

“...you can beat us in the House of Assembly but you can’t beat us in the street”: The Symbolic Value of Charlestown’s Orange Lodge Riot¹

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While Canadians are accustomed to life in a secularized society, such was not always the case. As historians have established, in the nineteenth century, adherence to Christianity was the norm. This fact is articulated by W.L. Morton, who notes that “religion – not wealth, and not politics – was the chief concern, the main ideal occupation of Canadians.”²

Although the hegemony of Christianity in nineteenth-century Canada had positive effects, such as common cultural values for the population, it also had its downside. Chief among these was denominational conflict. Despite worshipping the same God, and obeying the same commandments, the various denominations differed in their interpretations and practices. The clearest divide in this regard was between Protestants and Roman Catholics. Although Protestant Canada was made up of a wide array of worshippers who maintained distinct identities, its adherents tended to unite against their papist adversaries. The ensuing misunderstandings and prejudices resulted in a preponderance of clashes between the two groups throughout British North America during the nineteenth century.

Such violence long bypassed Prince Edward Island. While the neighbouring colonies had all suffered through similar experiences, the diminutive colony of 94,021 entered the 1870s relatively unscathed by such eruptions.³ This absence of denominational violence is especially intriguing given the colony’s religious makeup: fifty-five per cent Protestant, forty-five per cent Roman Catholic.⁴ Such

¹ I would like to express my appreciation to Professor Marguerite Van Die, under whose guidance this paper was originally written, and Professor Edward MacDonald, who provided valuable advice in the early stages. As well, I would like to thank George O’Connor and the anonymous reviewers for reading the various drafts of this paper and providing many helpful comments.

² “Victorian Canada,” in *The Shield of Achilles: Aspects of Canada in the Victorian Age*, ed. W.L. Morton (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968), 314.

³ *Census of the Population, and other Statistical Returns of Prince Edward Island, Taken in the Year 1871* (Charlottetown: Reilly & Co., 1871), 7.

⁴ *Ibid.* According to 1871 census figures, the largest single denomination was the Roman Catholics, with 40,442 adherents. The next two groups were the Presbyterian Church “of lower Provinces,” with 18,603, and the Kirk of Scotland, with 10,976. There

an evenly matched population, one might suspect, would lend itself to the violence endemic elsewhere. However, notes historian Ian Ross Robertson, the “surprising circumstances for a colony so evenly divided was the dearth of religious hostilities.”⁵

Such a peaceful co-existence would not last. On 12 July 1877 the Island’s record of religious non-violence came to a dramatic end when the Charlottetown headquarters of the Loyal Orange Order, its members just returned from a day of recreation, bore the brunt of an angry mob. Why did this unfortunate action occur? Why, thirty years after the peak of Orange-Green conflict in British North America did such an event transpire in Charlottetown? As this study reveals, the incident in question is fraught with symbolism that reflects the realities of the religio-political discourse that had come to dominate life on Prince Edward Island over the previous twenty-one years. When bitter debate over the place of religion in the education system began to split the Island community along denominational lines in the mid-1850s, the Roman Catholic minority inevitably found themselves on the losing end. Alienated and suspected of Romanist plots, they were blocked from holding power in government, and were unable to implement their desired policies. As tensions mounted, frustrated members of the Roman Catholic population came to view the Orange Order as a symbol of their opposition, culminating in the 12 July 1877 attack of the Order’s Charlottetown contingent.

Although the 1877 riot was a significant event in the history of Prince Edward Island, it has long been overlooked. A survey of relevant literature reveals only four items that discuss the riot. The first published was Reverend John C. Macmillan’s *History of the Catholic Church in Prince Edward Island from 1835 to 1891*.⁶ While it provides useful insight into the Church’s response to the violence, this partisan account of the riot contradicts contemporary testimony. Andrew Robb’s “Rioting in 19th Century P.E.I.,” summarizes the events of 12 July 1877 in three paragraphs.⁷ Likewise, Boyde Beck’s light-hearted *Prince Edward Island: An Unauthorized History* handles the event in a similarly superficial manner.⁸ Anecdotal rather than academic, these works explain what happened on the day in question, but fail to provide insight into why the riot occurred. More significantly the leading academic text on nineteenth-century Prince Edward Island, the Francis W.P. Bolger edited *Canada’s Smallest Province*, does not mention the Orange Order’s existence. Nonetheless, the book does help shed light on the religio-politico tensions that

were 8,361 Methodists, 7,220 Anglicans, 2,709 Bible Christians, 77 Universalists, 8 Quakers, and 931 of “Other Denominations.”

⁵ Ian Ross Robertson, “The Bible Question in Prince Edward Island From 1856 to 1860,” *Acadiensis* (Spring 1976), 4.

⁶ John C. Macmillan, *History of the Catholic Church in Prince Edward Island from 1835 to 1891* (Quebec: L’Evenement Printing Co., 1913), 315-318.

⁷ Andrew Robb, “Rioting in 19th Century P.E.I.,” *Canadian Frontier* (Annual, 1978), 32.

⁸ Boyde Beck, *Prince Edward Island: An Unauthorized History* (Charlottetown: Acorn Press, 1996), 117-120.

dominated Island society between 1856-1877, especially as they impacted local elections. However, coverage of “the elemental animosity [that emerged] between [the] Protestant and Catholic”⁹ population is largely a backdrop to the book’s central focus – Prince Edward Island’s entry into Canada in 1873.¹⁰ The riot at the Orange lodge is not mentioned in an academic text until Brendan O’Grady’s *Exiles and Islanders: The Irish Settlers of Prince Edward Island* was released in 2004. Handling the event in three pages, O’Grady connects the event to the tensions between Irish Catholics and the Orange Order elsewhere, but does not establish a local context that explains why the riot occurred.¹¹

Given the lack of coverage of the Orange Order in Prince Edward Island histories, an examination of studies specific to the organization is warranted. One of the leading studies on the Order in central Canada is Gregory Kealey’s “The Orange Order in Toronto: religious riot and the working class.”¹² Primarily focussed on the Order’s class composition in the late nineteenth century, it also provides some insight into the city’s religious conflict. As Kealey notes, riots were rooted in symbolism during this period. The two riots that occurred in the relatively calm 1870s were the result of Irish Catholics overstepping “informal limits” that the Orangemen deemed “could not be allowed to pass unchallenged.”¹³ In the first example, the boundary was violated when a prominent Fenian leader was invited to speak at a St. Patrick’s Day gathering, while the other was infringed when papal symbols were featured during a Sunday street procession. As Kealey indicates, St. Patrick’s Day speakers were acceptable, as were marches featuring green regalia and Hibernian slogans. However, employing a revolutionary speaker in the former instance, and promoting their Roman Catholic allegiance in the latter, was considered a symbolic affront to Toronto’s Protestant hegemony.¹⁴

⁹ W.S. MacNutt, “Political Advance and Social Reform, 1842-1861,” in *Canada’s Smallest Province*, ed. Francis W.P. Bolger (Charlottetown: The Prince Edward Island 1973 Centennial Commission, 1973), 130.

¹⁰ Ian Ross Robertson’s “Religion, Politics, and Education in Prince Edward Island from 1856 to 1877,” (MA thesis, McGill University, 1968) discusses the tensions that Bolger did not address. It also notes the emergence of the Orange Order on Prince Edward Island; however, it does not address the focus of this paper, the 1877 riot. The author would like to acknowledge that his contextual understanding of the politico-religious situation on Prince Edward Island during the 1850s-1870s is largely attributable to Robertson’s authoritative thesis, as well as the journal articles that emerged from his research.

¹¹ Brendan O’Grady, *Exiles and Islanders: The Irish Settlers of Prince Edward Island* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004), 240-242.

