Rebels marching down Yonge Street to attack Toronto, 1837.

The Not So Peaceable Kingdom: Quakers Took Up Arms in the Rebellion of 1837[1]

by *Laura Peers*

Every four months throughout the mid-1830s Quakers in Upper Canada asked themselves, "Are Friends clear of bearing arms, of complying with military requisitions, and of paying any fine or tax in lieu thereof?" According to their belief in the evil of violence, Quakers refused to participate in any activity which promoted either the spirit or the machinery of war. This included such things as writing or publishing documents to do with war and selling goods to the military Despite their convictions, a number of Quakers from both central and western Upper Canada chose to shoulder arms for the reform cause during the Rebellion of 1837. The long inward journey that these Friends made from pacifism to armed revolt, and from political frustration to violent action, was made only under the duress of political deadlock and the absence of any other avenues for long-needed changes. Their desperate and painful decision to act also had heavy consequences: of those who chose to fight, at least five were imprisoned for their efforts, one was hanged and a num-

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ber were disowned by the Quaker meetings to which they belonged.

The Friends who participated in the Rebellion were no strangers to war. Many of their parents had come to Upper Canada after suffering during the American Revolution, both for their pacifism and for their pro-British feelings. The account of Isaac Webb, a Quaker living in Pennsylvania, illustrates the harassment to which Friends were subjected for their beliefs. According to family tradition, Webb's land was confiscated because of his Loyalist sympathies, after which he was threatened by Whig settlers:

"In the early part of the revolution of 1776 father's troubles commenced. The new Government called for all militia men they could raise. His principles opposing all war, he refused to go, and to escape their hands he went to the woods... for three months ... In the fall of the year they ventured to go to a back settler's house of their acquaintance, thinking they might be pretty safe, but their enemies had got some knowledge of them, and came with a company of armed men."

Isaac and his companion escaped the gang, but felt it prudent to travel east and spend the winter in New York. When they returned the following summer, they faced an angry mob which was determined to hang or shoot "them ___ Tories!"

Like many others, the family involved in this incident tried to smooth things over and remain in the community they had worked so hard to build. But for many Quakers, the post-Revolution period was one of economic hardship, especially in recently settled areas. Once-promising Quaker communities in Pennsylvania were faced with the difficulties of recouping losses of property sustained during the war, as well as attacks by hostile Indians, floods, and more rapid non-Quaker population of previously isolated Quaker communities. By the 1790s, many Quakers began moving west into the newly-opened areas of Michigan territory and Ohio, and north into the developing colony of Upper Canada.

Quakers were attracted to Upper Canada for a variety of reasons. As Loyalists, some received land grants from the British Government. Land grants were also given in large blocks to several Quakers in order to settle several of the unpopulated "back townships". Timothy Rogers applied for forty farms (of two hundred acres each) in York County, and Samuel Phillips and Isaac Lundy were given twenty more just east of Rogers' area. Large blocks such as these offered extended families the chance to settle near each other, an advantage in pioneer society where labour was scarce and roads were poor. Other families who did not receive free land came because the land was relatively cheap, and because relatives had already moved. Isaac Webb "could see no prospects of having a house of his own" in Pennsylvania, and after labouring for over a decade on rented land he made up his mind to move to Canada. He was accompanied on this journey by four families, all of whom were related in one way or another. They were eager for the chance to begin new communities free from non-Quaker influences, and were happy at the promise of exemption from military duties in Upper Canada. After their trials in America, this must have been a deciding factor for some settlers.

The Quakers laboured throughout the first decades of the 1800s to build new homes and settlements. In parts of the Home District, they were the first to begin clearing the forest. By 1820, Quaker communities and meetings were well established in several clusters. One group in the Home District included the hamlets of Newmarket, Pickering, Pine Orchard, Uxbridge, and Sharon. Kingston. Adolphustown, and West Lake were among those in the eastern end of the province, and Norwich and Yarmouth in the western end. By the late 1830s, Quakers constituted 4,826 of Upper Canada's population (excluding that of York) of 358,021, but they were virtually the only

inhabitants in some of the more isolated areas.

To their distress, however, both Quaker and non-Quaker settlers discovered that the development of the rural areas of Upper Canada was severely limited by the self-interest and inefficiency of the more powerful members of the provincial government, commonly known as the "Family Compact". Based primarily in York (now Toronto), the Compact was composed of upper-class men, many of whom were related and were appointed largely on the basis of patronage. The life-styles and financial situations of Compact members were far removed from those of the settlers or small businessmen, and the Upper House seldom concerned itself with the basic needs of the majority of the population of Upper Canada.

