory of the differing “founding ethos” of each nation (Lipset 1990, 1–18) are rather simplistic and dated. The United States was a republic born of revolution, with an ingrained patriotic fervour and gallery of heroes, much stronger than its Anglo-Canadian neighbour, but that has faded in relevance over the years. Everything does not go back to the founding origins of the two nations. Focusing on more recent decades, a few other factors come into play in shaping contemporary values, prevailing attitudes and public policies in relation to the veneration of nation-builders.

Ascendancy of the post-national state philosophy

Contemporary Canada has been described as a “post-national society” born of immigrants, open to newcomers, and less inclined to upholding its founding traditions and institutions. Newly elected Prime Minister Justin Trudeau best encapsulated this in his memorable October 2015 proclamation in the *New York Times Magazine*: Canada, he said, could be the “first post-national state.” Then, he added: “There is no core identity, no mainstream in Canada” (Foran 2017). That harkened back to Bruce W. Powe’s conception of unique post-national state in *Towards a Canada of Light* (Powe 1997), challenging the nationalist model best exemplified in George Grant’s classic *Lament for a Nation* (Gwyn 1995). More recently, public intellectual and essayist John Ralston Saul likened this post-nationalist vision to an Indigenous concept of welcome. “Space for multiple identities and multiple loyalties,” is how he explained the philosophy, the roots of which go deep in North American soil, “for an idea of belonging which is comfortable with contradictions” (Saul 2016; Foran 2017).

Indigenous activism and support for Indigenous rights is much stronger in Canada and drove much of the public policy agenda during the statue-toppling phase from 2015 to the early 2020s. While the legacy of slavery and segregation are seared into the American consciousness, Indigenous injustices and inequalities exert a more potent influence in Canada. Indigenous people represent a much higher proportion of the population and figure more prominently in the history of policy conflicts over rights and recognition. Current trends in protests to remove statues and public figures like Ryerson in Canada are driven by violence and injustices perpetrated against Indigenous peoples, most notably through colonial policy, oppressive actions, and residential school atrocities. In the United States, Mann has been spared because most of the focus of such protests, driven by Black Lives Matter, is on targeting symbols of slavery, lingering Confederate values, and racial segregation (Brock and Migone 2023, 310–315).

Disruptive protests aimed at toppling historical founding figures elicit different policy and civic order responses in the two countries. Following the al-Qaeda terrorist attacks on September 11, 2011, American authorities moved swiftly to protect and safeguard American public squares and monuments, including the statue of Horace Mann outside of the State Capitol Building in Boston, Massachusetts. The general pattern in Canada, according to MLI

FIGURE 5: The toppling of the Ryerson statue (2021)



A statue of Egerton Ryerson, reputed founder of the Ontario school system, lies on the grounds of the university that bears his name after being toppled in June 2021.

Source: Evan Mitsui/CBC News Toronto

fellow Ken Coates, is one of “general government inaction and disturbing passivity in the face of disruptive protests.” Where protests challenge explicit government mandates, such as COVID vaccinations or diversity in hiring policy, it’s enforced, but if it conflicts with “soft policy” on protecting historic monuments or pipelines, governments are “loth to act quickly, if at all” (Coates 2021; Coates 2021a).

Today’s angry and intolerant times have overridden traditional values of respect for historic nation-builders, civility, and respect for viewpoints at odds with the shifting popular consensus. Politeness and viewpoint diversity are endangered in what Coates describes as “the swirling mess that passes for public debate.” Attempts to come to terms with and weigh the legacies of historic figures like Ryerson are met with “intransigence and condemnation from all across the ideological and cultural spectrum” (Coates 2021).