¹² Gregory Kealey, *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism, 1867-1892* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980). “The Orange Order in Toronto” is the seventh chapter in Kealey’s book.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

In Scott See's *Riots in New Brunswick: Orange Nativism and Social Violence in the 1840s*,¹⁵ the author provides a contrasting interpretation of Orange-Green riots. Economic factors, according to See, were the primary cause of these disturbances, which occurred with regularity in the colony during the 1840s. During this decade, New Brunswick's economy was experiencing a recession. This coincided with the large-scale immigration of Irish Roman Catholics who were escaping famine in their homeland. Fearing these immigrants would lower wages and steal what jobs were available, the "Orange Order embarked on a comprehensive vigilante campaign against Irish-Catholics."¹⁶

An important consideration when examining the context of the Charlottetown riot is the ethno-religious composition of Prince Edward Island. The Island's population was composed of four major ethnic groups. The French, at approximately ten per cent of the 1881 population of 108,891, were Catholics. The English, at twenty per cent, mostly belonged to the Methodist and Anglican Churches. The largest group, the Scots, comprised forty-five per cent of the population. Of these, the majority were Presbyterian, while the remainder were Roman Catholic. The most relevant group to this study, however, were the Irish. The second largest ethnic group, with twenty-three per cent of the total population, an estimated ninety per cent of the province's Irish were Roman Catholic.¹⁷

It is also important to establish what the Orange Order was. Originally formed as a Protestant paramilitary organization, they emerged from a climate of religious violence that riddled Ireland during the late eighteenth century. Named after King William of Orange, the Dutch prince who solidified Protestant control of Great Britain in 1690, the Order rapidly spread throughout much of the English-speaking world. Shortly after its 1795 founding, Orange lodges were located across Ireland, England, and the British colonies.¹⁸

British North America proved conducive to the growth of Orangeism. Introduced by British soldiers garrisoned in the colonies, the first lodge was officially opened in 1818. Buoyed by a heavy influx of Irish Protestant immigrants,¹⁹ within twenty years there were close to three hundred lodges in

¹⁵ Scott See, *Riots in New Brunswick: Orange Nativism and Social Violence in the 1840s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁷ *Census of Canada, 1880-81* (Ottawa: MacLean, Roger & Co., 1882), 206-209; Andrew Hill Clark, *Three Centuries and the Island: A Historical Geography of Settlement and Agriculture in Prince Edward Island, Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959), 207; O'Grady, *Exiles and Islanders*, 232.

¹⁸ Cecil Houston and William Smyth, *The Sash Canada Wore: A Historical Geography of the Orange Order in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 8-20.

¹⁹ The Irish were the largest immigrant group to British North America during the nineteenth century. While it is often thought that the majority of these immigrants were Roman Catholics who fled the famine between 1845 and 1850, Cecil Houston and William Smyth have established that the majority of Irish immigrants were part of a wave

British North America. While these lodges retained the key tenets of Orangeism, a loyalty to the British Crown and Protestantism, different social, economic, and religious conditions meant that the British North American Order developed into an indigenous institution. Rather than focussing on religious warfare, as was the case in the British Isles, the British North American Order emphasized fraternity and immigrant aid. Brian Clarke notes that from its humble origins, by the 1850s the order had become "...a mainstream association devoted to maintaining Protestant hegemony in the United Canadas and upholding the colony's British character."²⁰

Orangeism had a slow start on Prince Edward Island. The warrant for the colony's first lodge, Charlottetown's Boyne Lodge No. 14, was issued in 1851. It took eight years before the second lodge, Pinette's Thistle Lodge No. 917, was established. This delayed growth can be explained, at least partially, by the fact that Prince Edward Island did not have a sizeable Irish Protestant population. By 1866 the Orange Order had overcome this hurdle and had established thirty-six lodges Island-wide. Their growth, as the name of the second lodge suggests, was achieved by appealing to the sizeable Scottish Protestant population.²¹

The events of 12 July 1877 began in a relatively low-key manner. As part of their annual commemoration of King William of Orange's victory at the Boyne, Orangemen from Charlottetown and the surrounding area arranged for a day of celebrations up the West River. Since this trip required a steamship, it was decided that the men would first meet at the capital's Boyne Lodge, located on Queen Street between Grafton and Kent. At 11:00 AM approximately 150 Orangemen marched in procession to the waterfront, where they boarded the *Southport*.

By all accounts the ensuing festivities went smoothly, as did the Orangemen's return to Charlottetown at approximately 8:00 pm. Returning to their lodge for closing remarks, the group once again formed a marching procession. Queen Street was lined with spectators, who formed "one dense

of 450,000 that arrived during the previous thirty years. These Irish were primarily of the Protestant faith. Houston and Smyth, *Irish Emigration and Canadian Settlement: Patterns, Links, and Letters* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 4, 8, 21.

²⁰ Brian P. Clarke, *Piety and Nationalism: Lay Voluntary Associations and the Creation of an Irish-Catholic Community in Toronto, 1850-1895* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 154. By 1864 the Order would have an estimated 200,000 members across British North America, including such high-profile individuals as Sir John A. Macdonald. Likewise, they assumed considerable political control of the colonies. This was most pronounced in the municipality of Toronto, where twenty-one of the twenty-four mayors that served office between 1845 and 1900 were members. Houston and Smyth, *The Sash Canada Wore*, 86, 156-157.

²¹ Grand Provincial Orange Lodge of Prince Edward Island, "Report of the Sixth Annual Session of the Provincial Grand Lodge" (Charlottetown: 1866), 38. [Prince Edward Island Provincial Archives, Accession No. 2420]; Houston and Smyth, *The Sash Canada Wore*, 76.

mass of people” on the block surrounding the hall.²² While the majority of the estimated three hundred people in attendance were present for the march, and as such can be labelled “spectators,” mixed in with the crowd was a group of agitators. The “rowdies,” estimated at fifty young men, attempted to obstruct the Orangemen as they returned to their lodge. Able to push their way through the crowd, the Orangemen rushed indoors, while the aggressors attempted to incite others on the street.

As it turns out, the agitators had one thing in mind. Flying above the Orange lodge was the group’s flag, a rectangular cloth one-half yellow and one-half Union Jack. As the Orangemen made their way inside their building, a volley of stones were thrown at the lodge amidst calls to lower their flag. As the windows shattered around them, the Orangemen retaliated by aiming a series of revolver shots into the crowd, hitting two bystanders. As this transpired the Orange leaders, Senator Heath Haviland and Dr. John T. Jenkins, yelled at their brethren to quit firing their weapons. A number of men on the street ran into a neighbouring yard, and emerged moments later with a ladder. Intending to scale the hall and bring the flag down, they were halted by city marshal Thomas Flynn and two other members of the crowd. As the authorities attempted to instil order to the situation, members of the crowd continued volleying stones at the building, demanding that the flag come down.

At this point the city’s stipendiary magistrate, Rowan Fitzgerald, arrived on the scene.²³ Dismayed by what was unfolding before him, he assumed the role of negotiator. Aware that the crowd would only disperse once the Order’s flag was lowered, the Orangemen grudgingly accepted. Sensing triumph as the flag descended, a great cheer emerged from the street. This incensed the Order, and the flag was promptly returned to full mast. With intensity once again reaching fever pitch, and another volley of stones thrown, the authorities pleaded with the involved parties. Finally, the Orangemen agreed to lower the flag in exchange for an end of the stone barrage. However, the incident was not quite over. As the flag made its final descent, members of the crowd seized the symbolic item. This was met with a flurry of gunshots from inside the lodge, which struck one man above his left ear. With the flag down, the authorities regained order, and the crowd dispersed.

²² “The 12th of July,” *The Examiner*, 13 July 1877, 3. The reconstruction of the events of 12 July 1877 is taken from coverage found in *The Examiner*, *The Herald*, and *The Presbyterian and Evangelical Protestant Union*.

²³ The job of stipendiary magistrate was created in 1875. Primarily designed to function as an impartial supervisor of the Charlottetown police court, Fitzgerald “was also empowered to direct and discipline the police force.” His priority in this respect was combating “public drunkenness and rowdiness.” See Greg Marquis, “Enforcing the Law: The Charlottetown Police Force,” in *Gaslights, Epidemics, and Vagabond Cows: Charlottetown in the Victorian Era*, eds. Douglas Baldwin and Thomas Spira (Charlottetown: Ragweed Press, 1988), 92.