William Lyon Mackenzie,
"the strident publisher and Reformer who would lead the Rebellion in 1837"

Settlers also resented the Anglican Church's attempt to control the Clergy Reserves, which comprised one seventh of the province's land. While the Church of England was supported by the Compact, it was a religious minority in Upper Canada by the mid-1820s. The reserves also created difficulties for settlers trying to create compact communities, since they were largely uncleared. The Reserves must have been especially frustrating to the Quakers, who had no formal ministry and distrusted "hireling ministers" of all kinds. William Lyon Mackenzie, the strident publisher and Reformer who would lead the Rebellion in 1837, advocated selling the reserves and using part of the profits to improve roads. His suggestion was popular with settlers such as the Quakers. Where backwoods roads existed, they were often virtually impassable, and greatly retarded the growth of many small settlements.

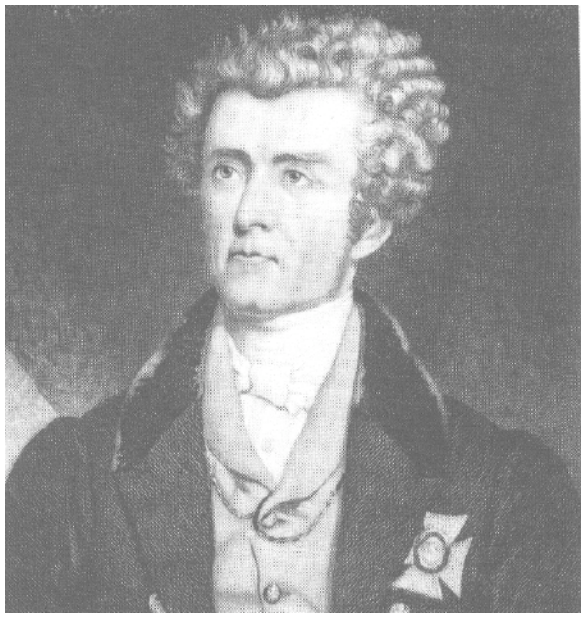
The Quakers also suffered from the Family Compact's concerns about the dangers of American influence. While Loyalists from America had been welcomed into Upper Canada several decades earlier, the tensions caused by the War of 1812 created strong anti-American sentiments among the colony's upper class. One Quaker bitterly recalled that as a result of discrimination against settlers from the United States, "I saw my father deprived of his franchise. He could neither vote nor receive votes, though he had the necessary property qualifications and had worked hard for it." The fact that in many cases the Quakers were the best-established, the most literate, and the most qualified in their communities for public office made such restrictions especially galling. For a time, settlers of American background were even threatened by the loss of their lands. This situation was rectified in the late 1820s after petitions from the citizens to the British Government, but for years after their victory the Quakers and other settlers from the States remained resentful and suspicious of the Legislature.

In response to widespread problems such as these, the Reform party grew rapidly during the 1820s and 1830s. The Quakers' journey from political frustration to armed rebellion was continued by the impotence of this promising political development. Although Reformers often occupied most of the seats in the elected Assembly, they could accomplish nothing when pitted against the Compact-dominated Upper House. By the early I 830s, a number of townships were meeting to discuss means of reform, and formed permanent

"Societies for the Preservation of the Constitutional Rights of British Subjects". These groups drafted petitions to the British government requesting such changes as a system of equal representation, the abolition of Crown and Clergy reserves, and the granting of increased powers to Townships which would contribute to progress. One such petition signed by a number of people from Uxbridge in 1831 included the names of eight Quakers.

The township committees proved to be crucial training grounds for political awareness and for local Reform leadership. They were, of course, aided in these tasks by William Lyon Mackenzie's radical Reform newspaper and by his presence at many of the township meetings.

Frustration continued to build in the Quakers and their neighbours as, one by one, their hopes for peaceful change were dashed. The continued expulsion and re-election of Mackenzie from and to the Assembly mirrored the growing deadlock between the Assembly and the Legislature after 1834. The appointment of Sir Francis Bond Head (a supposed Reformer) as Lieutenant-Governor accomplished nothing, since he quickly proved himself an ally of the Compact. When the Reformers lost in the election of 1836 (after Bond Head and others had branded them Republicans and atheists), the Reformers' hopes of legislated, peaceable change were ended. Combined with a disastrous economy in 1836-37 and the threat of foreclosure which was faced by many farmers, this was for many the last peaceful step in the journey to rebellion.