Serious and nuanced public debates are reduced to “black and white standoffs” with combatants on both sides engaged in a “dialogue of the deaf” and ready to pounce on even the smallest deviation from perceived wisdom in the ongoing “culture wars.” Spooked by protests, politicians take the easy way out – removing statues of Thomas Jefferson, a Virginian slaveowner, in

the United States, and John A. Macdonald, who favoured Indian residential schools, here in Canada. With a notable lack of historical accuracy or much of a deep understanding of Ryerson and his times, Canada's best known education reformer now stands condemned with "venom but little historical balance" (Dutil 2021; Coates 2021). What's more remarkable is the complicity and compliance of public bodies, including Parks Canada, the National Historic Sites and Monuments Board, and Archives Canada (Ostola 2022; Government of Canada 2024a).

Recognizing and revitalizing our educational heritage

Mann's Canadian counterpart, Ryerson, is ripe for reconsideration, recognizing many of his signal achievements which have stood the test of time. Total erasure of Ryerson leaves too many holes in the foundations of Ontario and, by extension, Anglo-Canadian education. In addressing the injustices of Indigenous residential schools, we should not make matters worse by painting Ryerson and his supporters with a tar brush. Without inflating or glorifying Ryerson's role, it's hard to ignore the significance of his 1846 plan for public elementary education and his profound impact on the shaping of the system. Removing his name from Ryerson University and Toronto's first Normal School simply does not pass the test of fairness. Street justice, justified by a commissioned university report, was administered swiftly without sober second thought. It's up to historians to call out glaring examples of presentism (Gibson and Miles 2022) that fail the test of historical accuracy and violate the fundamental principles of sound historical thinking, for the sake of future generations.

Recovering Ryerson's enduring educational legacy will require a concerted effort to restore a measure of historical consciousness at all levels of the education system – from provincial education ministries to school districts and faculties of education down to our local schools. When the current identity politics social justice wave (Dummitt 2024) subsides, policy-makers will be looking to "build back" what's been devalued or lost and receptive to an education reform agenda aimed at integrating our educational heritage into the curriculum and restoring "narrative competencies" among the current generation of students.

Such a strategy for heritage revitalization in Canadian education might include a few critical steps:

Immediate actions

- Review and revisit Egerton Ryerson’s role in the founding of Canada’s public schools.
- Commission Heritage Ontario to erect a new monument at Queen’s Park in honour of Ryerson with a descriptive panel explaining his legacy in historical context, in all its complexity.
- Commission a new fuller description and accompanying plaque re-affirming “Adolphus Egerton Ryerson” as a National Historic Person (1803–1882) and install it in a prominent public location near the site of Canada’s first Normal School in Toronto.

Longer-term strategy

- Establish a provincial inquiry into the Ontario Ministry of Education’s mission and mandate with regard to educating students about the origins, purposes and mission of the public school system.
- Engage national heritage organizations such as the Canadian Institute for Historical Education, the Association of Canadian Studies, Historica Canada, and Canada’s History Society in developing a new public education program recognizing significant milestones in Canadian education and supporting an outreach project of school-wide heritage commemoration and events.

Today the unfortunate trend of banishing historical figures from the public square is falling out of fashion. When the current phase finally ends, we will come to grips with the consequences of erasing names and burying troubling aspects of our contested past (Government of Canada 2024; Parks Canada 2024). Indigenous leaders, such as Darlene Bernard, chief of Lennox Island First Nation on PEI, are sending signals that it’s time to publicly display the Charlottetown statue of John A. Macdonald on a park bench that was removed and “boxed-up” three years ago (MacLeod 2024). When historical balance returns, Egerton Ryerson should be among the first of those restored to the public square and properly recognized for laying the foundations of the Canadian public education system. [MLI](#)

About the author



Paul W. Bennett, EdD, is director, Schoolhouse Institute, adjunct professor of Education, Saint Mary's University, and chair of researchED Canada. One of Canada's best-known education policy researchers and commentators, Bennett has generated dozens of policy research reports and written ten books, including *The State of the System: A Reality Check on Canada's Schools* (2020). Most recently, he has focused on analyzing the profound impact of the COVID-19 global disruption on student learning in research reports and presentations, most recently at the March 2024 TES World Education Summit. For an extensive collection of his commentaries, see Educhatter Blog, recognized by two different independent research agencies as the top Education blog in Canada in 2018 and 2022. [MLI](#)

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