With at least three members of the crowd suffering from bullet wounds, an Orangeman suffering from a stone-inflicted head injury,²⁴ a building full of shattered glass, and a wellspring of animosity, it seemed unlikely that events had reached a conclusion. Amidst rumours that the two parties would recommence hostilities the next day, the defiant Orangemen returned to their battered hall the following morning. Fearing further disturbances, the city police took drastic action. Augmented by approximately one hundred hastily sworn-in constables,²⁵ the city police took to the streets *en masse*, issuing twenty-eight warrants from the night before and arresting twelve. As the arrested were transferred to the local jail under heavy security provided by the constables, an additional fourteen deputies provided a precautionary night guard at the lock-up. The remaining constables were assigned to patrol “the [Orange] lodge, and all places they thought necessary, in order to preserve quiet in the city during the night.”²⁶ In the interest of maintaining peace, the constables were joined by an additional “body of volunteers,” amounting to another one hundred uniformed and armed men, who paraded the streets. Such dramatic precautionary measures apparently quelled any further plans of upheaval, as the night, and the coming days, passed without incident.

While the religious climate on the Island was unmistakably tense in the late-1800s, such had not always been the case. Religious relations may not have been entirely cordial heading into the 1850s, but neither were they at a breaking point. In general, the population co-existed in a peaceful manner, unlike the neighbouring British North American colonies, which suffered frequent interdenominational clashes. In this respect it is noteworthy that many of Prince Edward Island’s most successful social and service organizations at mid-century were nondenominational.²⁷

Part of the reason Islanders of different faiths had lived together peacefully is that they had been united in a common fight. In 1767 the British government divided the nascent colony into sixty-seven lots, which in turn were transferred

²⁴ According to contemporary accounts, two of the gunshot victims, “a man named Lafferty and a boy named Higgins,” were innocent bystanders. Although one was struck above the temple, and the other in his left arm, both were reportedly “slightly wounded.” The man shot in the final flurry, Patrick Brenan, was hit above his left ear. The injured Orangeman was John Moore. “The 12th of July,” *The Examiner*, 13 July 1877, 3.

²⁵ The Charlottetown police department was established in 1855 in conjunction with the municipality’s incorporation. Originally consisting of six permanent constables, it is possible that the force was slightly larger in 1877. To save costs, however, the majority of the work was fulfilled by seasonally employed night watchmen and deputized constables. Marquis, 89-91.

²⁶ “In The City Yesterday,” *The Examiner*, 14 July 1877, 2.

²⁷ These organizations included the Mechanic’s Institute, which sponsored community lectures and educational initiatives, and the Benevolent Irish Society, which was established in 1825 to aid the colony’s Irish immigrants. Robertson, “The Bible Question in Prince Edward Island from 1856 to 1860,” 22; Robertson, “Party Politics and Religious Controversialism in Prince Edward Island from 1860 to 1863,” 55; O’Grady, *Exiles and Islanders*, 177-179.

to a group of minor dignitaries, merchants and military officials.²⁸ Charged with overseeing their land's development, the primary responsibility of these absentee landlords was to settle the colony. As such, the Island was quickly populated with tenant farmers, who resented the fact that they did not own the land they cultivated. An escheat movement developed by the eighteenth-century's end, and by the 1830s the Island's dominant political party was dedicated to this cause. Although the escheat movement had faded in the 1840s after it became clear that the British government would not cooperate, its ability to unite Protestant and Catholic tenants for a common good was significant.²⁹

Another factor behind the colony's relatively peaceful existence is the general sense of progress Islanders felt in the mid-nineteenth century. Described by Ian Ross Robertson as "a vital, aggressive society, full of energy and self-confidence,"³⁰ the colony was economically successful during the 1850s. Self-sufficient, it provided a ready supply of food, timber, and sailing ships to Britain, and following the 1854 Reciprocity Treaty, the United States.³¹ Annual colonial revenue rose from £22,000 in 1850 to £35,000 in 1854; more impressively, during the same period the public debt shrank from £28,000 to £3,000.³²

In addition to the positive economic situation, Islanders were living in a colony that was undergoing considerable political reform. In 1830 legislation that had prevented Roman Catholic males from voting and holding office was repealed.³³ Following this, a push by the Liberals to implement responsible government was undertaken, with the appropriate legislation gaining royal assent in 1851. Finally, in 1853 the Franchise Bill was passed, which eliminated existing land requirements and established universal adult male suffrage.³⁴

Before one assumes an overly idyllic view of the Island, it must be noted that its history was not devoid of violence. Prior to the introduction of the secret ballot for provincial elections in 1913, voters were required to state their

²⁸ Francis W.P. Bolger, "The Beginnings of Independence, 1767-1787," in *Canada's Smallest Province*, 38.

²⁹ Bolger, "The Demise of Quit Rents and Escheat, 1824-1842," in *Ibid.*, 99, 114. For more information on the Island's sense of achievement and prosperity during this period, see David Weale and Harry Baglole, *The Island and Confederation: The End of an Era* (Charlottetown: Williams & Crue, 1973), 79-98.

³⁰ Robertson, "The Bible Question in Prince Edward Island from 1856 to 1860," 3.

³¹ MacNutt, "Political Advance and Social Reform, 1842-1861," in *Canada's Smallest Province*, 136.

³² *Ibid.*, 128.

³³ *Journal of the House of Assembly, 1830* (Charlottetown: George T. Haszard, 1830), 5.

³⁴ MacNutt, "Political Advance and Social Reform, 1842-1861," in *Canada's Smallest Province*, 114, 118, 124, 126. The Island featured a bicameral legislature until 1892, at which point its two houses were abolished and the current Legislative Assembly was created. Frank MacKinnon, *The Government of Prince Edward Island* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951), 210-214.

preference in public.³⁵ In the heady days of escheat and electoral reform it was not uncommon for supporters of either side to attend the election grounds in order to provide a degree of intimidation. Such tactics often erupted into brawls. The culmination of these events was a 1 March 1847 by-election in Belfast. Contested by a land reformer and a former agent for the local absentee proprietor, the event was overseen by upwards of four hundred onlookers. A riot ensued, in which three men were killed, and many more injured. This proved the high-water mark of electoral violence, as legislation designed to reduce physical intimidation at the polls was passed in 1848. Explaining the root cause of this riot has proven difficult. The traditional explanation has been that this was a battle between Scottish Presbyterians and Irish Catholics, although H.T. Holman notes that the two sides were also split between “landowners and tenants, and Tories and reformers.”³⁶ While Holman fails to pinpoint a precise catalyst, Brendan O’Grady is more assertive. Although there were various factors at play, he attributes tensions over land reform as the ultimate springboard to violence.³⁷

If the Island was in such positive shape heading into the 1850s, what had happened to provoke the riot in 1877? Simply stated, the place of religion in the education system emerged as an issue in 1856, and ignited a firestorm of controversy that would continue for two decades. As the politician-journalist Edward Whelan noted in retrospect, at its root was a “serious and most unaccountable misunderstanding.”³⁸

Island Liberals, under the tutelage of Premier George Coles, were a formidable political force in the early 1850s. Popular because of the attainment of responsible government and their support for land reform, they maintained control of the colony, with the exception of two brief lapses, throughout the decade. In office at the decade’s onset, they won the 1854 election 18-6.

While the Liberals’ fortunes were high, prospects for the Conservative Party were correspondingly low. Representing the interests of the colonial elite, they did not benefit from the ongoing democratization occurring on Prince Edward Island. Desperate to resume power, they eagerly awaited an issue that they believed could rally support around the party. Education would become the Conservatives’ issue.

The Liberal’s legislative agenda in the early 1850s emphasized standardizing the colony’s education system. In 1852 the Free Education Act was passed to ensure all areas of the Island could attract qualified schoolteachers.³⁹ The following year a school visitor, John M. Stark, was hired. A stern Scotsman with little patience for substandard achievement, he was not impressed with the state of education he encountered. As he noted in his second

³⁵ MacKinnon, 218.