Sir Francis Bond Head,
Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada

During the summer of 1837, Mackenzie campaigned throughout a number of townships, calling for more strident measures by Reformers. By November, physical harassment of Reformers by Tories and Orangemen lent weight to Mackenzie's suggestion that the Reformers arm themselves. By this time, the "Societies for the Preservation of the Constitutional Rights of British Subjects" had become "Committees of Vigilance", but while they agreed with the need for protection, they were not knowingly arming themselves for revolt.

Mackenzie revealed his plan for revolt late in November, much to the distress of his Quaker supporters. Joseph Gould, the son of a pioneer Quaker and a member of the Orthodox Quaker community in Uxbridge, tried to dissuade Mackenzie at a meeting in Stouffville. He was unsuccessful, of course, and "was taunted with cowardice" for his beliefs. Several weeks later, Gould participated in the fighting near Montgomery's Tavern on Yonge Street only because he was virtually waylaid and hauled there by a group of friends who looked upon him as their leader. Other Quakers were unaware of Mackenzie's final plan and believed that they were only going to demonstrate against the government. The majority of the Friends who took an active part in the Rebellion did so, however, because their consciences dictated that they should. Obeying one's conscience was an important part of Quaker belief, and

had been used to interpret and apply the ideal of Quaker pacifism during the American Revolution and the War of 1812. Just as Quakers later became involved in the American Civil War because their consciences decreed that the evil of slavery was greater than the evil of war, so did some Upper Canadian Quakers feel that the need for political and social justice justified their participation in the Rebellion. It is no coincidence that both the Home District and London District, which each had several Quaker communities, had the highest numbers of citizens arrested for participation in the Rebellion.

Two Quakers attained some notoriety as leaders during the action. Joseph Gould had emerged as a community leader during the organization of the Township Committees in the 1830s. When he was taken to Montgomery's Tavern on 4 December he was dismayed at the lack of organization among the rebel forces gathered there and immediately posted guards and watches for the night. The following day, Gould participated in a battle in which one man, Captain Wideman, was killed and a number of others injured. Gould's narrative implies that he was armed with a rifle; other rebels, he notes, bore only pikes and pitchforks. When Gould and his companions heard that Montgomery's Tavern had been taken and burned by the government troops, they hid in the forest on the west side of Yonge Street and planned to escape to the United States. They made the mistake of building a fire at night, however, and were arrested and taken to Toronto.

