CHAPTER 2

Popular Radicalism and the Theatrics of Rebellion: The Hybrid Discourse of Dissent in Upper Canada in the 1830s*

I could repeat a thousand stories,
   About the Radicals and Tories,
   The Banks, the Merchants and Mechanicks,
   The Church Reserves and Ceaseless Panicks
That all of you must know as well,
   Or better far, than I can tell.
But what’s the use of telling o’er
   A string of news you’ve heard before.¹

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The current historiography of Upper Canada is curiously unconcerned with what was once a major preoccupation: the importance of the Rebellion of 1837–8 and the nature of the radicalism associated with the politics of dissent that emerged in the 1830s and culminated in a rare, if ineffective, uprising.² Whereas older writings exhibited obvious partisanship, there is no denying that the scholarship on Upper Canada in the 1830s, prior to the 1990s, was insistent on staking out interpretive ground, focusing on the meaning and significance of the radical edge of the age.³ Undoubtedly, the liberal,⁴ conserva-

1 ‘New Year’s Address’, St. Catharines Journal, 3 January 1839.
2 Consider, for instance, the unfortunately neglected Guillet 1938, and the still extremely useful Clark 1959, pp. 255–508.
3 Landon 1974, pp. 154–70.
4 Categorisations of liberal historiography are by necessity rather elastic. Especially significant are contrasting assessments of the leading figure of the Upper Canadian Rebellion, William
tive, or Marxist writings on the 1830s have not aged particularly well. There were serious shortcomings within all schools of thought. But what is striking in reading the major relevant studies of the last decade is how far they are outside of older readings of Upper Canada in the 1830s. Like much historical writing in our time, there is a tendency to sidestep engagement with conventional preoccupations. In the resulting displacement, claims made on behalf of the sophistications of newer approaches – be they theoretical or analytic – are often oddly complacent in their lack of attention to past scholarship, perhaps even to aspects of the past itself that bear on their concerns and arguments.

My approach in this chapter is to resituate the politics of Upper Canadian dissent in the 1830s at a particular interface. The popular radicalism of the 1830s was a hybrid of transplanted practices, thoughts, assumptions, and sensibilities. In the material circumstances of a new and emerging society, these translated into an ensemble of arguments about rights that were simultaneously British and American. A hybrid discourse of dissent was rooted in readings of Enlightenment thought and Age of Revolution ideology that were not so much articulated in political tracts as they were performed in a theatrics of discontent. This both animated the highly politicised atmosphere of everyday life and gave new meanings to elections, tavern debates, and even domestic relations. I draw not so much on concerns with constitutional issues, the diversity...