³⁶ Holman, “The Belfast Riot,” *Island Magazine* (Fall-Winter 1983), 7.

³⁷ O’Grady, 203-230.

³⁸ *Debates and Proceedings of the House of Assembly, 1857* (Charlottetown: Herald Office, 1857), 61.

³⁹ See “Report of the Visitor of Schools” in *Journal of the House of Assembly, 1858* (Charlottetown: George T. Haszard, 1858), Appendix T.

annual report, “I could scarce have believed that there could have been in any part of the world so numerous a staff of teachers who so few had even the shadow of a qualification for their important office.”⁴⁰

Another education reform was the creation of a provincial Normal School, which was designed to provide uniform teacher training under the careful guidance of Stark and the government-appointed Board of Education. Opened in Charlottetown on 1 October 1856, the school visitor found one major flaw – its secularism. A devout Free Churchman, he feared that the absence of religion in the curriculum would result in moral depravity among the students. In order to rectify this, he recommended:

a daily Bible lesson (the first lesson of the day after opening) in which the truths and facts of Scripture will be brought before the children’s minds by illustrations and picturing out in words, in language simple and easy to be understood, from which everything sectarian and controversial shall be carefully excluded.⁴¹

Two days later a special meeting was held by the Board of Education, which upheld a previous decision that only approved books could be utilized in the Normal School. Since the list of approved books did not include the Bible, Scripture readings and lessons were effectively prohibited in the classroom.⁴²

When the Roman Catholic Bishop of Charlottetown, Bernard Donald MacDonald, heard of Stark’s attempt to include religion in the Normal School, he expressed his opposition. Fearful that the introduction of religion in the school would propagate the faith of the Protestant majority, he wrote to Premier Coles, saying, “nothing favourable or unfavourable to any religious denomination must be inculcated.”⁴³ Oblivious to the fact that the matter had already been handled, on 7 November 1856 he also sent a letter to the Board of Education, stating:

This introduction of religious matters into our public mixed schools is the Rock of Scandal....[I] earnestly beg of the Board to reconsider the evil tendency of introducing religion in any shape into our mixed schools....prayers and all religious exercises, as well as the reading of the Scripture from any version not approved by all, must be discontinued....If the friends of education wish our

⁴⁰ Quoted in Robertson, “The Bible Question in Prince Edward Island from 1856 to 1860,” 4.

⁴¹ Robert Blake Irving, *Normal School Soiree: Report of the Speeches and Proceedings at the Inauguration of the Normal School* (Charlottetown: Whelan, 1956), 27.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 18. The Board of Education did not oppose the inclusion of religion in the classroom, *per se*. Rather, there was a clear line drawn between religious education in a school dominated by a particular denomination, which was acceptable, and religious education in a mixed classroom, which was not. Since the Normal School attracted both Protestants and Roman Catholics, it was generally felt that it should remain devoid of religious lessons.

⁴³ Letter reprinted in Macmillan, 123-125.

mixed schools to prosper, their wish can only be realized by allowing those schools to be godless, under the present circumstances of the country. The Catholics, I am bound to say, will be satisfied with nothing else.⁴⁴

The Premier moved quickly to ease the bishop's fears, assuring him that Stark's recommendation had been soundly rejected. The Board of Education, meanwhile, ordered Stark to investigate the state of Bible reading in the Island school system. His report concluded that it was in decline, and was largely absent in classes of mixed faith.⁴⁵

The 1800s had seen a dramatic rise in evangelical Protestantism in North America. An interdenominational movement that aimed to create a Christian society "through the reformation of life and habits," by mid-century it had become a culturally dominant force throughout the United States and much of British North America.⁴⁶ Well-organized and unafraid to exert their political power, these militant Protestants aimed to remake society in their image. Part of this restructuring included a rejection of "ritualist" religion, and the inculcation of Biblical values wherever possible.

While evangelicals were not as culturally dominant in Prince Edward Island as in the neighbouring colonies of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, the movement was nonetheless a powerful force. When Stark's report was released, indicating a decline in the Bible's public school presence, the evangelicals were appalled. A copy of the Bishop's letter to the Board of Education was obtained by a group of concerned ministers, who in turn interpreted the letter as proof the Catholic Church was behind the Bible's decline.⁴⁷ In this, they conveniently overlooked the fact that the letter was drafted after the Board upheld its existing religious policy, as well as the fact that the seven-member Board consisted of five Protestants.⁴⁸

Outrage among the Protestant population was swift and severe. On 13 February 1857 an overflow audience gathered at the city's Temperance Hall for what would become known as the First Great Protestant Meeting. Reportedly "the largest [public meeting]...ever convened in this town,"⁴⁹ it

⁴⁴ Quoted in Ian Ross Robertson, "The Bible Question in Prince Edward Island from 1856 to 1860," 7.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 7-8.

⁴⁶ T.W. Acheson, "Evangelicals and Public Life in Southern New Brunswick, 1830-1880," in *Religion and Public Life in Canada: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Marguerite Van Die (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 50; T.W. Acheson, "The 1840s: Decade of Tribulation," in *The Atlantic Region to Confederation*, eds. Phillip Buckner and John Reid (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 317-318.

⁴⁷ A copy of the letter was supplied by Reverend David Fitzgerald, an Anglican minister who was born and educated in Ireland. He was also a member of the Board of Education. Robertson, "The Bible Question in Prince Edward Island from 1856-1860," 8.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁹ "Public Meeting," *The Islander*, 20 February 1857, 4.

was led by ten clergymen, representing the Presbyterian, Anglican, Wesleyan, and Bible Christian denominations. Speaker after speaker deplored the idea of education devoid of religious guidance; likewise, it was decided that the group would petition the government in the upcoming session for the establishment of obligatory Scripture readings in the public schools.⁵⁰

When the colonial legislature reconvened on 26 February, it quickly became obvious that the Bible controversy would be the focus. It also became clear how the politicians would divide on the issue. While the Liberal government, featuring strong support from the Roman Catholic population, was hesitant to change its position, the Conservatives, under Edward Palmer, had now found an issue it felt would galvanize the population. Palmer stated his belief that for “education to be useful and safe to the people, [it] should be based upon the christian religion.”⁵¹ The Liberals stuck to their position, arguing that compulsory Scripture readings in the schools would cause Catholics to “withdraw from them, and thus nearly one-half of the people of the Island will be deprived of the privilege of having their children educated.”⁵² With this, the battle lines were clear. On one side stood the colony’s Roman Catholic population and the Liberal Party; on the other stood the militant Protestants and the Conservative Party.

The inflammatory rhetoric soon escalated. The recently founded *Protector and Christian Witness* ran articles stating that “We love peace, but we love the Bible more.”⁵³ To this was added the paranoid claim that Catholics, moderate Protestants, and the Liberal Party “have conspired to rob the lovers of the Bible in this Island of one of our most valued rights.”⁵⁴ The tone worsened as 1858, an election year, approached.⁵⁵ Leaders of the Protestant faction, by now known as the Protestant Combination, published a list of “Questions to be put to Candidates for Seats in the ensuing General Assembly of this Island.” As these questions clearly illustrate, the Protestants had expanded their campaign from one advocating mandatory Bible readings into one also including anti-Catholic rhetoric. Not only did they expect candidates to vow never to fund Catholic institutions, but they also demanded an acknowledgement of:

the necessity for the great Reformation from Popery in the sixteenth century...of the existence of a wide spread combination of Popish

⁵⁰ Robertson, “The Bible Question in Prince Edward Island from 1856 to 1860,” 10.

⁵¹ *Debates and Proceedings of the House of Assembly, 1857*, 58; Robertson, “The Bible Question in Prince Edward Island from 1856 to 1860,” 12.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 55.