Joseph Gould

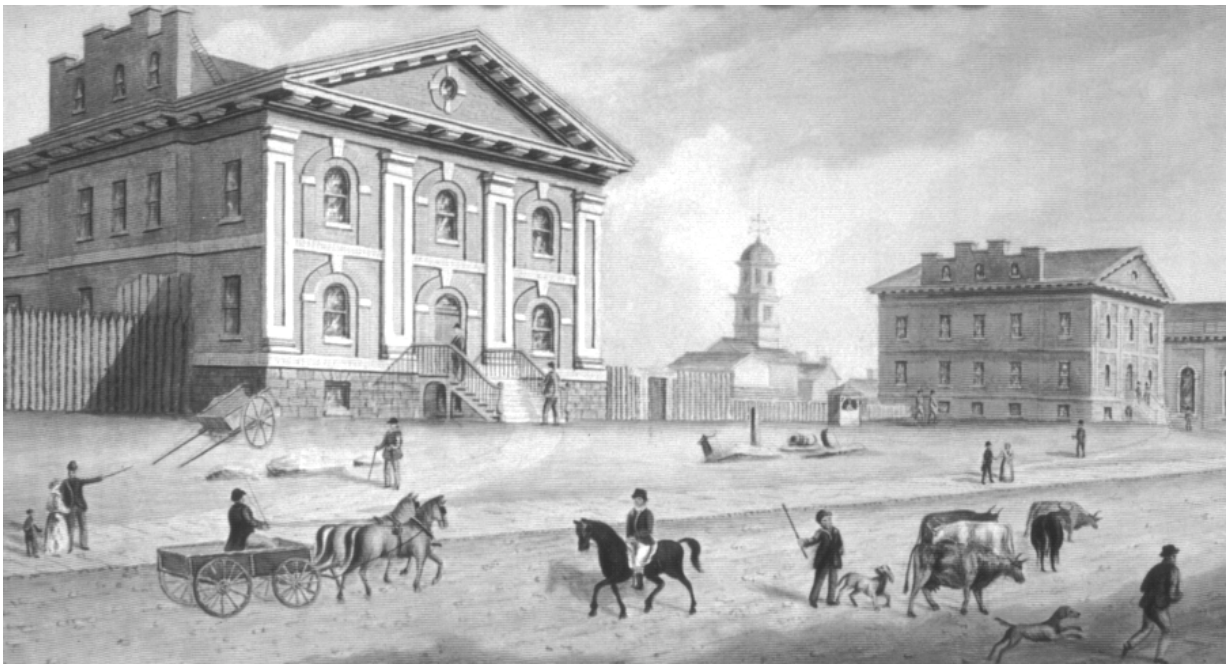
The second Quaker leader, Joshua Doan, was also the son of a pioneer family in Sparta. A tanner by trade, Doan was provoked not only by the reasons which had so incensed Joseph Gould but also by the government's failure to honour its early promise of military exemption to Quakers. As early as the War of 1812, Quaker property was seized when they refused to pay fines in lieu of military service; this practice was frequent in the Yarmouth area. In early December of 1837, groups of rebels began assembling throughout the area from Sparta to Brantford under the leadership of Dr. Charles Duncombe. Just as Mackenzie's goal was to gain control of York, Duncombe's intention was to take possession of Brantford, Hamilton and the surrounding area and then join with Mackenzie. On the 12th, one group of about fifty men, including Joshua Doan, marched from Sparta to the rebel rendezvous at Scotland. There they learned of the defeat of Mackenzie's forces at Toronto, and were ordered by their leader to retreat to Norwich. The government militia followed close behind the rebels, and Joshua Doan's group was captured at Otter Creek (now Richmond). Doan escaped, and fled to the farm of Quaker Ephraim Haight in Sparta. Haight hid Doan in a log granary, after which Doan was able to flee to the States. Doan later participated in an attack on Windsor by a group of American "Patriots" and Upper Canadian rebels in December of 1838, one of several such attacks intended to overthrow the established order in

Upper Canada and set up a more American form of government. Like the Rebellion, these invasions failed miserably. Doan was apprehended while trying to get back across the St. Clair River after the Windsor battle and was taken to London for sentencing.

The role of other rebel Friends is less certain. Some, such as Joel Gould and Joel P. Doan, accompanied their strong-minded relatives. Whether they were persuaded to go by the arguments of their families or whether they went in an attempt to keep their relatives out of trouble, we shall never know. Joel Gould accompanied his brother Joseph to Montgomery's Tavern on 4 December, and was sent on the 5th with Captain Matthews to attack Toronto From the east, via the Don Bridge. Joel must have escaped from the troops after the altercations that day, for his name does not appear on the lists of those imprisoned as traitors. Joel Doan has been described as a leader in the uprising in the western part of the province, but his exact actions are unknown. He escaped capture and fled to the States for several months.

A group of Quakers at Norwich assisted the rebels who retreated there by allowing their meeting-house to be used as a rendezvous. One Friend also provided Charles Duncombe, the rebel leader in that area, with a Quaker outfit to help him escape the troops who were combing the roads and woods for him. Several years later when the English Quaker Joseph Gurney met in worship with the Norwich Quakers, he felt obliged to "proclaim Christ and his peaceable reign against all tumult and factions," and noted that "many of the Rebels were present" in the meeting-house.

Far less is known of the specific actions of other Friends who participated in the Rebellion. William Hilborn of Uxbridge took up arms "with a Company in the service of the late rebellion," as did Gideon Vernon, William Pearson, and John McMillan of the Home District, and Solomon Lossing and Edward Carmen of Norwich. Lossing, according to one source, had arranged for provisions for the rebels in the Norwich area. Lists of rebels arrested in the province after the fight-



The Toronto Court House (left) and Jail (right), King Street, Toronto

ing include a number of other persons who have Quaker surnames but who cannot be traced in Quaker records. These people were probably nominal Friends, that is, children of Quakers or children of previously disowned Friends who nevertheless attended Meetings for worship and were part of the Quaker community. They include William Rogers, William Doan, Ebenezer Moore, Robert Taylor, Jonathan Doan, John Randal, Enoch Moore, John Vernon, and Joshua Winn.