⁵³ “Mr. Barker’s Testimonial,” *Protector and Christian Witness*, 29 April 1857, 3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ According to Robertson, the “Bible Debate of 1858 had been more heated than that of the previous year, for the ‘Biblicians’ believed that the tide was beginning to run in their favour.” Robertson, “The Bible Question in Prince Edward Island from 1856 to 1860,” 16.

agents for the re-subjugation of the British Empire to the priestly domination of Rome...[and resistance to] all Romish aggressions on the rights of others...⁵⁶

Three weeks later the Second Great Protestant Meeting was held in Charlottetown, where a resolution was passed pledging that those in attendance would use their “utmost influence to return [only] sound Protestant and Bible-loving men at the ensuing General Election.”⁵⁷ Such sentiments were further echoed in the *Protector and Christian Witness* when it stated that “Let the only question be between Protestantism and Romanism.”⁵⁸

When the ballots were counted, the Liberals emerged with a 16-14 victory. This government proved unstable and brief. One member was declared ineligible to hold office due to a failure to meet property requirements; consequently, the party found itself unable to name a speaker and maintain a majority.⁵⁹ After hitting a stalemate the legislature was dissolved. In the ensuing election, contested on the same issues, the Conservatives emerged with a convincing 18-12 victory.

Given a clear mandate from the voters, the Conservatives prepared to address the Bible issue. However, while the rhetoric bandied about during the campaign had been quite extreme, the legislation that ensued was surprisingly moderate. Passed in early 1860, the “Bible Clause” stated that teachers in all publicly funded schools were required to begin each day with the reading of Scripture. There would be no interpretation of the reading, and attendance was optional. This proved an acceptable compromise for the majority of Islanders. According to Ian Ross Robertson:

[it] gave the Protestants the satisfaction of knowing that they could claim the legal right to have the Scriptures read in the classroom, yet guarded against controversial interpretations and commentaries, thus keeping the Catholics in the public schools.⁶⁰

Despite the moderate settlement, the damage had already been inflicted. The Island population had been effectively divided along religious lines. This was evident, not only in the all-Protestant Conservative government, but also in the social life of its citizenry. Organizations that had once thrived by attracting Protestants and Catholics, such as the Mechanic’s Institute, were now in decline. This coincided with the

⁵⁶ “Questions to be put to Candidates for Seats in the ensuing General Assembly of this Island,” *Protector and Christian Witness*, 27 January 1858, 3.

⁵⁷ “The Great Protestant Meeting,” *Ibid.*, 24 February 1858, 2.

⁵⁸ “The Coming Election,” *Ibid.*, 5 May 1858, 2.

⁵⁹ While property requirements were eliminated for voters in 1853, they remained in place for elected officials. John Ramsay did not have the £50 worth of freehold or leasehold land required of members, and as such was ineligible to take a seat in the legislature. “Mr. Ramsay’s Qualification,” *The Islander*, 18 March 1859, 2. The legislature had expanded from twenty-four to thirty seats earlier that year.

⁶⁰ Robertson, “The Bible Question in Prince Edward Island from 1856 to 1860,” 22, 24.

establishment of denominational groups such as the Protestant Young Men's Christian Association, and the Catholic Young Men's Literary Institute.⁶¹ Likewise, the spectre of religious violence reared its ugly head during this period. On 12 July 1857, a crowd of Roman Catholics harassed a Bible Christian minister named Cephas Barker while he was "street preaching." One year later, when the Conservatives held a "Queen's County Indignation Meeting," it nearly erupted into large-scale violence when a group of Irish Catholics decided to attend and vigorously uphold their beliefs.⁶² Thus, while controversy surrounding the Bible's place in the education system had been solved, it was but the first stage in an ongoing polemic that would ultimately lead to the 1877 riot.

Just as the preceding controversy began innocently enough, so too did the next incident. On 1 May 1860 the colonial legislature heard the third reading of a bill to create Prince of Wales College, a non-denominational public institution. Noting that the school would receive substantial government funding, a Catholic Liberal named Francis Kelly requested that the diocesan-funded St. Dunstan's College receive an annual grant of £300. Although this suggestion was hastily defeated by a margin of 12-4, the matter would not fade away.⁶³ As the election of 1863 approached, the Liberals would renew the issue as the central plank in their platform.

The ensuing controversy can in large part be traced to new leadership in the Island Catholic Church. On 30 December 1859, Bishop Donald Macdonald passed away. A demure man who generally shied away from political involvement, his replacement, Peter McIntyre, would prove his antithesis. Strong headed and unwilling to compromise his beliefs,⁶⁴ McIntyre was representative of the new breed of Catholic bishops who dominated the region in

⁶¹ Established by Father Thomas Phelan in October 1856, the Catholic Young Men's Literary Institute's "object was to band together the Catholic young men of the town, and promote amongst them a love of good literature." Macmillan, 106-107. This apparently included anti-Protestant rhetoric, as displayed by a guest lecturer's portrayal of the English Reformation's leaders as "evil doers." "Catholic Young Men's Literary Institute," *The Examiner*, 26 December 1859, 3. The local Young Men's Christian Association, likewise, engaged in highly sectarian rhetoric. Led by the Reverend David Fitzgerald and George Sutherland, it was deemed too ultra-Protestant for some of its clientele. As such, in 1860 the Young Men's Literary and Scientific Association was formed. This upstart organization, unwilling to take an extreme sectarian position, failed to take root amidst the prevailing politico-religious climate. Robertson, "Party Politics and Religious Controversialism in Prince Edward Island from 1860 to 1863," 56. For contemporary commentary on the Mechanic's Institute and its decline, see *The Examiner*, 26 December 1859, 2.

⁶² Barker had to be escorted to safety by city officials. "Street Preaching And Disturbance," *The Examiner*, 13 July 1857, 3; "The Indignation Meeting," *The Examiner*, 30 August 1858, 2.

⁶³ Robertson, "Party Politics and Religious Controversialism in Prince Edward Island from 1860-1863," 30-32.

⁶⁴ Edward MacDonald, "Peter McIntyre," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, XII (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 638.

this period. Whereas earlier bishops, such as Macdonald, were content with the attainment of political equality, McIntyre and his contemporaries aimed to create a distinctly “Catholic social order with institutions that paralleled but did not connect with those of the larger society.”⁶⁵ Knowing that the Liberals were heavily reliant on Catholic support, the bishop was not afraid to push the party to advance such aims.

The paranoia that began in 1856 continued to escalate for three years. William Henry Pope, editor of *The Islander* and colonial secretary, ran a series of articles proclaiming that “ANY GOVERNMENT OTHER THAN AN EXCLUSIVELY PROTESTANT ONE, MUST OF NECESSITY BE VIRTUALLY A ROMAN CATHOLIC ONE.”⁶⁶ The editor of the *Protestant and Evangelical Witness* turned to attacking Catholic theology, stating, “We are prepared, when the proper time comes, to show that the fundamental principles of your church are false.”⁶⁷ This sparked a public feud with St. Dunstan’s rector, Father Angus McDonald, which was played out over the course of three months in the local press.

As the scheduled election of January 1863 neared, both sides sought to rally public support for their cause. The Presbyterians, led by Reverend George Sutherland, printed one thousand copies of a pamphlet that asked rhetorically “What, stript [*sic*] of all prejudice from birth or education, is Popery?” It answered:

[T]hey are wholly opposed to the teachings of the Word of God. If the Bible is true, they are not....Popery, while professing to educate, fetters, enfeebles, and destroys....We presume not to dictate for whom you are to vote; but....let the day of trial see you ranged in undivided ranks in favor of a free, independent, and unfettered Protestant Government.⁶⁸

With the major issue on the minds of voters being the public endowment of St. Dunstan’s College, the electorate headed to the polls on 21 January 1863. Once again a stratified population returned the Conservatives by an 18-12 margin. Another all-Protestant government was formed. Not surprisingly, the issue of public funding for St. Dunstan’s College was dropped for the foreseeable future.

Two major issues emerged following the 1863 election that relegated the religious controversies to the background. First, the question of Confederation with the neighbouring British North American colonies arose in 1864. Although

⁶⁵ Acheson, “The 1840s: Decade of Tribulation,” 318-319.

⁶⁶ “To the Protestants of Prince Edward Island,” *The Islander*, 19 July 1861, 2. Pope’s position is interesting because, although born into the Methodist faith, he was widely regarded as an “infidel” due to his lack of religiosity. Ian Ross Robertson, “William Henry Pope,” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, X (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 594.

⁶⁷ “To the Rector of St. Dunstan’s,” *Protestant and Evangelical Witness*, 8 March 1862, 2.

⁶⁸ Reprinted in “The Rev. George Sutherland,” *The Vindicator*, 26 December 1862, 2-3.

steadfastly opposed, due in large part to its economic buoyancy and satisfaction with the recently won power of responsible government, the Confederation debate occupied much of the small colony's attention.⁶⁹ Second, the land question re-emerged in 1864 with the formation of the Prince Edward Island Tenant League. Fashioned after the Irish Tenant League, it pressured landlords to sell their lands by withholding rents.⁷⁰ Between these two issues, the previous political alliances were dropped, and new ones assumed. As such, in 1867 the anti-Confederate, pro-land reform Liberal Party returned to office with a 19-11 victory.

Bishop McIntyre revived the issue of funding the diocese's schools in 1868. Noting that approximately five hundred students were being taught in St. Dunstan's and three recently established convent schools, with "no aid from the Public School Fund of the Colony,"⁷¹ he claimed they were deserving. Uninterested in reviving religious debate, the Liberal Party rejected the bishop's idea, even though its Roman Catholic members were supportive. Sensing an opportunity to garner popular support, the Conservative Party made a surprising move and aligned itself with the bishop.⁷²

Protestant groups outright condemned the idea of state funding for Catholic institutions. At their annual meeting, the Wesleyan Church stated sectarian churches would "inflict upon the country deplorable evils...[including] the propagation of [doctrinal] error." Such changes to the education system would gain their support "under no guise, however specious."⁷³ Likewise, the Presbyterian Church appointed a committee to research the issue. In an open letter to the colony's Presbyterians, they sought to:

remind the whole body of Protestants in the Colony, that...they should feel that their duty at the approaching election requires them to give their suffrages only to men whose established principles will be a sure pledge that by no partial or unjust measures any

⁶⁹ See Bolger, "Prince Edward Island Rejects Confederation, 1864-1867," and "The Coy Maiden Resists, 1867-1872," in *Canada's Smallest Province*, 156-184, and 185-206.

⁷⁰ The League's efforts would be crushed when the Island government called in troops to restore order. Nonetheless, the widespread popularity of the League convinced many landowners that it would be in their best interests to sell their land. See Ian Ross Robertson, *The Tenant League of Prince Edward Island, 1864-1867* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).

⁷¹ "Memorial to Bishop Peter McIntyre," in *Journal of the House of Assembly, 1868* (Charlottetown: Frederick Hughes, 1868), Appendix FF.

⁷² The new stance was articulated by John Hamilton Gray at the annual public examination of St. Dunstan's College. "Public Examination At St. Dunstan's College," *The Examiner*, 13 July 1868, 2.

⁷³ Quoted in Robertson, "Religion, Politics, and Education in Prince Edward Island from 1856 to 1877," 194.

denomination of Christians shall receive educational advantages or support at the expense of their fellow subjects.⁷⁴

As the election of 18 July 1870 approached, it featured a new series of alliances. The Conservative Party, which had formed governments in 1859 and 1863 based on anti-Catholic sentiments, was now allied with the bishop in his quest for sectarian school funding. The Liberal Party, whose previous association with the Catholic Church meant it still ran a slate of Catholic candidates, was now in alliance with the Protestant majority. The Liberals won the election 24-6; however, dissent was brewing within the party. At meetings held 18-19 August, the ten Catholic members issued an ultimatum: either a grant to Catholic schools would be legislated, or they would resign. When the Protestant Liberals could not agree to such terms, the Catholics left, forming a coalition government with the Conservatives. This newfound alliance was conditional: they would wait to address the school question until after the next election.⁷⁵

Having set the issue aside for three years, the issue of funding Catholic schools would arise one final time. Island politicians had recently changed their attitude towards Canadian Confederation, and in 1873 were in final negotiations with the Canadian government in Ottawa.⁷⁶ Section 93 of the British North American Act, the legislation that created Canada, guaranteed funding for denominational schools in any province that entered Confederation with such arrangements already in place. Well aware of the opportunity this presented, McIntyre made a concerted effort to gain the appropriate legislation.⁷⁷ That he failed to do so before the Island's 1 July 1873 entry was a major disappointment; nonetheless, once the issue was revived he was loath to relent on it.

Despite a failure to gain funding, Bishop McIntyre continued to raise the level of his demands. Whereas he once aimed to acquire funding for St. Dunstan's College, which was followed by attempts to also gain funding for the diocese's convent school, in a pastoral letter dated 22 December 1873 he revealed that he felt a fully separate school system was necessary. As his letter notes:

The Education Law as it stands at present is virtually Protestant, and unjust to Catholics. We must battle against this injustice if we prize the eternal welfare of our children....it is not a few short hours devoted once in the week to religious instruction, which can give to the youthful mind that religious form capable of modelling the actions of a life-time. Religious instruction, to be effectual in after life, must in youth be

⁷⁴ "To the Presbyterians of Prince Edward Island," *The Islander*, 10 June 1870, 3.

⁷⁵ Bolger, "The Coy Maiden Resists, 1867-1872," in *Canada's Smallest Province*, 200.

⁷⁶ While the issue of religious education was set aside, the government's focus was the creation of a railway that spanned the entire Island. A popular initiative, its construction would effectively bankrupt the Island, forcing the colony to enter Confederation in 1873. Bolger, "Long Courted, Won at Last," *Ibid.*, 207-211.

⁷⁷ Robertson, "Religion, Politics, and Education in Prince Edward Island from 1856 to 1877," 213.

continuous. It must not be confined to a day or an hour. It must go on from morning to night, and from week to week. It must permeate the incidents of every day's routine, and be inhaled, so to speak, with the very atmosphere of the Schoolroom.⁷⁸

According to McIntyre's outlook, any area where two-thirds of the children were Roman Catholic warranted a church-run, but publicly funded, school.⁷⁹ To show support for his cause, a petition was circulated that reiterated Catholic dissatisfaction with the current school system. Over nine thousand would sign this petition.⁸⁰

The bishop's manoeuvres did not go unopposed by his opponents. On 9 March 1874 fifty-one Protestant ministers published their "Appeal To The Protestants of Prince Edward Island." Denying the bishop's allegations that public schools favoured Protestantism, the ministers' appeal also stated that Protestants:

must, when called upon to exercise their franchise, sink all past and party feelings, and recognize but two parties vis. [*sic*] the true Protestant, who values and maintains Protestant rights on the one side, and on the other the real Roman Catholic and the venal time-server forming a party ever ready to sacrifice our interests, and subject ourselves and our children to such tribute as the dictates of Roman Bishops may impose.⁸¹ Likewise, the day after the bishop's petition was submitted to the provincial legislature, it was met by a counter-petition. Signed by forty Protestant clergymen, this petition reiterated that they opposed publicly funded denominational schools.⁸²

Debate continued into 1876. By this point in time controversy regarding religious education had plagued the Island for twenty years. Determined to settle the matter of public funding for religious schools conclusively in the upcoming election, Premier Louis Davies made it clear that there would be "no side issues."⁸³ As such, the existing party structure dissolved and new alliances were formed. Davies, believing that sectarianism "might make the people obedient to the pastors...[but it] would reduce their intelligence to a much lower level than it was at present,"⁸⁴ led the Free School Party. James Pope, the younger brother of William Henry, led the Denominationalists.

With the mutual acceptance that this would be the last election contested on the issue of religious education, the stakes were high. As

⁷⁸ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 237-238.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁸⁰ *Debates and Proceedings of the Legislative Council, 1875* (Charlottetown: George T. Haszard, 1875), 105-106.