The prices paid by these rebel Friends for discarding their pacifism were varied, and sometimes surprising. One Quaker paid the highest price of all for his actions: Joshua Doan of Sparta was hanged for high treason on 6 February 1838. His last letter to his wife, written from his cell in London, reads in part, "I wish you to think of such questions as you may wish to ask me, as I do not know how long you will be permitted **to** stay I must say good-bye for the night, and may God protect you and my dear child, and give you fortitude to meet that coming event…" Quaker Sarah Haight preached at his funeral, while Joshua's brother Israel paced up and down the meeting-house yard, grieving. Joel Doan returned briefly to Sparta and married Joshua's widow before moving permanently to California.

Several other Quakers were arrested, including Joseph Gould (291 days in prison), William Pearson (two weeks), John McMillan (two weeks), Gideon Vernon (seventy-one days) and Solomon Lossing (101 days). Lossing, a magistrate, was tried for treason but acquitted; the others were released after petitioning, being questioned, and promising to keep the peace.

In addition to being punished by civil authorities, Quakers also had to contend with their own communities after the Rebellion. As the Quaker Discipline, or guidebook, stated,

> "Should members of our Society be so unmindful of our Christian testimony against war, as to bear arms … advice should be speedily given them; and after being tenderly treated with, in order to bring them to a sense of their error… unless they give satisfaction i.e., a satisfactory explanation or apology to the monthly meeting they are to be disowned."

Several Friends were evidently unable (or unwilling) to apologize for their actions. William Hilborn, who was apparently never arrested, was disowned by the Uxbridge Meeting for taking up arms. Edward Carmen of Norwich was similarly disowned, and the Yonge Street Monthly Meeting recorded in January of 1838 that two of its members (unnamed) were guilty "of bearing arms in the late Rebellion." Other rebel Friends, such as Gideon Vernon and Joshua and Joel Doan, were never disciplined or disowned by their meetings. There are no records of a meeting's decision not to discipline a member for rebelling, but it is not difficult to understand that the political frustration and personal conscience-searching which had led individual Friends to participate in the affair must also have lain behind a meeting's decision to say nothing.

Of course, not all Upper Canadian Quakers sympathized with the rebels. Some denounced the Rebellion as an attack on the Crown by a lawless pack of fools, atheists and Republicans. Hannah Palmer Moore, a staunch Quaker, later wrote a poem about the Rebellion which began with the stern word,

> Come, friends and neighbors, pray give ear
> While I relate a story
> Of what took place in the first year
> Of the reign of Queen Victoria.
> In Canada a strife began.
> A wild seditious frenzy
> Spread by a bold ambitious man
> Called William L. McKenzie.

Friend Hannah's poem hints at the tensions which must have existed in post-Rebellion Quaker communities, and reminds us how difficult it must have been for the few rebel Friends to make the decisions they did.

According to one source, the terms “rebel” and “son of a rebel” quickly became taunts which provoked fist-fights at many a non-Quaker gathering for decades; Quakers undoubtedly had their own ways of expressing disapproval outside of the meeting-house. Rebel Friends would also have faced harassment from Orangemen, who also saw the Rebellion as “a wild seditious frenzy” and were prone to using mob violence to express their sentiments to the rebels.

Orangemen aside, there was a great deal of support for the Rebellion in rural communities. This helped the rebel Quakers and their families restore their lives to order during 1838, and later contributed to the success of several of them as politicians and citizens of high standing in their areas. Joseph Gould, for example, became the first Reeve of Uxbridge Township in 1851, the first Warden of Ontario County in 1852, and was elected the first Member of Parliament for North Ontario in 1854. Beyond giving vent to their communities frustrations and achieving some personal renown, however, the rebel Quakers accomplished little. The Rebellion led to Lord Durham's investigation, and to some changes in municipal government, but the causes of the Rebellion itself were not fully addressed until Britain granted responsible government a decade later - which occurred not because of the protest of 1837, but because of a shift in British colonial policy. Without benefit of hindsight, though, this handful of Friends bravely made the decision to break with their traditions and pursue what they saw as the only avenue left open to them in the struggle for reform. The rather ironic ending of Friend Hannah's poem might well serve as a fit epitaph for the rebel Quakers:

> Their efforts all have been in vain,
> Their hopes of triumph ended
> Prosperity and perfect peace
> Again their reign resuming
> Now makes our hopes and joys increase,
> Our prospects bright and blooming.
> Long may Victoria wear the Crown
> Worthy of good opinion
> Dispense due justice all around
> Throughout her wide Dominion.