⁸¹ *The Examiner*, 9 March 1874, 3.

⁸² Robertson, "Religion, Politics, and Education in Prince Edward Island from 1856 to 1877," 255.

⁸³ *Debates and Proceedings of the House of Assembly, 1876* (Charlottetown: Herald Office, 1876), 211.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

polling day, 17 August 1876 neared, the tension became clear. At an all-party forum on 28 July, 1,500 crowded into the Charlottetown Skating Rink to hear the local candidates. The meeting began with a forty-minute speech from Frederick Brecken, a Denominationalist. When Free Schooler Heath Haviland attempted to speak next he was “howled down” by the crowd. Premier Davies tried to regain order, but was inaudible above the noise generated by the followers of Brecken and Pope. Frustrated, Davies and Haviland left the building, accompanied by their supporters.⁸⁵ Brecken and James Pope remained, with the latter outlining his position:

I am in favour, in the towns of this Province, of utilizing the private schools...and of paying for the Secular Education therein given, a per capita allowance equal to the amount which the State would be called upon to pay for those pupils if educated in the Free Schools.⁸⁶

The rowdy behaviour displayed at the all-party forum re-emerged on election day. When it was announced that the Free Schoolers had won 19-11, Davies attempted a speech in front of a crowd gathered at a Charlottetown poll. He was met with a volley of stones, which forced the Premier and his friends to flee the scene. This disturbance continued well into the night, before the authorities restored order.⁸⁷ Despite this, Davies charted forward and enshrined the non-sectarian nature of education in 1877 School Act, effectively ending two decades of conflict.

While it is tempting to look at an event in isolation, the wider context of history must be taken into account. Taking such into consideration reveals that the rise in anti-Catholic sentiments seen on Prince Edward Island was not an anomaly; rather, it was part of a rise in such activity worldwide. Great Britain was undergoing a dramatic rise in Protestant-Catholic anxiety during this period. Fiercely protective of their Protestant heritage, the general population of England was taken aback by a series of developments in the early nineteenth century that suggested Roman Catholicism was growing within the country. These developments included the high-profile conversion of John Henry Newman, a prominent theologian at Oxford University,⁸⁸ and the parliament-approved restoration of Great Britain’s Roman Catholic hierarchy in 1850. Increased paranoia

⁸⁵ “The Monster Meeting In The Skating Rink,” *The Patriot*, 29 July 1876, 2; “Monster Meeting! Over 1500 Persons Present,” *Island Argus*, 1 August 1876, 2. According to the *Argus*, two-thirds of the crowd followed Davies and Haviland when they exited the building.

⁸⁶ “Great Meeting At Citizens’ Skating Rink!”, *The Examiner*, 31 July 1876, 2. The Catholic Tories disagreed with Pope insofar that they “leaned towards a complete separate schools system,” which was in line with the Church’s demands. G. Edward MacDonald, *The History of St. Dunstan’s University, 1855-1956* (Charlottetown: Prince Edward Island Museum and Heritage Foundation, 1989), 118.

⁸⁷ “The Election,” *The Patriot*, 19 August 1876, 2.

⁸⁸ Jane Garnett, “Religious and intellectual life,” in *The Nineteenth Century: The British Isles: 1815-1901*, ed. Colin Matthew (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2000), 218.

about “papal aggression” caused the Protestant churches to begin working closely together against their common enemy.⁸⁹ This resulted in the 1846 founding of the Evangelical Alliance, a powerful voluntary association that would spread to the United States in 1867.⁹⁰

North America also proved a hotbed of anti-Catholicism during the mid-1800s. Many feared that the heavy influx of famine Irish Catholics immigrants in the 1840s was the opening stage of a papal plot to conquer the world. In the United States, the American Party, better known as the “Know Nothings,” gained considerable popularity based in part on their anti-Catholic platform. In British North America, the influx of Irish Catholics at mid-century had resulted in a rash of anti-Green riots. The raised tensions of militant Protestants was articulated by Robert Murray, a Nova Scotian who announced at the sixth general conference of the American Evangelical Alliance that the Canadian Catholic Church was “so strong as to occasion anxiety to the friends of liberty and education.”⁹¹

One outside event that particularly galvanized Islanders, given its close proximity, was the New Brunswick School Question. The psychological impact of this affair on the disputants in Prince Edward Island was pronounced. The colony’s Protestants viewed it as proof that Roman Catholics were willing to engage in violence in their quest for “sectarian privilege.” The Roman Catholics, on the other hand, saw it as another example of the Protestant majority seeking to stamp out their interests.⁹²

As the preceding establishes, the religious climate on Prince Edward Island was charged with tension in the period preceding the 12 July 1877 riot. However, it fails to explain why the Charlottetown Orange lodge was attacked on the night in question. In order to ascertain the assailants’ rationale, we must examine the Order’s significance and place in public affairs on the Island.

As noted earlier, the Orange Order had grown slowly on Prince Edward Island. Despite the Order’s humble beginnings, it nonetheless had quickly garnered the attention of the colonial administration. Aware of the Orange Order’s reputation for engaging in conflict elsewhere, the Island government feared that the organization would foster violence if given an opportunity to take root. As such, in 1852 Lieutenant-Governor Alexander

⁸⁹ Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1992), 257. When one takes into consideration that the majority of Prince Edward Island’s ministers were born and educated in Great Britain, the environment that emerged in the colony becomes more understandable. Robertson, “Party Politics and Religious Controversialism in Prince Edward Island from 1860-1863,” 57.

⁹⁰ Paul A. Crow, “The Ecumenical Movement,” in *Encyclopedia of the American Religious Experience: Studies of Traditions and Movements*, volume 2, eds. Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1988), 981-982.

⁹¹ Noll, 256-257, 307.

⁹² Robertson, “Religion, Politics, and Education in Prince Edward Island from 1856 to 1877,” 266.

Bannerman had issued the following proclamation, aimed specifically at the Orange Order:

‘every Society or Association the members whereof take any oath or engagement not required or authorized by Law,’ and ‘every Society or Association the Members whereof, or any of them, take and subscribe or assent to any engagement of Secrecy, Test, or Declaration not required by Law’...are subject to transportation or imprisonment.⁹³

This legislation, which was not legally binding, failed to destroy the Order on Prince Edward Island. Although the Order did not expand to a second lodge for eight years, Orangeism took on a new significance as religious controversy flared in the late 1850s. Believing that Catholics were blocking their access to the Bible, concerned Protestants flocked to the Order. Portrayed as the vanguard of Protestantism, by 1866 there were thirty-six lodges across the Island.⁹⁴

In 1863, with twenty-two lodges, the rapidly growing Order had sought legal incorporation to “enable its members to better manage their pecuniary affairs.”⁹⁵ In an era of major political turmoil, the debate that accompanied this legislation “set a new and probably unequalled standard for acrimony.”⁹⁶ The debate split the legislature along party lines. The Conservatives, closely allied with the Orangemen, argued in favour of the bill, while the Liberals took a steadfast position against. Incensed that a party deriving much of its support from Catholics was blocking the Order’s interests, Conservative politicians evoked images of papal treachery throughout European history.⁹⁷ The Conservative leader William Henry Pope asked why the Order should be blocked from incorporating if “even the Romish Bishop in this city” had been permitted to do so.⁹⁸ From here the debate degenerated into accusations of sexual immorality. Pope made references to “lecherous old Popish priests,” to which George Coles responded: “It was a well known fact that Orangemen upon the Island would not, and did not hesitate to seduce Catholic girls, and afterwards refused to marry them.”⁹⁹

⁹³ “Report of the Sixth Annual Session of the Provincial Grand Lodge,” 11. The Free Masons were exempted from this declaration, which was viewed to be the result of Premier George Coles’ membership in this group.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 38. As Houston and Smyth noted in *The Sash Canada Wore*, “The Orange Order did not create that feeling of sectarian bitterness. It was, in itself, a byproduct of it, and the association’s comfortable niche amid the everyday social life of the community indicated that in many Prince Edward Island settlements, as in the rest of Canada, Orangeism was not an unwelcome intrusion.” 78.

⁹⁵ “Report of the Sixth Annual Session of the Provincial Grand Lodge,” 13.

⁹⁶ Robertson, “Party Politics and Religious Controversialism in Prince Edward Island from 1860-1863,” 50.

⁹⁷ References were made in the legislature to England’s Gunpowder Plot of 1605, and France’s St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre of 1572.

⁹⁸ *Debates and Proceedings of the House of Assembly, 1863* (Charlottetown: Herald Office, 1863), 39, 46, 57.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 51, 55-56.

The Orange Order Incorporation Act of 1863 was introduced on St. Patrick's Day, a clear sign of contempt for the Irish Catholic population that vigorously opposed the measure. Passed along straight party lines, the bill gained royal assent from Lieutenant Governor George Dundas. Nonetheless, it would not proceed as planned. A petition signed by 11,500 of the Order's opponents seeking its disallowance was sent to the Colonial Secretary of State, the Duke of Newcastle. An ardent opponent of the Order, the Duke obliged. He wrote in his letter to Dundas:

I deeply regret that the Legislature of Prince Edward Island should have given its sanction to a class of institutions which all experience has shown to be calculated (if not actually intended) to embitter religious and political differences, and which must be detrimental to the best interests of any Colony in which they exist."¹⁰⁰

While the Orange Order took this defeat as further proof that the Roman Catholic minority sought to dominate society, it served to rally Protestant support behind the organization. In the ensuing year the number of lodges operating on the Island rose from twenty-two to twenty-nine.¹⁰¹ During this time the Order also increased its already considerable influence within the Conservative party. This can be seen in the address given by the Island Grand Master, Sir J.B. Cooper, who proclaimed that Orangemen must concern themselves with "securing good working majorities in favour of the CONSERVATIVE PARTY."¹⁰² Cooper also discussed the Order's influence over the political party, noting that:

If the Conservative Government, as at present constituted, does not please you, insist upon its reconstruction as a condition precedent to your support, and your wishes, I have not the slightest doubt, will be promptly complied with.¹⁰³

A powerful lobby group, the Orange Order would exert its opposition to plans of the Roman Catholic community with regularity. When the subject of funding St. Dunstan's College was debated at length in the 1860s, the Order was among its harshest critics. Describing it as "our Island Maynooth," they feared:

the endowment from the public chest of a sectarian institution expressly designed for the training of Romish priests, the overthrow and destruction of our noble Colonial institution, Prince of Wales' College, and the

¹⁰⁰ Francis W.P. Bolger, *Prince Edward Island and Confederation, 1863-1873* (Charlottetown: St. Dunstan's University Press, 1964), 13. The Duke of Newcastle's disdain for the Orange Order was evident in 1860, when he urged the Prince of Wales to cancel his visit to Kingston, Ontario, in order to avoid passing under an arch established by the local Orangemen.

¹⁰¹ Robertson, "Party Politics and Religious Controversialism in Prince Edward Island from 1860-1863," 51.

¹⁰² "Report of the Sixth Annual Session of the Provincial Grand Lodge," 6.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 16. When the Conservative Party aligned itself with Bishop McIntyre, the Order was fiercely opposed. This led them to withdraw their support from the party for the duration of the school debate.

perversion of the Protestant youth.¹⁰⁴ Likewise, they were in total opposition when the bishop shifted his aim towards achieving a fully separate Catholic education system.¹⁰⁵

From 1856 to 1877 the Island was beset with politico-religious conflict during which the Roman Catholic minority repeatedly failed to have its interests acted upon. Despite spirited Catholic protests, legislation was passed in 1860 that made Scripture readings a mandatory part of a schoolteacher's job. In the ensuing years, despite the Catholic population's repeated efforts, the government failed to legislate funding for sectarian schools. This effort died in 1876 when Premier Davies enshrined the non-sectarian nature of the school system in the Prince Edward Island Education Act.

The one victory that the Roman Catholics could boast of would turn sour. Having successfully petitioned the Duke of Newcastle to disallow the Orange Incorporation Act of 1863, this manoeuvre galvanized the Protestant community and led to a rapid expansion of Order lodges. A powerful lobby group that represented all that the papists were not, the Orange Order were an obvious target for Catholic aggression.

The timing of the Charlottetown lodge's attack is also significant. The centrepiece of the Orange calendar, 12 July marks the annual commemoration of King William's seventeenth-century victory over Catholic forces at the Boyne. This event represents a claim of Protestant supremacy wherever it is celebrated. Charlottetown's Catholics would have greeted this annual event with disdain; however, there is no record of violence in the city on this day prior to 1877. Having recently lost the conclusive battle for sectarian education, the culmination of twenty years of public conflict, it appears that by 1877 members of the Charlottetown Catholic community could no longer take reminders of their subjugation without action. That one of the riot's instigators, Nicholas Collins, was quoted as saying "Damn you, you can beat us in the House of Assembly,

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 7-8. The Orangemen's description of the situation was inaccurate. While St. Dunstan's did provide a training ground for many priests in its early years, this was not its explicit purpose. As G. Edward MacDonald notes, "Despite St. Dunstan's obviously Catholic orientation, they [Protestants] were welcome...Presumably, Protestant students would be exempt from any catechism [*sic*] classes, and attendance at Mass. But they could hardly be spared the Catholic viewpoint which permeated secular subjects like history, English, and philosophy." MacDonald, *The History of St. Dunstan's University*, 87.

¹⁰⁵ That an Orange Lodge Incorporation Bill was passed again in 1878, just one year after the Charlottetown riot, indicates the level of power the Order maintained at the time. Again a topic of bitter controversy, this bill was refused royal assent by Lieutenant Governor Robert Hodgson. When a similar bill was passed two years later, Lieutenant Governor Heath Haviland, an Orangeman himself, refused assent on the advice of Conservative Premier W.W. Sullivan. MacKinnon, 154.

but you can't beat us in the street,"¹⁰⁶ testifies to this connection between political frustration and public action.

The singular aim of the Catholic mob provides considerable insight into their motives. Their goal was not to injure the Orangemen, which explains why they did not attack the men as they marched through the streets. Rather, the crowd waited until their adversaries were inside the lodge before they commenced pelting them with stones. The mob's aim, as testimony shows, was to force the Orangemen to lower their flag. When this was accomplished, they dispersed. Given that the riot was the breaking point of tensions between the two groups, it may seem anticlimactic for the Catholic mob to have focussed its attention on something as specific and material as a flag. However, the importance of the Orange flag should not be underestimated.

As Eric Hobsbawn points out, a flag is an important symbol that proclaims a group's identity.¹⁰⁷ The Orange flag, flying above their lodge, represented the supremacy of the Order in Island life. For the embittered Roman Catholic population, what better way was there to show their rejection of this than to force the Orange Order's flag down on their most celebrated day? For those involved in the flag's descent, it was their opportunity to usurp the Order's power, albeit briefly, as retribution for years of Protestant domination.

How does the 1877 riot fit within the grander historiography of Orange-Green riots in British North America? In one sense it is an anomaly. Whereas elsewhere the vast majority of such incidents were sparked by the aggression of Orangemen, members of the local Roman Catholic population instigated this event. However, it is in understanding the riot's root cause that this study is most useful. The evidence clearly supports Gregory Kealey's observation that such instances were often symbolic events. Whether it be the Irish Catholics' overstepping informal boundaries afforded them by the Protestant majority, as seen in Kealey's "The Orange Order in Toronto," or the articulation of long-suppressed frustration by Catholics in Charlottetown, such events have a meaning greater than the immediate actions suggest.

¹⁰⁶ "Evidence of Sworn Witnesses," *The Examiner*, 18 July 1877, 1.

¹⁰⁷ Eric Hobsbawn, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawn and Terence Ranger (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 11.